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| Author | Murray, Teresa Grace |
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***The Poetics of Empire: A Model of Time and a Problem
of Language in Medieval and in Postcolonial Writing***

Teresa Grace Murray

***Ph.D.
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Abstract

A gendered trope of *auctoritas* links Dante's *Commedia* with the postcolonial novels, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. The recurrence of a circular motif inscribing mystery – present at the levels of structure, theme and language – in these texts, undermines both the logo/ethnocentricity ascribed to medieval writing, and the criticisms levelled at postcolonial writers for writing in colonising languages. The explicit constructions of gender, and the traditionally peripheral role of woman, find a central place in these texts ultimately concerned with the positing of loss and absence. The hierarchical universe which emerges from a dual cause – God is the first cause and man the efficient cause – in the medieval Scholastic view, together with the circular persuasive ends of poetry derived from Aristotle, provide a means of justification not only for the fictive forms of medieval poetry but also for the postcolonial writer's choice of English. In both cases, language – whether fallen or foreign – is at an ultimate remove and has already betrayed its enunciator.

At a textual level, circular-simultaneous-with-hierarchical imagery – synthesised in the medieval “ladder of love” – repeatedly asserts an emphasis on artifice in these works. The concern with explicitly fictive representations of Origin – lost Edens and pasts – develops this means-to-ends argument. The textual echoes between these writings depend to a significant degree on key female protagonists who are both multivalent and explicitly fictive in the terms of their presentation. In this they conform to Kristeva's spatial model of poetic language in the *Chora*. The shift from a frustrated verbal emphasis to a visual emphasis, enabled by these figures, evokes the fantasies of lost primal scenes – the Edens of pre-lapsarian and pre-colonial pasts – and returns us, via the Lacanian gestalt of the phallic-mother complex, to the medieval perspectival resolution to the problem of freewill versus Divine Providence.

Dante's use of *auctoritas* vis-à-vis the Courtly Love tradition suggests a feminine basis to his methodology – both in its circular dynamic and in the feminine basis of the ladder of love which characterises it. T. S. Eliot's allusions to Dante, which explicitly rewrite the motif of the ladder, elicit a final justification not only of the use of English by postcolonial writers, but of their allusions to Western canonical writers – Tennyson, Yeats, Conrad. In the model of “significant re-enaction” presented in Eliot's cyclical response to Dante, a valid means of signing difference (within a frame of similarity) is proposed. The feminine figure of *auctoritas* developed here, and characterised in these texts by the goddess Circe, becomes the ultimate sign of a process highlighted in the writings produced by these two Empires – Holy Roman and British Imperial – but by no means exclusive to it.

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Finally, thanks must go to my mother and my sister whose belief and support throughout this project have made it possible.

This thesis is dedicated to Vincent James Murray and Marie Veronica Yeoland.

Declaration

I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

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Introduction

The motif of the circle with a line running through it offers a pattern for the relationship between Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. The co-existence of circular and linear structures in this model is interesting for both medieval and postcolonial writing in its ability to describe "simultaneous difference". In medieval writings this was the co-existence of literal and figurative perspectives - an incompatibility which signed the nature of the created world. It will also be seen to enable an articulation of the divided experience of the postcolonial world. Both medieval and postcolonial "realities" - for the reasons discussed here - are best represented in as overtly fictive and artificial a structure as possible. The circle-line motif offers a way of reading the resistant aspects of these texts without forcing them to conform to "explanatory" modes of interpretation. It avoids, in its very form, reductive strategies. The relationship between these texts describes a model for the articulation of "otherness" with implications well beyond this study.

My concern is not to establish the direct literary influence of a medieval poet on two very different postcolonial writers: this would be problematic, even if possible, for the historical and political reasons given below. It is, rather, to demonstrate that the analogical method developed in scholastic thought, and most fully realised in Dante's *Commedia*, bears a significant relation to and offers a precedent for reading the works of these postcolonial writers. The textual links I identify to other Western texts in these postcolonial writings will be read within the frame of Dante's distinctive use of allusion, on the basis of a methodological, as well as thematic, parallel.

There are strong linguistic, thematic and structural parallels between these works produced under the conditions of nascent Christian humanism and the legacy of Imperialism. Although this study is not concerned with a historical comparative approach, it will consider conditions which directly inform what I will term "strategies of resistance" employed in these texts. Although in certain instances it is difficult to ignore the imagistic and aural echoes between Achebe and Silko, and Dante, I will not pursue the claim that these postcolonial texts refer directly to medieval scholasticism. There is, after all, a necessary engagement with the Western literary tradition and canon in the articulation of a postcolonial voice: to speak to the West, the postcolonial writer must speak in its language, implicating the literature

which has formed this language. To pursue the argument of literary reference would be to implicate, or at least to have to eliminate, much of the Western canon. The texts discussed here share specific parallels at the levels of image, language and structure. To claim that Silko and Achebe could be just as usefully compared to Shakespeare, or Goethe - on the grounds of their influence on the development of Western languages – would, therefore, be facile. There are identifiable textual links connecting Dante's *Commedia* with Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in a manner which engages with contemporary theoretical issues concerning literary/poetic language. Furthermore, the parallels between these texts may be considered to be of particular interest because of their status within their respective canons. The postcolonial texts discussed here are, generally, considered "classics" within their genre. Dante's *Commedia* is very much a "classic" of Western thought, as well as of Western poetry. Dante's poem will not so much be considered a source for these novels as analogous to them in the ways of reading it offers. The poem, and the traditions it condenses, offers a new way of interpreting the *versi strani* so characteristic of the postcolonial text. This thesis will focus on a close reading of these parallels in the awareness that it cannot hope to fully investigate the consequences of them for the contemporary debate. It sets out, given the unusual nature of such a parallel, to establish a basis for further investigation.

Dante was an ardent supporter of the Holy Roman Empire, and wrote a work, *De Monarchia*¹ to those ends. These postcolonial texts, by contrast, chart the destructive effects of Christianity, among other things, on indigenous life.² A dismissal of this discussion on these grounds would be simplistic, depending on historicism rather than literary analysis. Although Dante's work may be considered pro-Christian and these postcolonial works, in some sense, anti-Christian, both are more centrally concerned with the experience of alienation and the forms of a language inscribing distance and difficulty. Medieval writing in general, and Dante's poem, specifically, did not enjoy the status of theological truth. Poetry, in the

¹ Dante Alighieri, *De Monarchia*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1948).

² Compare: "Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family" *Ceremony*, p.68, with:

"the Reverend James Smith [...] saw things in black and white [...] And Black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness [...] He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal." *Things Fall Apart*, p.130.

medieval hierarchy of knowledge was at the greatest remove from God, and Dante's particular circumstances, as an exile and a writer of vernacular works, served to further distance such claims. At the material level, the *Commedia's* very writing was influenced by a sense of distance - Dante was writing from the position of a political exile. These texts share a feature more commonly attributed to postmodern writing, concerned as it is with not fixing meaning. This is a spatial model harmonising apparently irreconcilable perspectives. It is evident at the levels of structure and of theme but most significantly, in this literary study, it dominates language in these works.

The model under discussion derives from the medieval doctrine of *translatio*. A.J. Minnis, in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*,³ gives the late medieval definition of *translatio* as "the explanation of meaning (*expositio sententiae*) in another language."⁴ Each of these texts is negotiating a form of translated experience. Dante's vernacular is not only a relatively new departure for the poetry of the time, but it is also a new language - synthesised out of the many dialects of the lands comprising modern-day Italy. Achebe's novel is presented in terms which not only suggest the simplifying effects of translation into English, but he reminds his reader constantly, in the planting of Igbo words within the text, that the story is "occurring" in a different language. Silko's narrative, in turn, strains between English and the forms and rhythms of "the old dialect full of sentences [...] involuted with explanations of their own origins" (*Ceremony*, p.34).

Translatio was also a metaphor for a history that mapped the movement of tradition - the process by which the past is translated into another beginning. The concept described both linguistic and temporal shifts: Hugh of St. Victor defines *translatio imperii* as the co-ordination of time and space arranged by Divine Providence.⁵ Giuseppe Mazzotta comments:

³ A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.374.

⁴ Hugutio of Pisa, *Magnae derivations, s.v. glossa*, in Oxford Bodleian Library, M.S. Bodley 376, fo.84; followed by John of Genoa, *Catholicon, s.v. glossa* (Venice, 1483), in Minnis, p.374

⁵ "ut quae in principio temporum gerebantur in Oriente, quasi in principio mundi geruntur, ac deinde ad finem profluente tempore usque ad Occidentem rerum summa descenderet, ut ex ipso agnoscamus appropinquare finem mundi." Hugh of St. Victor, *De Arca Noe morali*, iv, 9 in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: [N.P.]1844-94) 176, col.667. quoted in Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.99

Modelled on the movement of the sun from east to west, this doctrine is conventionally based on the analogy between the duration of the day and the totality of history. The movement of the sun gives a spatialised view of time and the end of the day, when the sun sets, is the end of both space and time. The doctrine of *translatio*, however, literally accounts for the view of history as a self-acknowledged metaphor, the world of translation, always foreign to itself, unrepeatable and pointing to its own end. The rhetorical view of the historic process is by no means unusual and it depends on the assumption of the figurative nature of history. This is not to deny that history is not part of grammar: it is, indeed, the “letter” which calls for interpretation, the “fundamentum allegoriae,” a veritable metaphor. This view of history appears to be consecrated by St. Augustine, who illustrates the tragic duality of history in an explicit rhetorical figure. The wickedness of the devil and of man coexist with the goodness of the Kingdom of God: together they embellish the process of history and make “the course of the ages, as it were an exquisite poem set off with antithesis.”⁶

These writers share the sense of an explicit and constitutive history in their experience of Empire. This is reflected in their highly self-conscious treatment of craft and artifice in literary representation.

These texts are severally “distant” from one another, but all three betray the tensions of responding to worlds marked by change and irreconcilable difference. Dante’s poem bridges the divide between the late Italian medieval and early renaissance periods; it reflects his politically hybrid “White Guelf” beliefs and the experience of exile.⁷ It is a poem written in a new and highly innovative vernacular but describes an old world still subject to Ptolomeian astronomy in which God is the first and foremost creator, and the earth – his creation - the centre of the universe. *Things Fall Apart* is a twentieth-century English language novel depicting an Igbo village in Nigeria in the early stages of its encounter with British colonial rule. It is a fictive tale told retrospectively, emphasising to its (Western) audience their distance: they are separated not only by time and space, but by language too. *Ceremony* is the attempt to resurrect Native American identity by a half-caste Indian, brutalised by the experience of war, in an English moulded to the ritual forms of Native American Indian prayer and story cycles. In these works, communication inscribes distance, difference and loss.

⁶Mazzotta, pp.99-100. “Sicut ergo ista contraria contrariis opposita sermonis pulchritudinem reddunt: ita quadam non verborum, sed rerum eloquentia contrariorum oppositione pulchritudine conponitur.” St. Augustine *De Civitate Dei* xi, 18, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*. Quoted in Mazzotta, p.100.

⁷In 13/14th century Italy there was dispute between the papacy and the emperor for temporal authority. The Guelfs, numbering the rising mercantile classes, hoped to rid Italy of foreign influence and maintain control of governments in their independent communes - they supported the papacy in opposition to the emperor. Dante was a White Guelf, a nationalist, but with hopes for Italy’s future in the restoration of the empire.

These texts are marked by two highly visual motifs: the circle and line of dualistic history and what I will argue to be a development of it, the hierarchical “ladder of love”.⁸ These motifs sign absence in their inscriptions of distance and difference – experiences as familiar to the subjects of the Holy Roman Empire and those who came after them, as to those of British Colonial rule. They are identifiable at the literal level as well as being employed structurally and are in evidence also meta-textually in the relationships between these and other texts. The “means” in these texts, the motifs signing the presence of absence, become the “message”. A poetics with highly contemporary relevance emerges from an investigation into the effects of these two empires on their respective poets.

In literary terms, a non-linear relationship – close to the Bloomian identification of successive generational “influence” – exists between Dante, Achebe and Silko.⁹ Harold Bloom argues that literary influence is not always uni-directional: for him, “strong” poets achieve their own voice in striving to escape those of their predecessors but do so by appropriating their influence.¹⁰ His identification of *apophrades*, the return of the dead, suggests the necessity of an engagement with other voices in the work of certain poets:

With the very strongest there is a grand and final revisionary movement that purifies even this last influx[...]For all of them achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*. (*The Anxiety of Influence*, p.141.)

This involves a deliberate misreading of the predecessor’s work. Bloom identifies, “the death of poetry in our tradition [...] self-slain, murdered by its own past

⁸Implicit in many medieval writings, this means to divine knowledge via the experience of earthly/sensual love was later formalised by Castiglione: “But among such blessings the lover will find another much greater still, if he will make use of his love as a step by which to mount to a love far more sublime; which he will succeed in doing if he continually considers within himself how narrow a bond it is to be limited always to contemplating the beauty of one body only [...] And thus he will no longer contemplate the particular beauty of one woman, but that universal beauty which adorns all bodies; and so, dazzled by this greater light, he will not concern himself with the lesser, and burning with a better flame, he will feel little esteem for what at first he so greatly prized.” Baldasare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation* edited by Daniel Javitch (London: Norton, 2002), Book IV, 67, p.255.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ He states: “poetic influence – when it involves strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation.” (*The Anxiety of Influence*, p.30)

strength”(The Anxiety of Influence, p.10.) In Bloom’s theory, the struggle for authenticity is the struggle for a distinctly original voice.

The struggle I identify here is more directly concerned with language than with the particular speaker, and with the difficulty of saying anything other to the forms that that language will allow. The primary texts discussed share a central concern in their juxtaposition of the cyclic processes of “return” to the linear and finite processes of writing. This, together with the significance of the mirrorings between as well as within these texts, follows in the tradition of the “Aristotelian Prologue” developed in the scholastic commentaries of the thirteenth century.¹¹ The literary-political discussion develops a different focus, however, to the one identified by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*.¹² In this, he makes a case for the central role of the printing press in the growth of a national identity. My concern will be with the constructions of identity in the works of writers who are primarily informed by non-print cultures. Dante was writing well before the means of mechanical reproduction; Achebe and Silko both, in terms of form and content, reflect the oral-based indigenous societies with which they are concerned. These three writers employ, at several levels, the sign of the circle with the line running through it in their attempts at self-articulation. All three may be understood to pursue, in their political emphases, a very material engagement with their fictive narratives. This study will be concerned with identifying a poetics which resists the patriarchal

¹¹ The Scholastics discuss the importance of a decorous and orderly progression from the literal (or historical) level of factual knowledge/understanding to the allegorical and finally the anagogical:

“This, then my student, is what we propose to you. This field of your labour well cultivated by your plough, will bear you a manifold harvest. All things were brought forth in order: move along in order yourself. Following the shadow one comes to the body: Learn the figure, and you will come to the truth”

Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, Bk 6, Chapter II, repr. in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-1375* ed A.J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.74.

They also make a distinction between natural and artificial order:

“The material’s order may follow two possible causes: at one time it advances along the pathway of art, at another it travels the smooth road of nature. Nature’s smooth road points the way when “things” and “words” follow the same sequence, and the order of discourse does not depart from the order of occurrence. The poem travels the pathway of art if a more effective order presents first what was later in time and defers the appearance of what was actually earlier[...]it disposes the material to better effect. The order of art is more elegant than natural order, and in excellence far ahead even though it puts last things first.”

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967)from II: “Ordering the Material”, repr. In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (London: Norton, 2001), pp.230-231, p.230.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

linearity of both the printing press and the Western-centred academe it may be said to have engendered - uniting Dante with Achebe and Silko in a supremely postmodern “moment” outside of linear time.

The double perspective of medieval cosmology - in its accommodation of both the temporal and the divine - offers a model for the resolution (without elimination) of difference with a subtlety paradigmatic of medieval understanding, and useful for the postcolonial writer. This model suggests that the inexhaustible is compatible with the finite, the perfect with the failed, the absolute with the contingent, and the immovable (God) with the moved (man). The characteristic medieval ability to harmonise different, even contradictory, perspectives originates in a theological argument but is also expressed analogically. It can be seen in the “motivational” theories of Augustine and in the “harmonising” attempts of Boethius, which are realised both persuasively and dialectically. An accretive “ladder of love”, based on the bond between lord and subject in the feudal system and reflecting the relationship between God and man, describes the relationship between these perspectives. In this, the higher levels depend upon the lower levels.

The argument underlying this multiple perspective is derived primarily from Aristotle and concerns causality. C. S. Lewis comments:

The infinite, according to Aristotle, is not actual. No infinite object exists; no infinite process occurs. Hence we cannot explain the movement of one body by the movement of another and so on forever. No such infinite series could, he thought, exist. All the movements of the universe must, therefore, in the last resort, result from a compulsive force exercised by something immovable. He thought that such an Unmoved Mover could move things only by their end or object or (if you like) target – what he calls their Final Cause – not as one billiard ball moves another but as food the hungry man, as the mistress moves her lover, as truth moves the philosophical inquirer. He calls this unmoved mover either “God” or “Mind”. It moves the Primum Mobile (which of course sets all the inferior bodies in motion) by love [line1, *Metaphysics*, 1072b].¹³

There are two categories of existence inherited by the medieval thinkers and poets: the finite and the infinite. These are separate but they intersect at the point of volition – the “final cause”. Although the first (the finite) is dependent on the second (the infinite) this dependency depends, in turn, on a condition of the first. This describes a hierarchy - one category is superior to the other - but the system is also accretive: the

¹³ C. S. Lewis, “Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages” in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* collected by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp.50-1.

higher level implies the lower. Both motifs - circle and ladder - are necessary to a full understanding of this model.

Boethius is acknowledged as a major forerunner of the medieval scholastics. He considered himself a bringer of knowledge, including Aristotle, to the West:

I wish to translate the whole work of Aristotle, so far as it is accessible to me into the Roman idiom and conscientiously offer his complete utterances in the Latin tongue [...] Moreover, I shall make all this comprehensible by interpretative explanations. I should also like to translate all Plato's *Dialogues*, and likewise explain them, and thus present them in a Latin version. When this is accomplished, I will furthermore not shrink from proving that the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions in every way harmonise, and do not, as is widely supposed, completely contradict one another.¹⁴

Boethius's desire to translate Aristotle converges with a desire to harmonise apparently contradictory "knowledges" in a typically perfect fit of form and content: Aristotle was the first to describe a scheme in which contradictory phenomena could be contained. Nor is it surprising that such ambitions should be linked to writing in a vernacular.¹⁵ For the Christian in particular, human language was both a consequence of and a sign of the difference between the finite and the infinite.¹⁶ The ambition of this clearly assimilative mind is realised in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It takes its scheme from the Platonic allegory of the ascent of the soul in which there is a turning of gaze from false to true [iii, 1], and a subsequent realisation that God is the supreme good [iii, 10] (Plato, *Republic*, Book VII); and its methodology and terminology from Aristotle. Their apparently contradictory coexistence in the single body of Boethius's text exemplifies the later medieval method. The "inspired eclecticism" with which Boethius blends received material from multiple sources to form a new and harmonious whole suggests the medieval literary application of Aristotelian philosophy as well as its contemporary relevance.¹⁷

The two containing images which define medieval thought - the ladder of love (describing the accretive nature of the relationship between the temporal and the divine), and the circle with the line running through it (the dual nature of time: both

¹⁴Commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, 77, quoted by Hans Von Campenhausen, in *The Fathers of the Latin Church*, translated by Manfred Hoffman (London: A. and C. Black, 1964).

¹⁵Perspectively, the Latin into which Boethius intended to translate the works of Plato and Aristotle, was a vernacular.

¹⁶Boethius was an early Christian.

¹⁷See H. R. Patch, "Fate in Boethius and the Neoplatonists", *Speculum*, 4, (1929), pp.62-72.

finite and infinite) – are derived from a cosmology dominated by the harmony of the spheres. Lewis comments:

God, in Aristotle, moves the world by being loved, not by loving; by being the supremely desirable object [...]. A modern may ask why a love for God should lead to perpetual rotation. I think, because this love or appetite for God is a desire to participate as much as possible in his nature; i.e. to imitate it. And the nearest approach to His eternal immobility, the second best, is eternal regular movement in the most perfect figure, which for any Greek, is the circle. Hence the universe is kept going by the continual effort of its most excellent parts (each a little slower and feebler than the one above it) to conform their behaviour to a model of which they always fall short. That of course is the real meaning of Dante's (often misunderstood) line about "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." Even so, love is perhaps too ethical a word; "appetite" would be better. In this scheme God is the quarry, the Intelligences the huntsmen; God is the mistress, all things else the suitors; God the candle, and the universe the moth. (Lewis, pp.50-51.)

This is an ordered universe. The expression of will, manifest in the movement of the heavens, is in – imperfect – imitation of the first cause. This is the mode of operation of the unmoved mover. The world is moved by the expression of freewill when it is directed towards its maker in a circular dynamic that admits of hierarchy but is not limited to a linear relationship. Boethius realises the implications of this for the writer. Being both a translator – and so not the originator of his material - and in identifying the role of the author with the moved object, as well as in his ambition to harmonise the works of Plato and Aristotle, he demonstrates himself to be at several removes from his source. Conrad of Hirsau explains the role of the medieval author:

The "author" (auctor) is so called from the verb "increasing" (augendo), because by his pen he amplifies the deeds or sayings or thoughts of men of former times.¹⁸

Boethius admits to this in that his material is not "his own" as well as in his intention to offer an "interpretation". His choice of Plato and Aristotle, considering their role in the "poetry and lies" debate, politicises his project, suggesting that the question of man is closely related to the question of language.

Such definitions, however, clearly alter over time. C. S. Lewis, in an address to Cambridge scientists, identified what he considered to be the fundamental difference between medieval and modern man:

[...] whatever else we feel, we certainly feel that we are looking *out*, out of somewhere warm and lighted into a dark, cold, indifferent desolation, out of a house on to the dark waste of the sea. But the medieval man felt he was looking *in*. Here is the outside. The moon's orbit is the city wall.¹⁹

However, Lewis's definitions seem anachronistic. Such distinctions may hold between medieval and Lewis's "modern" man, but the definition of modern is relative. Contemporary theory suggests that the "present case" has already moved on. The "modern man" posited by Lewis is not the same as that of Barthes, who argues that "we" now experience differently:

We know that the medieval septenium, in its grandiose classification of the universe, prescribed two great areas of exploration: on the one hand, the secrets of nature (the quadrivium) and, on the other, the secrets of language [parola] (the trivium: grammatica, rhetorica, dialectica). From the end of the Middle Ages to the present day, this opposition was lost, language being considered only as an instrument in the service of either reason or the heart. Today, however, something of this ancient opposition lives again: once again the exploration of language, conducted by linguistics, psychoanalysis, and literature corresponds to the exploration of the cosmos. For literature is itself a science, or at least knowledge, no longer of the "human heart" but of human language [parola]. Its investigation is not, however, addressed to the secondary forms and figures that were the objects of rhetoric, but to the fundamental categories of language. Just as in western culture grammar was not born until long after rhetoric, so it is only after having made its way for centuries through *le beau litteraire* that literature can begin to ponder the fundamental problems of language, without which it could not exist.²⁰

In other words, as Jacques Derrida puts it in his study of the science of writing, *De la Grammatologie*: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte".²¹

This does not describe a simple reversal of Lewis's position: it is not that we now join medieval man in "peering in" rather than out of the world into the abyss. The medieval model of the cosmos has been scientifically disproven and continues to be, simply, "untrue". To return to this former position is no longer possible for contemporary man. However, as even Lewis comments:

perhaps in calling it untrue, we should mean something other than our grandfathers meant [...] I suppose most people would now admit that no picture of the universe we

¹⁸ Conrad of Hirsau, *Dialogue on the Authors*, trans. from Huygens, *Accessus ad auctores*, in Minnis, p.43.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, collected by Walter Hooper, (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1966), p.59.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.20-21.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), p.3.

can form is “true” in quite the sense our grandfathers hoped. (“Imagination and Thought”, p.62)

Models of truth are at issue here. Although science may dismiss certain claims it cannot guarantee that the ones which replace them will not, in turn, be dismissed by the investigations of future ages. Modern science is a science of hypothesis. Medieval evaluations of truth are no more singular.

Barthes notes that the object of inquiry has shifted recently from what may be considered the Romantic/ Enlightenment understanding of language (“an instrument in the service of either reason or the heart”) to an inquiry into the nature of the medium itself. According to Lewis, medieval studies began in the eighteenth century because of the prevalent taste of the time and focused on the Ballad and Romance forms. He argues, however, that these were not characteristic of the medieval ages, and that these “studies” reveal more about the eighteenth century and its fantasies than about the middle ages. He suggests that this has led to a misperception of the period:

Medieval man was not a dreamer, nor a spiritual adventurer; he was an organiser, a codifier, a man of system. His ideal could be not unfairly summed up in the old housewifely maxim “A place for everything and everything in its (right) place.” (“Imagination and Thought”, p.43.)

It is this misperception of medieval man that has, conceivably, led to the misinterpretation of Derrida’s statement on theocentrism. He claims that the retroactive construction of a theocentric tradition demonstrates “l’ethnocentrisme le plus originel et le plus puissant”.²² Derrida, however, is acutely aware that this “tradition” is a contemporary phenomenon rather than a medieval legacy. The reproduction of conditions it (contemporary literary theory) sought to redress suggests a Lacanian process of “specularisation” in the self-identification of a contemporary episteme. (I will return to this with reference to Kristeva’s theory of poetic language and the role of what may be termed “the feminine” in poetics.) It becomes clear that the effect of post-structuralist inquiry cannot be to render everything meaningless after deconstruction (decentralisation): the “original” position (that of the medieval) was never one of centrality. This “position” is a retrospective construction reflecting, in a perfect circle of self-referentiality, an aspect of the present case rather than the

²² Jacques Derrida, *De La Grammatologie*, p.3.

truth about the past. The medieval model and contemporary linguistic theory here converge with psychoanalytic literary criticism, as I will discuss in the later stages of this study.

In actual fact, “security”, for medieval man, came in the knowledge of two different versions of reality, the human and the divine. Lewis observes:

In our visible world the circumference, the Primum Mobile, moves quickest and is nearest what we call the centre – i.e. the Earth. But the true nature of the universe is exactly the opposite. In the visible and spatial order Earth is centre; in the dynamic, invisible order the Empyrean is centre, and we are indeed “outside the city wall” at the end of all things. (“Imagination and Thought”, p.62.)

The theocentrism identified by Derrida is not so much the “dynamic, invisible order” of medieval cosmology, but the Romantic version based on studies of uncharacteristic and decontextualised elements of the medieval literary tradition. The Ballad and Romance are often structured around the search for exaggeratedly distant and unreachable objects such as a lost lover/kingdom/past. The subtlety of the medieval God-of-all-being, manifest in fallen man and in all his works and perspectives, (loss and distance are the human condition) is “lost” in such object-led interpretations. That medieval theology conceived of two centres, the Earth and the Empyrean, simultaneously, suggests a de-centrism rather than the theocentrism as described by Derrida. The thirteenth century author, Alanus, for one, considered human beings to be “aliens” on earth – a sentiment that may be seen to have some resonance today.²³ The sense of alienation within the modern world can be traced, among others, through Goethe to Kafka and Camus and has become almost a cliché of the postmodern “state”.

It may be argued that postmodernity is coterminous with postcolonialism in that it resulted from the decentralisation of Empire.²⁴ It could, however, also be argued that the re-perception of the alien at the “centre” in postmodern doctrine (specifically in Derrida’s reopening of scholastic debate) made it difficult to maintain the position of the (colonial) alien at the periphery. The colonial subject, distant from

²³ *De Planctu Naturae*, P.L.ccx, Prosa III, col 444 AB, trans. James J. Sheridan, *The Plaint of Nature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980).

²⁴ “The major project of postmodernism - the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse.” *Introduction to Part IV: “Postmodernism and Post-colonialism”* in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.117-150, p.117.

centres of power and authority, has been as isolated as now the postmodern subject is, and previously the medieval subject was. When that “centre” collapsed, however, the newly postcolonial subject found himself doubly alienated in that he became peripheral (spatially and economically) from a *non*-centre. The medieval subject was the focus of debate amongst scholars concerning his ability to express his freewill given a God who had already foreseen all. The postmodern subject finds difficulty in practising positive action in a world that is radically indifferent and free. The postcolonial subject is haunted by a too-recent history (and education) and fears that any action will be interpreted within the colonial frame of influence.

Theocentrism is clearly not an accurate description of medieval cosmology but a reconstruction of it from a later perspective. It is a way of reading that ignores the subtlety of *allegoresis* and insists that spoken language is superior to written language, not only ultimately but actually (the logocentric argument). This is ethnocentric because it asserts that speech is primary which in turn implies that language cannot travel very far either spatially or temporally, from its point of origin. The postcolonial position challenges (or attempts to challenge) such a view in that it “writes back” to a tradition (the colonial country) in its mother-tongue. Here, language has, at the most literal level, surpassed its origin. The postcolonial subject shares with the medieval subject, in his/her double experience of alienation, a language that inscribes distance and difficulty. The medieval model, proposed here, far from exerting an ethnocentric way of reading, may be seen to offer a precedent for and containment of the problems of contemporary, and particularly postcolonial, language.

Both the medieval and postcolonial texts discussed here are self-conscious of their legitimacy-claims in their respective world orders – a condition heightened, it seems, by the empires that dominated these worlds. Poetry, more generally, has early had to justify its existence and its truth-status. Plato discredited the classical poets on the basis that their work constituted a reflection rather than a true object. He reduced their art to a failed attempt at mimesis:

The quickest way perhaps [to produce art] would be to take a mirror and turn it round in all directions. In a very short time you could produce sun and stars and earth and

yourself and all the other animals and plants and lifeless objects we mentioned just now.²⁵

Plato's criticism of this mirroring – the activity of art - is that it is “two generations away from the throne of truth.” The imitation of reality is not and cannot be the end of the writings of either medieval or of postcolonial subjects. The texts discussed here describe multiple and divided worlds, which find unique and original articulation in literal, fictive means. For these writers a singular reality that could be reflected has been eternally lost: the worlds they inhabit are primarily divided, the worlds they aspire to are, essentially, “artificial”.

Homi Bhabha prefaces his article “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” with a quote from Lacan:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage [...] It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.²⁶

Bhabha discusses the subversion of the colonial discourse of domination by the mimicry of it performed by the colonial subject. He claims that “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” (p.361). In these terms mimicry, rather than signifying sameness, is significant in the differences it highlights. He goes on to elaborate:

the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same but not quite) does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. (“Of Mimicry and Man”, p.361.)

Bhabha makes a distinction between the Platonic sense of the term “represent”, signifying the simple reflection of the Ideal object and the more modern, or critical usage identified in this discussion of mimicry: “Mimicry *repeats* rather than *represents*.” (p.365) He makes this distinction on the basis of Lacan's definition of mimicry above: “the effect of mimicry is camouflage”. This is a biological definition

²⁵ Plato *Republic*, Book X, [596], trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p.318.

²⁶ Homi Bhabha “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October*, no. 28, Spring (1983), pp.125-33 repr. in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1996), pp.360-368, p.360.

of the term.²⁷ A biological usage in turn would depend on the theory of evolution in which an organism, over a number of generations, adapts to its environment in order to secure the survival of the species (though not, of course, consciously). In camouflage, the organism copies the background against which it will appear to its predator *in order to* escape the perceptive faculties of this predator. There is a teleological connection between the organism and its surroundings: biological mimicry is an “effect” of the predator’s perceptive faculties and “exists” in relation to these rather than to the background in an independent sense. There is a particular kind of agency at work in this mimicry which is a composite of the subject and the object, or rather, demonstrates the subject to be in some way dependent on the object for the expression of its subjectivity – its survival/continued existence. Mimicry, in this sense, is clearly in the eye of the beholder. The effects of mimicry do not, therefore, only imply difference but also subjectivity. The question of perspective in this discussion converges with questions both of agency and of difference.

Medieval writers had to contend with the notion of language as a sign of the fall. The postcolonial writer faces the question of being subject to a language that signs his culture’s denigration. The main defence from the particular claims of “in authenticity” levelled at postcolonial writing (particularly from the cultural revivalists who would dismiss writings in colonial languages) is that it attempts a discussion of the current state in which that nation finds itself. This is a present of which the colonial language is an undeniable (though perhaps regrettable) part: it has become integrated into the nation’s consciousness. Postcolonial writers who write in English argue that a literature that claims to articulate a particular experience must be attentive to its forms, an understanding parallel to that of the medieval relation between form and content.

Fanon argues that the postcolonial subject, as the term implies, cannot deny the colonial experience and simply revert to a pre-colonial past:

²⁷ “that a Gestalt should be capable of formative effects in the organism is attested by a piece of biological experimentation that is itself so alien to the idea of psychical causality that it cannot bring itself to formulate its results in these terms [...]” “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1980), pp.1-7 repr. in *Modern Literary Theory*, pp.126-130, p.127.

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature.²⁸

The postcolonial text is, of necessity, at several removes from "truth" - if one such truth could be located. It is written by the formerly colonised and so is remote from the cultural/political/economic centre, about the experience of colonialism - which is now past. It is, therefore, both spatially and temporally "at several removes" from either centre of what may, loosely, be termed "truth". The term "post-colonial" implies a point of convergence of the world of the coloniser with that of the native and so validates the existence of at least two perspectives. There is not one truth from which the activity of postcolonial writing diverges: there are several perspectives it juxtaposes.

The political implications of the - inherently polyvalent - postcolonial text are irrepressible and are bound to the work's material existence. Fanon comments:

This may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (Fanon, p.155.)

Fanon's understanding of the ends of postcolonial writing does not depend on a notion of origin but on material possibility. In this definition, he refers to a future predicated on present activity - on its creation by the work of the present - rather than a past reanimated. The "portrayal" of village life in a novel such as *Things Fall Apart* cannot, in this view, be read as a simple evocation of a prelapsarian state but must be recognised as a complex discursive text in which past and future coexist in the matrix of the present. The power of agency - the human contingent of the present moment - is deeply implicated in postcolonial writing.

The medieval motifs of the ladder and the circle, based on the freewill-determinism debate, are traced as central means in the articulation of emergent voices in this study. Lacan comments on subjectivity, and the perspectival, in the development of identity:

²⁸ Frantz Fanon from "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968) (original French edition 1960), repr. in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, pp.153-157, p.154.

It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me “You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn’t see you!”[...]If what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated.²⁹

The relation of the subject to the domain of vision, according to Lacan, is as a screen receiving the Other’s gaze but lacking its plenitude; the subject does not possess the gaze, but is primarily constituted by it. The gaze and the subject position founded on it is liable to shift as the subject’s relation to others in its network does the same. The position of the subject is constructed in the gaze of the other rather than in the defining look of the self. The subject, then, is a reflection rather than a “true object”. In these terms, the reflection of a reflection is not a divergence from truth, as Plato would insist, but rather the true record of the nature of the subject with regard to its “seenness”. Lacan summarises his view thus: “We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world”.³⁰ “Reflection” becomes synonymous with “construction”.

The writings discussed here are concerned with an alienated subject – fallen or colonised – as well as being explicitly engaged with the means of their construction. The mirrorings between these most apparently disparate genres, the medieval and the postcolonial, may be understood within the frame of psychoanalytic theory to derive from an emphasised concern – under the conditions of empire - with the constitutive nature of representation. One of the most interesting manifestations of this for this study is the manifestation of a particular intertextuality present in these works. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, in their introduction to *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method*, comment:

The rediscovery of intertextual creativity in the twentieth century can be considered a return to the earlier acceptance of the imitative function in writing, the relationship between one author and another or between text and text.³¹

Both Dante and Achebe explicitly re-enact elements of earlier authors. Achebe makes a number of overt allusions to Modernist writers and Dante very consciously reworks Classical mythology. Silko’s allusions are less explicit, but reveal a

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1973) trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1981), p.75.

³⁰ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.75

³¹ *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method*, eds. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols (London: University Press of New England, 1982), p.18.

methodology which not only offers a reading of the relationship between these texts but also develops a level of sophistication rarely seen. The “rediscovery of intertextual creativity”, might, of course, be cited as the justification for a comparison of any twentieth century writing with any early writing. The specific basis of this discussion, however, is a form of allusion which works as a form of resistance rather than of elucidation. All three writers align themselves with literary “backgrounds” to political rather than simple mimetic ends. A particular and subtle use of *auctoritas* is employed in these texts to articulate otherness without rendering it merely a shadow of “the same”.

Chapter One

A Defence: the problems of medieval poetics and of postcolonial language

Plato criticises poets for presenting their work as the literal truth when it is actually imitation.¹ He comments:

Some say that the tragic poets know all the arts, all human things, all pertaining to virtue and vice, all things divine. They claim that the good poet writing good poetry must know what he is writing about; otherwise he would not be able to be a poet. Therefore we must ask whether those who say this may have been keeping company with imitators who deceive them; whether, in consequence, they looked at the works of poets but did not understand that they were thrice removed from reality and could easily be produced without any knowledge of truth. For poets contrive appearances, not reality.²

There is a question however concerning the nature of reality, or, at least, the reality available to the medieval and the postcolonial subjects. Reality, for medieval man, was the conscious reflection of God's will. For the medieval author, imitation of this will could be understood to be the highest form of veneration. Mimicry has an important role to play in postcolonial writing, too: as we have seen in Bhabha's discussion, is employed as a strategy in the colonial situation to resist absolute dominion. For the postcolonial writer – according to Bhabha -³ it is an act of subversion. Both the medieval and the postcolonial writers discussed here write from a position of defense rather than from one of assertion. In both cases, imitation is a strategy of empowerment accessing a reality which the terms governing their worlds disallow.

For the medieval poet "reality", in the Platonic sense, is the preserve of a prime cause: to attempt it would be blasphemous even if it were possible. Medieval literature benefits from a macroscopic perspective in which God is considered the unmoved "mover" and the author merely the efficient cause or *auctor*. Chaucer and Henryson explicitly demonstrate their familiarity with the arguments of classical thinkers as well as their interpretation by the scholastics. Chaucer refers both to

¹ *The Republic*, Book X, 602b, trans. Richard W. Sterling, William C. Scott (London: Norton and Co, 1985), p.292.

² Plato *The Republic*, Book X, 598d-9a, p.289.

“Boece” (Boethius) and his follower “the hooly doctour Augustyn” in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. He refers to Cicero’s *In Somnis Scipio* in both this and in *The Parliament of Fowls*. He would have had Macrobius’s commentary on Cicero in mind with regard to these references. Sources are explicitly accessed via commentaries and interpretations suggesting that claims on originality are secondary if not irrelevant to these writers. Henryson is suspected of having drawn much of his prologue to *The Morall Fabillis* from Chapter XIV of Boccaccio’s *De Genealogia Deorum*. The planetary imagery in *The Testament of Cresseid* may also derive from this source. Furthermore, he uses Thomist analogies and refers to “Esopé” as his master. In drawing attention to these classical views – the notion of a prime mover and art as imperfect mimesis – medieval poets indicate their conscious use of imitative means.

Plato claims (at least tacitly) that a liar claims something is that which it is not. Saint Augustine offers a more complex, and more human view:

No one is to be considered as a liar who says something which is false, but which he believes to be true because, as far as he is concerned, he does not deceive, but is the victim of deception [...] and the man who says something which is true, but which he believes to be false is a liar.⁴

Boccaccio applies this understanding to the case of the poet in *De Genealogia Deorum*. For him too, a liar is a wilful deceiver:

[...] it is not a poet’s intention to deceive anybody with his inventions; furthermore poetic fiction differs from a lie in that in most instances it bears not only no close resemblance to the literal truth, but no resemblance at all; on the contrary it is quite out of harmony and agreement with the literal truth.⁵

Neither medieval poets nor postcolonial writers have much interest in simply reproducing the conditions of reality around them. For both, true reality lies beyond the literal level - which is an experience of distance and loss.

The medieval poets were not, however, complacent. Chaucer draws attention to the dangers of citation in his prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*:

³ See my Introduction.

⁴ Saint Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 18, CCL5, xlvi 58, extract in Minnis, p.95.

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word if it be in his charge,
 Or else he moot telle untrewe,
 Or feyne thing, or fynde wordes newe.⁶

His preface to the collection of stories in his *Canterbury Tales* suggests a clear grasp of the framing forces at work in narration. The figures who apparently “speak for themselves” in his work may be taken to be deliberately counterpoint to the generic tales he has chosen.

Aristotle, in chapter IV of *The Poetics* acknowledges that poetry is imitation but suggests that mimetic representations may operate as means of effective persuasion. Averroes summarised Aristotle’s clarification thus:

Since imitations which are meant as examples are nothing other than “likenings” made to things which we have already experienced, it is clear that the only reason for employing them is that what is said may be understood more quickly and easily. It is understood more quickly through the use of “likenings” because of the pleasure derived from the image of the thing which they represent. This is the first cause of the origin of poetry.⁷

There are two aspects to this argument. The first, is the implication that an imitation is in itself something other than the original object. It might, therefore, have a value in itself. The second is the notion that the truth-value of poetry is not internal but external to it, or, rather, is extant in its effects rather than in its content. While Aristotle acknowledges the imitative forms of poetry, Averroes sets limits concerning its fictive remit:

The poet does not have the licence to create pure fictions [...] The poet is denied the use of the impossible and invented fables such as those composed by Aesop [...] Imitation which keeps within the realm of the possible is more credible than that based on things which have never happened nor are likely to happen [...] representations arrived at by means of false and invented fictions are not part of the work of the poet.⁸

⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Genealogica Deorum*, xiii: Poets are not Liars, in Minnis, p.431-2.

⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The General Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales*, ll.731-736, in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁷ Quoted by Minnis, pp.293-4. Averroes was highly influential in the middle ages on the subjects of translation and commentary. He both translated and produced commentaries on Aristotle and so may be considered, in a sense, a “bringer” of Aristotle to the West.

Fiction has a truth-value if defined in terms of its effects: its ability to elicit pleasure, convince, and facilitate learning.

John Barbour, in his “historical” narrative *The Bruce*, appears to agree that only fiction which is truthful (as opposed to fabulous) has value:

Than suld storys that suthfast wer
 - And thai avar said on gud maner –
 Have doubill plesance in hyring.
 The first plesance is the carping,
 And tothir the suthfastness
 That schawys the thing rycht as it was (ll:3-8)⁹

Barbour presents *The Bruce* as a “suthfast” history revealing how the “stalwart folk” (19) of Scotland won their “fredome” (219). On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that he has amalgamated the actions and characteristics of three Scottish kings into one super-hero who fights the English King Edward I over a mythically extended period. Barbour’s “suthfastness” issues from a different definition of truth than the factual. The poem, from the evidence of the text, is clearly intended as a piece of political and national propaganda. His discourse on “truth” is in agreement with his subject: he is attempting, through the means of poetry to forge a “true” nation of Scots. That, at the time, this nation was subject to the English, is seen as a distortion: a sorry “untruth”. His statement “A! fredome is a noble thing” is a rallying cry to the Scottish aristocracy, reminding them of their duty to achieve freedom, and the reader of the active rather than passive nature of fate. The argument centres on the nature of man and the expression of his freewill as the only “truth”. Barbour’s “Romanys” (446) may be seen to follow in a tradition of mythic histories, which contain invented fictions in the service of greater truths. This tradition includes Virgil and Homer as well as much of the Old Testament. Saint Augustine observes:

The written account of historical events [...]will naturally convey some meaning beyond, different from the relatively insignificant knowledge of these historical facts.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, pp.384-6.

⁹ John Barbour *The Bruce*, Book 1, in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature: 1375-1707* Eds. R.D.S. Jack and P.A.T. Rosendaal (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1997), pp.1- 16.

¹⁰ St. Augustine *Christian Doctrine*, XIII, xxi.

If the writing of History may be seen to involve fictionalising means, then the project of poetry becomes more justifiable.

Chaucer makes a distinction between this and the more “marvelous” aspects of poetics:

For thylke tyme, as I have understoude
 Beestes and brides koude speke and syngre .
 (*The Nun's Priest's Tale*; ll.2880-1).¹¹

Later, Henryson appeals to his reader's imaginations in a similar vein:

My author in his fabillis tellis how
 That brutal beistis spak and understude,
 And to gude purposis dispute and argow.
 (“Prologue” to the *Morall Fabillis*; ll.43-6).¹²

Where Henryson suggests a precedent, Chaucer is more daring and has animals speaking as a matter of course. Both are clearly aware of the sense of disbelief that such narrative events generate. They are drawing attention to the fictionality of their work. Saul Brody comments:

His [Chaucer's] actual assertion is that we are hearing a story, not objective truth, thus the reader's attention is drawn specifically to the fictionality rather than the truth of the tale.¹³

The condemnation of the fabulous aspects of poetry seems to be founded on the assumption that the poet intends his audience to take his work literally. Aesop's fables, however, are often appended with a *moralitas* that insists on the poet's didactic intention. Explicit in this *fabula* form is the possibility of another level of interpretation beyond poetic pleasure. Both Henryson and Chaucer claim that there is more to their tales than mere fiction:

¹¹Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). ll.2880-1.

¹² “Prologue” to the *Morall Fabillis*, in *The Mercat Anthology*, pp.280-282.

¹³ Saul Nathaniel Brody “Truth and Fiction in the Nun's Priest's Tale” in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Chaucer* ed Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p.112.

But ye that holden this tale a folye
 As of a fox, or a cok and hen
 Taketh the moralite, good men. (Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*; ll. 3438-41)¹⁴

This acknowledges the “folye” of the conceits at the surface – or letter – of the tale but directs the reader towards the “moralite”. A fictional character warning an audience of the dangers of naïve belief in fictions adds an ironic twist: it emphasises the difficulty of distinguishing the real from the unreal. Henryson does something similar in his “Prologue”:

Sa lysis thair ane doctrine nyce aneuch [...]
 Under a feynzeit fabill (ll.17-18)

He openly draws attention to the fictionality of his work but insists that this is just the surface and that truth, true to its fragile and ephemeral nature, lies hidden beneath.¹⁵

The impetus for non-literal readings came from Scripture. Other modes of reading were needed for a text whose ultimate truth could not be questioned but contained passages that could not be taken literally. Aquinas comments:

¹⁴ in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed F.N. Robinson.

¹⁵ The understanding that there are several levels to be appreciated in the interpretation of art, and that this is a matter of perspective, is one that has been discussed at great length in twentieth century philosophy:

“To rejoice or suffer with the human destinies which a work of art may relate or represent is a very different thing from true artistic enjoyment. Indeed, such concern with the human element of the work is strictly incompatible with aesthetic gratification.

It is a perfectly simple matter of optics. In order to see an object we have to adjust our eyes in a certain way. If our visual accommodation is inadequate we do not see the object of we see it imperfectly. Imagine we are looking at a garden through a window. Our eyes adjust themselves so that our glance penetrates the glass without lingering upon it and seizes upon the flowers and foliage. As the goal of vision towards which we direct our glance is the garden, we do not see the pane of glass and our gaze passes through it, the clearer the glass, the less we see it. But later by making an effort, we can ignore the garden and by retracting our focus let it rest on the window pane. Then the garden disappears from our eyes, and all we see of it are some confused masses of colour which seem to adhere to the glass. Thus to see the garden and to see the window-pane are two incompatible operations: the one excludes the other and they each require a different focus.

[...]

Now the majority of people are incapable of adjusting their attention to the window-pane which is the work of art; instead their gaze passes through without lingering and hastens to involve itself passionately in the human reality to which the work alludes. If they are invited to let go this prize and focus their attention on the actual work of art, they will say they see nothing in it, because in fact they do not see in it human things, but only artistic “nothingness”.

The parabolic sense is contained within the literal sense [...]When the Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making.¹⁶

Scripture had to be understood to have allegorical as well as literal significance. This method of reading became known as “allegoresis”.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle developed a theory of progression from poet to text to audience along the lines of the causal argument used to explain the different perspectives of God and man. Nicholas Trevet, in his contribution to the “Aristotelian Prologue”, applies this theory to Seneca’s *Tragedies*:

The cause which brought it into being (causa efficiens) was Seneca. The origin of the subject-matter (causas materialis) is the madness of Hercules, in the course of which he killed his sons and his wife. The enforming cause (causa formalis) is the enjoyment (delectatio) of the audience, or else, in so far as there are narrated here some actions which are praiseworthy and some which deserve censure, the book can in a certain manner be placed in the category of ethics.¹⁷

The enforming cause, in poetry, is also the final cause – it is the form in which the truth is presented which effects the enjoyment of the audience.

Truth is by necessity contained within a poetic and sometimes explicitly fictive structure: the emotional “moving” of an audience depends on an expenditure of effort on the part of the audience. Boccaccio explains:

You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must enquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind [...]For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine.¹⁸

The artifice of poetry is necessary because such strenuous moral exertion requires persuasion - and the nature of man is such that this requires the promise of pleasure. Chaucer uses a similar metaphor at the end of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*: “Taketh the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille” (ll.3443). The “chaf” is the fictive level that protects

Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanisation of Art*, trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 68.

¹⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, (22 vols) Q. I, Article X, Reply 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: [N.P.]1920–31).

¹⁷ in Minnis, p.131.

¹⁸ in Minnis, p.431.

the “fruyt”. The implication is that effort brings its own reward. Henryson fuses these ideas by using metaphors that explicate, in a poetically consistent and satisfying manner, the need for audience participation:

The nuttis shell, thocht it be hard and teuch
 Haldis the kinnell, sweit and delectabill;
 Sa lysis thair ane doctrine wyse aneuch,
 And full of frute, under ane fenzeit fabill (“Prologue”; ll.15-18)

Henryson likens the artifice of the fable to the hardness of a nut’s shell, suggesting the effort needed to access its truth. It also suggests the reward that comes from work; as sensual/physical so intellectual/spiritual. The conditions of learning are explained by Aristotle:

Since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance a work of imitation such as poetry.¹⁹

The audience must “take delight” in the poetry in order to learn. Henryson refers to the Thomist metaphor of the bow:

For as we se, ane bow that ay is bent
 Worthis unsmart and dullis on the string:
 Sa dois the mynd that ay is diligent
 In ernistfull thochtis and in studying. (*Prologue*; ll.21-25)

The feinyeit fabils producing “merrie sport” are not, therefore, mere distraction but the very means of exercising the mind to the subtlety and flexibility necessary to bridge the gap that separates, ultimately, God from man.

The “Aristotelian Prologue” or “Doctrine of the Four Causes” was developed by later Christian theologians as a means, after suitable adaptation, of logically justifying biblical use of the figurative. Minnis notes that at the beginning of his commentary on Isaiah, Guerric of St Quentin identifies two levels of authorship. This was referred to as the “duplex causa efficiens” or “twofold efficient cause”:

¹⁹ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Book I, xi, 19-25, trans. John Henry Freese (London: William Heinemann, 1926), p.125.

the holy spirit may be regarded as the “moving” efficient cause which motivated the “operating” efficient cause, namely the prophet Isiah to write.²⁰

Guerric was trying to prove that the Bible, written by man, could also be God’s word. Human beings were considered to be divinely inspired and God the first cause. The New Testament states: “It is not ye that speak, but the spirit of your Father which speaketh in you”.²¹ It was of great importance that passages with figurative elements could be understood to be true.²² Aquinas points out: “Nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture.”²³

Bede, drawing on Augustine, laid the foundation for such a view in arguing:

Holy Scripture is pre-eminent above other writings, not only in authority because it is divine, and in utility because it leads to eternal life, but also, finally, in antiquity and in its own original manner of discourse[...]The masters of secular discourse cannot lay claim to any form of the rhetorical usage, whether of *scheme* or *trope*, the use of which has not been anticipated in the Bible.²⁴

The implications carried beyond scriptural interpretation and had consequences for the secular poet:

Boethius says EVERY SORT OF MAN that is, in general terms all mankind, rich and poor, of every degree, living on this earth, RISES FROM A SIMILAR BEGINNING, that is, because all men in terms of the soul, come from the one creator.²⁵

If all men are equal in the eyes of God, and if a man’s poetry may be divinely inspired, then it is possible that all poetry can be in some sense attributed to God:

²⁰ Minnis, p.198.

²¹ Matt. 10:20, Christ to the disciples.

²² “the reader must be prepared to ponder what he hears or reads; he is directly enjoined by Augustine to search for the underlying meaning where the surface meaning does not satisfy the demands of true doctrine: “In regard to figurative passages, a rule like the following shall be observed: *what is read must be diligently turned over in the mind until an interpretation is found that promotes the reign of charity.*” [De doctrina 3, 11 (17).]” Bernard F. Huppe, *Augustine’s Influence on Old English Poetry* (New York, 1959), p.19.

²³ Minnis, p.198.

²⁴ Bede, *De schematibus et tropis*, in *Rhetores Latini minores*, ed C. Halm (Leipzig, [N.P.] 1863), p.607, in Huppe, p.36.

²⁵ Minnis, p.339.

As the *logos* (reason) is the fundamental principle of everything, it must manifest itself in poetry also.²⁶

The final difficulty is why, if poetry may be considered to be of divine origin, it should need to take recourse to invented forms. Conrad of Hirsau offers one explanation:

We know that fables were invented so that by introducing the fictitious conversation of dumb animals, certain similarities in human morals and behaviours might be criticised.²⁷

Both Chaucer and Henryson see the fallen nature of man and of language as justification for, if not a demand for, “invented fictions”:

If an audience is mentally incapable of grasping the plain truth, though it is perfectly well known to the teacher, then the teacher can convey it through metaphorical language.²⁸

In this line of defense, divine truth is communicated via a human *auctor* - who creates a likening which is comprehensible - to the (dulled minds of a) fallen human audience. The intention is simultaneously to make this audience aware of their inability to perceive truth directly and to incite them - as far as capacity, will and the persuasive skill of the poet allows - to access divine truth through the exercise of their minds via the stimulation of their senses.

This directive can be clearly seen in the work of Henryson. The *Cock and the Jasp* is, superficially, the tale of a “cok” “seikand his meit” who stumbles across “ane jolie stone” (l.63).²⁹ The story reveals itself to be signing at several levels. Henryson presents the fable so that the immediate moral seems to be the value of humility and pragmatism. This is demonstrated by the figure of the cock – the main protagonist - who rejects the jewel as useless to his particular ends of hunger:

²⁶ Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship From the Beginning to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), quoted by Rollinson, Phillip, *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture* (London: Harvester Press, 1981), p.4. Pfeiffer refers to the Aristotelean idea that reason is man’s distinctive quality. Note also that *logos* is translated as “reason” but can also mean “word” and is used as such in the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel implying God – “In the Beginning was the word.”

²⁷ Minnis, p.47.

²⁸ Minnis, p.211.

²⁹ Robert Henryson *The Morall Fabillis in The Mercat Anthology*, pp.84-6.

Rise, gentill Iasp, of all stanis the flour,
 Out of this fen, and pas quhar thow suld be;
 Thow ganis not for me, nor I for the (*The Cock and the Jasp*; ll.107-110)

Henryson, however, condemns such short-sightedness. He sums up thus in the *moralitas*:

Quha can gouerne ane realme, cietie, or hous
 Without science? No man, I you assure.
 It is riches that ever shall endure (ll.136-138)

Henryson's interpretation in the *moralitas* transcends the literal (the reading which seems to, most directly, arise from the tale) and addresses a higher level of concern. As Stephen Khinoy suggests "we ourselves seem to be condemned for missing the point of the story."³⁰ The responsibility for truth is shifted from the realm of the poet to the audience. The freewill of this audience, in attempting to uncover the truth, transcends even the influence of the poet. This is the third aspect of the nature of the sign. Poets, according to Augustine are not liars: firstly, because they cannot be entirely in possession of their meaning, (it comes, ultimately, from God) and secondly, because their ends are different to their immediate effects:

[they feign] in order that one may reach what is intended by a narrative which is indeed fictitious but not mendacious since it has truthful signification.³¹

The matter of signing and the question of freewill underlie the figures of the circle and the ladder of love. They suggest the closest possible approach to truth in fallen worlds; postcolonial as well as medieval.

The interactive aspect of medieval poetics, which considers both the motivations of the author and the ability to comprehend of the audience, is parallel to contemporary thought on the nature of language and knowledge. Ashcroft puts the case squarely when he asserts

³⁰ "Moral relationships in Henryson", in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, ed. G. Ross Roy (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1981), p.103

³¹in Minnis, Introduction to "Scriptural Science and Signification", p.209.

Meaning is a social accomplishment characterised by the participation of the writer and reader functions within the event of the particular discourse.³²

Derrida's conclusion that there is "nothing outside the text", may, in this light, be seen to indicate that *all is text* rather than a (positivistic) "nothingness" outside the physical object of the text.³³ The postmodern thinker, Lyotard, strips such observations to their underlying premise and identifies the conditions of knowledge:

the fact remains that knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity.³⁴

Language or knowledge in post-industrial, post-humanist society cannot be understood to inscribe or contain meaning. The autonomous individual is thus recognised in his full dignity: his contribution to the constitution and interpretation of his world can no longer be denied. It becomes clear that medieval concerns with the matters of signing and freewill (albeit within the larger vision of God) remain extant.

C.S. Lewis describes, in his lecture on the medieval world-view, a model which may underlie, at least historically, contemporary problems of knowledge. God, it seems, becomes more Godlike in the independent activities of the creatures upon whom he has conferred the function of causality, both sexual and most relevantly here, artistic. Aquinas notes that God gifts independence to man:

not by a lack of power but by an immensity of goodness; he has wished to communicate to things a resemblance to him in that they would not only exist but be the cause of others.³⁵

O'Meara explains the significance of God's creation of man in his own image:

³² Bill Ashcroft, "Constitutive Graphonomy" in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.298-302, p.298.

³³ Postmodern theory implies that interrelations are all; medieval theory that interrelations are *all that man can know* but does assume another realm which is God (unknowable or at least uncommunicable between men).

³⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern: A Report on the Condition of Knowledge in From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence E. Cahoone (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 81-505, p.488.

³⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 70, quoted in Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p.76

[Aquinas' writings] are all, in a sense about incarnation, that is, about a special presence of God in us, and par excellence, in the word incarnate in Jesus. First and foremost, the *ST* [*Summa Theologiae*] is an ordered presentation of God-in-act. Beings emerge in the glory of their capacities for act and in the aura of their destinies. In plan and creation, through the missions of revelation and grace, the Trinity reaches men and women in their concrete world studied by scientists, philosophers, religious prophets, and theologians. Consequently, a basic theological pattern is that of being-in-action: natures, whether this species of hawk or that of sculptor, sustain their being and manifest themselves through their proper activities. One can see in the three parts of God, humanity and Christ traces of patterns of being, activity and process.³⁶

A model of "presence" and what may be termed "performance" can be seen to come close to the writings of Ashcroft and Lyotard.

Lyotard's example of the "zero-sum-game" in his essay "The Postmodern", in which the finite and infinite are juxtaposed, "the source is knowledge – language's reserve of possible utterances is inexhaustible", (p.505) offers a similarly dynamic model to Lewis's vision of the heavens. The parallels become clearer as he explains the rules:

The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the "moves" playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favours a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments by which I mean argumentation in that it concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time. (Lyotard, p.504)

A model driven by the interaction of the inexhaustible with the finite bears more than just passing resemblance to the description of the *primum mobile* given by Lewis, particularly in Lyotard's conclusion:

This sketches the outline of a poetics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown. (Lyotard, p.505)

The co-existence of order and mystery in the medieval universe is paradigmatic of its theology. V. E Watts in his introduction to Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* notes:

Eternity is explained not in terms of quantity of life but in terms of quality of life: in virtue of His complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life, God,

³⁶ O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian*, p.55.

in whom there is no past or future, but only timeless present, is eternal while the world which only attains an endless series of moments, each lost as soon as it is attained, is merely perpetual.³⁷

A dynamic suspension of contradictory phenomena can be seen to be sustained in the figure of the circle which, according to Lewis, is the form of the *primum mobile* - or at least a form in which the fallen human may comprehend it. The dynamic is evident also in the writing of the time. Chenu identifies the reflection of such a dynamic in the work of Aquinas:

In order, therefore, to understand the *Summa Theologiae* as well as the purpose of its author, it is important to perceive the *ordo disciplinae* that is worked out in it – not only the logical plan of the work, with its divisions and subdivisions, but also that inner flow of movement giving life to the structure after having created it [...].³⁸

According to Chenu, a level other than the literal is invoked in Aquinas' writings in a very conscious and organised way. That he implies this other possible "reading" is a necessary part or consequence of structural elements, suggests the centrality of the intangible, or mysterious, to medieval thought.

Another reader of Aquinas, A. D. Sertillanges, elaborates further in his identification of a sense of "otherness":

In St. Thomas, doctrine has become harmonious after the manner of a symphony. It vibrates freely in all its parts and undulates from end to end, without any of those intermissions which falsify the key and break the harmony, without unresolved discords or any but expressive silence, by which I mean Mysteries. Mysteries are not simply voids. They are more full of meaning than anything else, and it is their depth that makes them unfathomable [...] Their purpose in a synthesis is to give unity and strength, and indeed, beauty to the whole.³⁹

The polyvalency inscribed in medieval texts (and discussed in postmodern texts) appears to exert a force which is over and above the sum of its parts. Thomas implies a synthesis of different perspectives into a greater whole. In this, the ladder

³⁷ Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1969), p.27.

³⁸ M.D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas* (Chicago: [N.P.] 1964), p.301. See also Job 38; 4-7, "who laid the cornerstone thereof", as a third version of creation – all three must be taken together to give "true" account.

³⁹ A.D. Sertillanges, *St Thomas Aquinas and his Work* (London: [N.P.] 1932), p.113

structures the circle. The “meaning” of medieval texts resides in the interaction of its parts rather than simply in their coexistence.

Polylemy in texts is dynamic and produces effects beyond the control of the author. Barthes, in his relegation of the author to a mere “scriptor”, echoes the medieval concern with the *auctor*.⁴⁰ In the medieval scheme, rotation isn’t merely a form adopted from tradition. The author of love, God, stabilises the universe – according to the Neoplatonists as well as the Christians – in a triple movement which involves movement away from God, turning, and finally, coming back to him. The second stage is the moment of choice: an act of freewill which governs the possibility of the first stage and the final destination. It is not coincidental that the symbol of the circle was chosen to describe the movements of the heavens. The circle describes a dynamic of return which implies departure as well as arrival. More than just the Greek symbol of perfection (*pace* Lewis), it was a form that enacted, spatially and materially, man’s relation to God. In a *real* sense, in so far as the material world is the only reality that man knows, the circle described the “metonymic gap” (identified by Ashcroft) between God and his creation. In theology, all things were studied in their relationship to God:

Beyond the building blocks of Aristotelian science, Aquinas drew upon the theme of emergence and return. The young theologian teaching the *Sentences* had already employed the pattern of the procession outwards of creatures from the first principle and their movement toward fulfillment in their ultimate cause.⁴¹

Boethius fuses a view of meaning as process - between subject and object - with the image of the circle:

Everything is comprehended not according to its own nature but according to the ability to know of those who do the knowing. Let us make it clear with a brief example; the same roundness of shape is recognised in one way by the sight and in another way by the touch. The sight remains at a distance and sees the whole

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”: “Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that his hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely “polish” his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression) traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.” In *Image-Music-Text*, essays selected and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p.1466-70, p.1468.

⁴¹ 1 *Sent*, d.14, q.2 a.2, quoted by O’Meara, p.57.

simultaneously by means of rays of light passing from the eye, while the touch coming close to and grasping the sphere perceives its roundness part by part. Similarly man himself is beheld in different ways by sense perception, imagination, reason and intelligence. The sense examines shape as constituted in matter while imagination considers his shape alone without matter. Reason transcends imagination, too, and with a universal consideration reflects upon the species inherent in individual instances. But there exists the more exalted eye of intelligence which passes beyond the sphere of the universe to behold the simple from itself with the pure vision of the mind.⁴²

Ladder imagery is implicit in the description of *sensoria* and the different kinds of understanding.

An adapted version, the “strada al dio”, becomes a major trope in the poetry of Dante, and is later developed by Baldasar Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano*, James I in *The Kingis Quair*, and by Chaucer amongst others. Castiglione suggests the precedent of such a tradition:

Consider that Solomon, wishing to write mystically of very lofty and divine things, in order to cover them with a fair veil, imagined an ardent and tender dialogue between lover and lady, thinking that here below among us he could find no similitude more apt and suited to things divine than love of woman.⁴³

Later, he formulates this “similitude” into the ladder of love:

Therefore let us direct all the thoughts and powers of our souls to this most holy sight, that shows us the path leading to heaven; and, following after it and divesting ourselves of those passions wherewith we were clothed when we fell, by the ladder that bears the image of sensual beauty at its lowest rung, let us ascend to the lofty mansion where, lovely, and true beauty dwells, which lies hidden in the inmost secret recesses of God, so that profane eyes cannot behold it.⁴⁴

He suggests the necessity of sensual/worldly love in the experience of divine love. The “ladder of love” follows the pattern of medieval hierarchy: while one level of experience may be inferior to another it remains the first and necessary condition of the superior experience.

This model has already been presented by Boethius in terms of knowledge:

⁴² *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V: iv, pp.157-8.

⁴³ Baldasar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, ed. Edgar Mayhew (London and New York: Norton, 2002), p.189.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.257.

The superior manner of knowledge includes the inferior, but it is quite impossible for the inferior to rise to the superior. (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, p.158)

Within the spiritual and even the mysterious levels of allegorical interpretation, hierarchy is maintained. Aquinas explains:

Spiritual things are always hidden. Therefore, through the realities of time they cannot be fully manifest, and so they need a diversity of presentations.⁴⁵

The implications of this for Poetry and its defense are significant: the fictive, literal level is not negligible but absolutely necessary to communication and knowledge in a fallen context. There is a fundamental continuity to medieval thought so that the pattern of hierarchy is true at every level: from the tropological (including the literal, fictive and historical) to the allegorical (the figurative) and finally the anagogical (pertaining to God). There is no incompatibility because each interpretative level contains its own verification and proof. Brown suggests that this “interconnectedness” is drawn from the Greeks:

Just as Aristotelianism refused to dissect soul from body, so it refused a dichotomy between the spirit and the letter. The spiritual sense was not to be studied separately from the literal as if it were superimposed, but through and in the literal.⁴⁶

The literal level becomes the means of spiritual communication (even if in simplified and veiled form) rather than an injurious distraction.

This process reveals the very distance between divine truths and man in that the justification of its means of communication is based on the demonstrably fallible means of human sense organs:

Thomas explains that we understand by the impression which things make upon us. This impression gauges their intelligibility and our intelligence. It is the subject or the object which sets the limits as the case may be. The conditions of knowledge make us realise that the objects of experience are not entirely intelligible, and that we ourselves are not pure intelligences.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Super Evangelium S. Mattaei Lectura* [3:1], (Turin: [N.P.] 1951) ch. 3 lect.1, quoted by O’Meara, p.171.

⁴⁶ R. Brown, *The “Sensus Plenior” of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, 1955), p.61.

⁴⁷ A.D. Sertillanges, *Saint Thomas and his work*, p.37

However, it is not only that we cannot always “read” the data, but that this material may not be available in its entirety. The postcolonial theorist, Ashcroft would seem to agree in his explication of what he considers to be the message-event of meaning. He suggests that there is an ultimate distance between any reader and any author. After Derrida, language is always at a distance from its origin. More fundamentally for Ashcroft, the process of articulation and that of knowing are entirely separate. As “knowing”, according to him, is a retrospective act, between the reader, the text and the author, he identifies a “metonymic gap” in this relation. He finds this dramatised in postcolonial writing in that the postcolonial text's reception is in several ways - including geographically and culturally - far from its point of production. He considers there to be a lack of contiguity between the social world which produces the meaning and that which receives it, as there is between the linguistic expectation and the way it enters into the reading/writing process. Ashcroft argues for the undeniability of this distance at the level of meaning: “It is precisely cultural difference rather than cultural identity which is installed in this way”.⁴⁸

Lyotard, from a postmodern perspective, would seem to agree:

To the extent that science is differential, its pragmatics provides the antimodel of a stable system. A statement is deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known, and after an argument and proof in support of it has been found. Science is a model of an “open system” in which a statement becomes relevant if it “generates ideas”, that is, if it generates other statements and other game rules.⁴⁹

Lyotard’s analysis suggests that the very condition of knowledge is instability and process rather than the perfect communication of incontrovertible facts.

The subtlety of medieval understanding lends itself to the postcolonial situation in the paradoxical “articulation of inarticulacy” which it allows. A shared concern with the literal and fictive in postcolonial and medieval writing is the basis of this investigation. In the case of postcolonial writing, that we may “only know

⁴⁸ Bill Ashcroft “Constitutive Graphonomy” from “Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-colonial Theory of Literary Writing” in *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-colonial Writing* (Mandelstrup: Dungaroo, 1989), eds. Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, repr. in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1997).pp.298-302, p.299.

⁴⁹Jean-Francois Lyotard “The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge” trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984) repr. in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, pp.481-513, p.488.

through retrospection” is a case of the historical (one event happens subsequent to another on a linear time scale) having become spatial. The West can only know the true effects of colonialism on native peoples by a writing that severally inscribes distance and difference. The metonymic gap inscribed in the figure of the circle of medieval theology and poetics, and discussed in the writings of postmodern theorists, becomes manifest in postcolonial writing. In the tropology of the medieval world the literal/material/historical/fictive level is inescapable because man is at an ultimate remove from God. In the politics of postcolonialism, the literal level is the only means of redress to a linguistically, culturally and geographically distant centre. Medieval poetics may be able to offer a model for how the postcolonial text can “mean” for a postcolonising world.

The precedent for attention to the literal means of poetry which are, for the medieval, inherently fictive is, as we have seen, in the Bible. *Allegoresis* – a way of interpreting a text so that its meaning may be interpreted in more ways than the literal - is the literary correlative to the hierarchical universe described in medieval scholasticism. The potential for difference of this multi-layered model underlies the resonances between these postcolonial texts and the Western canon. Rollinson comments on Augustine’s *Christian Doctrine*:

Almost everything in the Old Testament, historical events as well as prophetic passages, is figurative [...] In fact any problem at all with the literal text is always a hint or direction to read figuratively.⁵⁰

This advice is echoed by Dante, who draws his readers’ attention to “*versi strani*”,⁵¹ the hard lines, with their suggestion of the different levels of truth from the literal to the anagogical. Difficult passages or language may also be taken as a sign in postcolonial literature of the need to consider specific contexts - for example, the fact that the text is being written for an English-speaking audience and therefore, to some extent, the Western world. This model also allows the use of literary language (and allusion) as a strategy of resistance. The necessity of using colonial languages in

⁵⁰ Phillip Rollinson, *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture* (London: Harvester Press, 1981).

⁵¹ “Ye that are of good understanding, note the teaching that is hidden under the veil of the strange lines”, *Inferno IX*, 61-3.

postcolonial articulations depends largely on the practical, or worldly constraint which influences the choice of medium, as V.S. Naipaul points out:

when one was young, one behaved as though there was God, that God was a publisher, editor, and critic, and if you were good, regardless of your background and your themes, you would be received into the pantheon of writers. But in fact virtue is not rewarded. If you're a Yugoslav, for example, there's no God for you, for God is going to have to go through an awful lot of English and French writing before He comes to Serbo-Croat.⁵²

In postcolonial writing, as in medieval writing, the means may be justified by the ends. In postcolonial writing too, the literal implies the practical as well as the political level. The use of English for the postcolonial writer is problematic. It depends on the figurative nature of language more generally, in the medieval sense: postcolonial texts in colonial languages force readers to "read" at other levels than the literal.

Dante's *Commedia* is written in a vernacular designed specifically for that purpose. It is claimed in the "Epistle to Can Grande" that:

the subject is man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his freewill he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.⁵³

By this he indicates that his concern is, appropriately for poetry, the human realm. Dante adds:

it may be stated briefly that the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and to bring them to a state of happiness.⁵⁴

Appropriate to the human realm, this is a poem infused with activity and will: in other words, it is didactic. This reflects the persuasive ends of the poetic project, and justifies writing in a language "really spoken by men", whether fallen or just alien to the experience described, if it is to move them. Albert Russell Ascoli reveals in his essay "The Unfinished Author", the ambition of Dante's enterprise, so that far from

⁵² "Interview with Naipaul" by Israel Shenker, in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp.48-53, p.53.

⁵³ *Dante's Epistotae*, ed. Paget Toynbee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), Section 8, p.200.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Section 15, p.202.

being yet further removed from "reality" by the use of the vernacular, Dante brings his reader closer to the truth of human experience:

[the poem] incorporates within itself a fully articulated vision of cosmic dimensions encompassing the reality of human languages; the political, social and "cultural" processes of human history; and the phenomenology of human desire and understanding. In short, Dante explicitly assumed for himself as poet and for his "sacro poema" (holy poem, *Paradiso* 25, 1) a conscious, visionary authority - subordinate only to God's dictates - over all of those forces which we now see as determining, and thus compromising, the authority of the individual creative act.⁵⁵

The decision to use a vernacular is a deliberate and careful one. It is not a failing on Dante's part but a direct consequence of his subject. It is also the sign of a singularly ambitious project: a poem to which both heaven and earth may be seen to have "lent their hands".

I have suggested that Dante's poem is pro-imperialist and that this is a potential source of conflict with postcolonial writing:

it may be manifestly seen that for the perfection of the universal, religious order of the human race it behoves that there should be one as shipmaster, who, considering the diverse and necessary offices, should have the universal and indisputable office of commanding the whole.⁵⁶

Dante *was* an imperialist, but not in the sense usually associated with colonialism. He was a Guelf in the tradition of his family, and so a nationalist, but a troubled one and his *Commedia* reveals strong "Ghibelline" sympathies - an advocacy of the imperial cause. Charles Till Davis comments: "The longing for the restoration of a universal empire, and its necessity for the attainment of human happiness, are also a central theme of the *Commedia*". Davis explains Dante's understanding of Empire:

For Dante, empire or monarchy signifies the command directing all other commands, the jurisdiction embracing and authorising all other wills (*Convivio* IV, 4) [...] the primary meaning of the word is universal authority [...] The empire is intended to be the political authority regulating the "humanas civilitas" which may be best translated as the civil order of mankind[...] embraces the whole human family [...]

⁵⁵ "The Unfinished Author: Dante's rhetoric of authority in *Convivio* and *De Eloquentia Vulgaris*", repr. in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.45-66.

⁵⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Convivio*. trans. J. M. Dent (London: Aldine House, 1924), Treatise 4 , p.243.

That empire or rule over the entire world comes directly through God, not through any other authority such as the pope's jurisdiction. The papal dignity is even higher than the imperial, but exists in an entirely different sphere. The emperor relies on philosophical teachings to lead men to their human goal of temporal happiness; the pope relies on theological teachings to lead men to the divine goal of salvation.⁵⁷

Davis ends his essay with the assertion that "it was his particular originality to sacralise secular or at least imperial government without in any way clericalising it or neglecting its natural function" (p.78). For Dante, different kinds of truth coexist, each confined to its proper place.

Albert Ascoli articulates Dante's recognition of an alternative to temporal derivations of authority: he sought "the direct infusion of inspired authority from beyond the confines of history" (p.65). To the Christian author of course, poetry and politics come together in the belief that God is the "Author of authors". Jeffrey T. Schnapp echoes this in his "Introduction to Purgatorio"

As indicated by Dante's incorporation of political matters into the *Commedia*, poetry has a key role to play in civilisation's renewal. And nowhere more so than on the slopes of Mount Purgatory, where the rebuilding of the body politic coincides with the rewriting of the Latin literary family. First the ancient Latin poets Virgil and Statius are brought together; then their successors, Dante, Guido Guinizzelli, Bonagiunta da Lucca, and Arnaut Daniel: all vernacular "Latin" writers instrumental in the rebirth of literary language during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In this setting the theme of "rebirth" takes on a far more extensive meaning than heretofore implied. More than the rise of a new vernacular Latinity, more than the regeneration of individuals or communities, it refers first and foremost to the nature and function of all human art: "qui la morta poesi resurga" ("here let dead poetry rise again" I, 7) Dante intones in the canticle's opening verses[...]by becoming regenerative tools, instruments of salvation.⁵⁸

Language is seen here not to "give" the truth of salvation, but to have the capacity, when used masterfully, to become its means – to form the first rung in the ladder to salvation.

Ascoli summarises Dante's achievement as "predicated on the transcendence of all historical-cultural determinations, in a vision that sees the universe as a whole" (p.65). Language can incorporate different experiences simultaneously, which is as

⁵⁷Charles Till Davis, "Dante and the Empire" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp.67-79, p.68.

⁵⁸Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Introduction to Purgatorio", in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp.192-207, p.192.

important for the postcolonial writer as for the medieval writer. Language itself, in its very nature, is political. A similar sentiment is echoed by David Dabydeen:

The business of the writer is to break through the confines of narrowness, whether it be the political narrowness of nationalism or the cultural narrowness of localism, or the imaginative narrowness of social reality or even the existential narrowness of reality itself.⁵⁹

The nature of language mirrors the nature of the worlds reflected in medieval and postcolonial writings.

The importance of poetry in the development of political thought is testified to in the writings of the earliest thinkers. Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* illustrates his discussion on courage with examples from Homer and the story of Diomedes and Hector, and his discussion on justice with examples from Euripides.⁶⁰ In her introduction to the *Ethics*, Sarah Broadie comments:

For him the theory of political institutions should start from a reasoned account of the inquiry into the chief human good; consequently, political inquiry rightly conceived, should contain as part of itself the inquiry into the chief good[...]. In working out a systematic account of the chief good, which is the object of political thinking and the end or goal of any political activity, Aristotle proceeds by examining existing views. He attends to the opinions of ordinary people, of the “better class of people”, and of intellectuals. He taps the common culture, the work of the poets in particular, for ethical materials.⁶¹

It might be argued that writing in the language “really spoken by men” is a sentiment common also to early nineteenth century texts, and therefore not sufficiently exclusive grounds for a comparison between medieval and postcolonial writing:

When Wordsworth asserted in the Preface[to the Lyrical Ballads] that he deliberately chose to represent “incidents and situation from common life” he translated his democratic sympathies into critical terms, justifying his use of peasants, children, outcasts, criminals and idiot boys as serious subjects of poetic and even tragic

⁵⁹ David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tago, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.170.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): Bk III.7: 1116a 20 – 1116bi (p.135); Bk V. 9: 1136a 10 – 1136a 15; 1136b 10 – 1136b 15 (p.170, 172).

⁶¹ Introduction to *Nichomachean Ethics* “1: The Chief human good”, pp.10-11.

concern. He also undertook to write in “a selection of language really used by men” on the grounds that there can be no “essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition” In making this claim, Wordsworth subverted the neoclassic principle that the language of a poem must be elevated over standard speech by a special diction and by artful figures of speech, in order to match the language to the height and dignity of a particular genre [...]The great poet is not the practitioner of an artist’s craft designed to satisfy the refined “taste” of a literary connoisseur. He is instead, Wordsworth says in a memorable phrase, “a man speaking to men”.⁶²

I am drawing a comparison, however, between the issue of Dante’s use of a vernacular, an innovative and problematic choice, and the language debate concerning postcolonial writing. In medieval terms “a man speaking to men” would be a match of form to content. The vernaculars developed in both medieval and postcolonial writing are to some extent artificial rather than “really used” because they both attempt to forge connections between divided worlds. Dante is particularly relevant to this discussion in his creation and use of a synthetic vernacular which harmonises different experiences - for example geographical and linguistic- as well as different categories - such as the political and the theological – in a single vision which evokes allegorical models throughout.

Unlike the “language really used” to which Wordsworth refers, Dante in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* must synthesize an Italian out of “at least fourteen vernaculars, all of which have variations within themselves[...]And if we count up the primary and secondary and sub secondary variations of the Italian vernacular, even in this small corner of the world we shall find that the different varieties of speech not only reach but exceed a thousand”.⁶³ He goes on to explain:

those which are of the highest standards of those actions which are specifically Italian, are not peculiar to any one city of Italy, but common to them all; and among these can now be counted the vernacular we have been seeking, whose scent is in every city, and its den is in none. (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*, XVI, p. 34).

Dante's vernacular signs an absence at the heart of the nation in its identification of the lack of a common language. Italy did not exist until it was "written".

⁶² *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802) in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, fifth edition, Vol.2 M.H. ed. Abrahms et al (Penguin: Ontario, 1986) pp.155-7.

⁶³ Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, trans. Sally Purcell (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981), Bk IX p. 27.

In Nigeria alone, as Obiechina in *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature*, admits, there are “six major language groups: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Kanuri, Fulani and Efik-Ibibio account for 85% of the population but more than fifty other language groups account for the remaining 15%.”⁶⁴ Achebe defends his use of English on nation-state grounds:

There are areas of Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers. But on the whole it did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their separate ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another [...]

The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in - English, French, Arabic.⁶⁵

This is not English as spoken in Britain. It is a language adapted by and reflecting the experience of the people who use it. This language has a very material aspect to it. Brathwaite has argued for: “recognition of the vitality of the oral tradition surviving from Africa, the earthiness of proverbial folk speech, the energy and the insistence of the drumbeat to which the living voice responds”.⁶⁶

Merle Collins in her novel *The Colour of Forgetting*, evokes the relationship between language and geographical context:

The adventurers had tried to change the magic by a renaming. Or a naming, you might call it, since by the time they came, the Caribs were gone, the French had left, and the Scots knew no other name. Arthur’s Seat, they called it, like some place they knew at home, and it became theirs. But not for long, and never, really. When the African people whom they called slaves disappeared from the estate, the mountain hugged and hid them even in spite of the magic of their naming. Or perhaps the Africans just knew better how to talk with the spirits of this land that people said the Caribs, who had another name too, used to call Camerhogne. You hear it? Camerhogne. Like a howl. Like music. Camerhogne. Who knows what is what? And how to know if you can’t hear voices in the wind? If a howl could frighten you to cowering and music is not really something that you listening for?

And then when time come and pass and who in charge decide to sell off the land that not so good, well, things change. By this time so, wasn’t Arthur’s Seat people calling it, since the name meant nothing to them, but Attaseat, claiming the

⁶⁴ Repr. in Ogba Kalu, *Understanding Things Fall Apart* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp.201-6, p.203

⁶⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, “The African Writer and the English Language” repr. in *Understanding Things Fall Apart*, pp.216-9, pp.217-8

⁶⁶ *The History of the Voice*, repr. in *Understanding Things Fall Apart*, p. 169.

magic. And because not too many of the big people really wanted mountain land, lots in Attaseat were bigger than the one or two acres available elsewhere.⁶⁷

English has become the means by which the postcolonial subject communicates but it bears the traces of African use. Collins testifies to the power of words, but also to their limitations in juxtaposing the influence of language to more elemental powers: the effects of time, nature and the revolutions of history. The English language is an object of the world just as any other. She suggests that the colonising language may seem to recreate the indigenous world “and it became theirs” but she demonstrates that this language bears the marks of the environment in which it is made to operate: “Arthur’s Seat” becomes “Attaseat” in the Caribbean. Her choice of a prehistoric volcanic plug - the original Arthur’s Seat - underlines the irony of the claims of language on elemental forces: the land mass in Britain far preexisted human beings, as well as its “original” name. She evokes a sense of otherness both geological and mythical.

Achebe concludes that “the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use.”⁶⁸ English, although considered in opposition to native vernaculars by Brathwaite and Ngugi, can be seen to have become a vernacular if this may be defined as a language “as really used”. The use of English by the postcolonial writer may be seen to be a strategic choice invoking the medieval scholastic “means to ends” defense, rather than mimesis.

The alternative to English – writing in native languages - has its critics amongst postcolonial writers. V.S. Naipaul is no champion of the use of Creole. He is sympathetic to John Figuera’s ridiculing of Brathwaite’s position and alert to the dangers of limiting the range of Caribbean poetry, which he considers to be a self-inflicted form of racism. He refuses to be limited to what he terms “local colour” and scorns a West Indian writer whose

women swayed like coconut trees, their mouths the colour of sapodilla, the inside of their mouths the colour of cut star-apple, their teeth white as coconut kernels, and when they make love, they groaned like bamboos in high wind. (in Dabydeen, p.170)

⁶⁷ Merle Collins *The Color of Forgetting* (London: Virago Press, 1995), p.20.

⁶⁸ “The African Writer and the English Language” in Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Heinemann: London, 1975), p.61.

Jamaica Kincaid, on the other hand, notes the experience of having to recite Wordsworth's "Daffodils", and is left with a sense of outrage and alienation at the experience.⁶⁹ There is a double problem here. The surface issue is simply that there are no daffodils in the Caribbean: to make children recite the poem - in English - is symbolic of the supplanting of native with colonising culture. James Baldwin explains:

My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience.⁷⁰

The second issue relates directly to Wordsworth and the project of writing vernaculars. His intention would seem similar to that of Naipaul and Kincaid. Wordsworth took language not usually used for poetry but rather for everyday life and applied it to poetry. The colonial education system is taking poetry, and ironically, the work of this particular poet and imposing it on life. This system grafts artificial, and alien language onto "men" (and women, and most perniciously, according to Kincaid, children) who *do not really use* this language. The colonial education system has misread its own poet.

These postcolonial writers cannot be satisfied with simple mimetic reflections of their experience because the very language that is available is the sign of the insult. Baldwin continues:

But now I began to see the matter another way[...]Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learnt to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test.⁷¹

Kincaid's reference is scathing: the postcolonial writer cannot merely imitate. His or her use of it is inherently political.

⁶⁹ "inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind line by line, every word of that poem [...]" Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (London: Picador, 1994), pp.17-19.

⁷⁰ quoted in Adewale Maja-Pearce, *A Mask Dancing: Nigerian Novelists of the Eighties*, (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992), p.171.

⁷¹ James Baldwin in *A Mask Dancing*, p.171.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is centrally engaged with the language problem. The narrative style is truncated, and peculiarly flat: "He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look." (p.3-4) This does not, however, give the impression of limited native minds but rather suggests the limitations of translation - and an English-speaker's limited understanding of Igbo life. And yet once this point is made (it is made sustainedly in that this style dominates the text), the story is vivid:

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.43)

The emotional impact comes through the stark undemonstrative language, which reflects the nature of English as "really used" in Nigeria. It is a language of formal communication, used in universities and bureaucracy, not a language of intimacy. It lacks class and social nuance, is "clean" and correct. Achebe puts it to subtle use; his purpose cultural retrieval - to rescue traditional culture from the myths and distortions of the colonist:

no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf rescued them.⁷²

The African writer's primary concern is political. It is also to avoid irresponsible idealisation. Achebe's language serves to convey the life of an untouched village which lacks social and individual diversity. It also achieves an unforced difference between normal literary English and the language used here reminding the reader that the villagers speak Igbo and that English is a translation. In its evocation of translation it suggests the allegoric method of scholasticism and the essential distance between the origin of the text (in this case, nineteenth century Igboland) and its end (the twentieth century West).

⁷² Chinua Achebe, *African Writers Talking*, 7, quoted by Simon Gikandi in "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature" in Preface to *Things Fall Apart*, p. xvii.

The undemonstrative English is a perfect antidote to the European “dark continent” view of Africa. Achebe reveals orderly, ordinary and quietly formal manners “forgive me”, said Okonkwo, smiling, “I shall not talk about thanking you any more”(*Things Fall Apart*, p.100). It is also suitable for relating the less acceptable aspects of traditional custom: the dispassionate style neither condemns nor attempts to excuse. At another level, it makes the colonial language secondary in as much as it suggests that this is not an original version of the events. An apparently colourless English proves to be a subtle rhetorical strategy. The emphasis on means of portrayal reaches its nemesis by the end of the novel when a white historian “closes” the narrative in his meditation on its suitability for inclusion in his book. He would plunder the story and simplify it, reducing it to a "short paragraph" or perhaps just a "footnote". The sense of futility at such violence is appropriate. That Okonkwo cannot ultimately conclude his own story, but has it appropriated, summarised and articulated by a white man - who knows almost nothing of him nor his circumstances - seems "true" given the context of colonialism.

The reference in the title of *Things Fall Apart* to Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming”, with its suggestion of the eternal cycling of history and the sense that the centre cannot hold, supports this reading. Achebe’s second novel *No Longer at Ease* takes its title from Eliot’s poem “Journey of the Magi” and refers continually to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Both refer to an ultimate gap or emptiness, an inarticulacy at the core. Achebe’s use of English, and further, his references to the Western canon, achieve, on several levels, a sense of the absolute, non-totalisable otherness of pre-colonial Africa rather than its simplification. The reference to Modernist texts may be read as an indication of the difficulty of reading, alluding as it does to the elitist ethos of the Modernists. It may be argued that this is also the structuring principle of Dante’s *Commedia*. This poem employs a new form of language suited to Dante’s project of salvation and renewal. He structures his poem, as Kevin Brownlee suggests in his essay “Dante and the Classical Poets”, around the works of the classical poets.⁷³ My concern is with a particular development in the contemporary debate surrounding mimesis.

⁷³ “the entire *Commedia* is built on a series of extended encounters with four Latin poets; Virgil, Statius, Lucan and Ovid”, Kevin Brownlee, “Dante and the Classical Poets”, repr. in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* pp.100-120, p.100

Lyons and Nichols discuss two distinct forms of mimesis.⁷⁴ These break down into an imitation of an original object, a realistic portrayal and an enactment in the sense of an *imitatio Christi*. They suggest that this second form of mimesis is now dominating mimesis studies, this is a form of methodology - a literary concern with re-performing acts of earlier authors:

The other view of mimesis does not emphasize the independent existence of the object represented, but rather focuses on the gesture of the person or subject who undertakes to displace our attention from the word of pre-existent objects to the work itself. This kind of mimesis, more akin to performance than to representation as traditionally understood, will be judged by a comparison of performances, juxtaposing successive gestures. It will flourish in theater, in the Christian artistic tradition where the *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ, served as a mimetic paradigm, in that branch of the study of human acts that we call methodology, and in the literary concern with reperforming (or with refusing to reperform) the acts of an earlier author.⁷⁵

The discussion of language above could also be set in the context of a re-performance, in this case the re-enactment of the experience of colonialism both at the level of content and in the confrontation that the use and adaptation of the English language provides.

The economy of style of Chinua Achebe's novels is related to the economy of theme suggested by the explicit references to Modernism in his novels. The suggestion is of a symbolic order rather than of a picture of "reality". One way of countering the criticisms leveled at postcolonial writing in its corruption of native experience is that it is not trying to portray native identity as it originally was, but the current state in which it finds itself - which cannot deny the experience of colonialism - and that it does this by opening up a discursive space within the text. In a sense it is more appropriate, more "true", for postcolonial literature to be written in an adapted form of English which both distances and engages the Western reader. Similarly, Dante argues in his "Epistle to Can Grande" that a fallen language is a truer medium for fallen man suggesting that truth is perspectival and can exist at a number of different allegorical levels. This is a major tenet in the medieval defense of poetry and one which Dante further emphasises in his development of a

⁷⁴ *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, eds. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols Jr. (London: University Press of New England, 1982).

⁷⁵ Editors' introduction to *Mimesis*, p.1.

vernacular. This is the lowest, furthest-away-from-truth, type of human discourse. It seems appropriate that a postcolonial world should use a colonising language to share itself with the West, in that it manages at the same time to inflect that language with its own experience and so perform its own act of colonising. Chinua Achebe asserts postcolonial identity by simultaneously giving the story of an Igbo confrontation with the white man and by stealing this man's language in order to do it. The closing scene of the novel is a difficult one but the historian's terse summary is contained within the larger, and more sympathetic frame of Achebe's postcolonial narrative.⁷⁶ The mimetic artifice (historical narrative) is enclosed within, and subordinate to, persuasive fiction (the novel).

Both postcolonial and medieval writing exist at the intersection of the literary with the material and political. The "justification" of much of medieval poetry was to teach medieval man about the reality of his relation to God. The purpose of much postcolonial writing is in the examples discussed here to explore the subject's experience of a world ruled by other, greater forces. The qualified silence at the end of *Paradiso*⁷⁷ is testament to the fact that Dante is not attempting to give a literal version of ultimate truths - and is not, therefore, vulnerable to Plato's charge of liar. The "reality" communicated by this is the individual nature of any experience of God. The quietude of the postcolonial texts under discussion here and the opaque nature of the language they employ suggests that the reader, and the culture of which s/he is inevitably a part, is the subject as much as the text. "Realism" is not the standard by which these writings can be judged because reality as an objective phenomenon - whether or not it may be said to exist - is not, ultimately their concern. Neither postcolonial, nor medieval writing are concerned with abstractions: they are concerned with the practical truths of the human sphere.

⁷⁶ "The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a dead man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress the point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*." *Things Fall Apart*, pp.147-8.

⁷⁷ See Dante's *Paradiso* XXXIII; ll.121-123: "O how scant is speech and how feeble to my conception! And this, to what I saw, is such that it is not enough to call it little."

Chapter Two

The Circle of the Senses: Artificial forms as natural things in Dante, Achebe and Silko.

In this chapter, the “causal” focus is on the material and formal inter-relationship: the reflection of the nature of the subject in the terms in which it is presented. In an explicitly artificial poetics where origin and end are extra-textual - such as in Dante, Achebe and Silko (caused by the immovable “mover” God, or in the latter cases, History) - circular form is dictated by the signing system’s own inter-relationships. The medium is particularly integral to the message of texts which reflect world orders in which language is deeply implicated. In the first part of this chapter I will establish the medieval case, and in the second part demonstrate its central relevance to the postcolonial situation.

Analogical translation, as employed in doctrinal metaphysics, was considered the most appropriate means of communication for the medieval poet: the relation between God and man is mirrored in that between the Word and the sign. The more conducive the chosen analogy to re-translation, the better, because in this it signed the distance between God and man and the essentially artificial – created - nature of existence. The work was more convincing the more plural and the more artificial it seemed: persuasive ends depended, in this, on the mimetic end. There were different ways of representing this, but the multiple nature of the human senses, each accessing a different though parallel world of experience, was a prime analogue.

Veracity, in Dante’s *Commedia*, is frequently associated with the multiplicity of the senses. A hierarchy of the senses had an established precedent by Dante’s time in both classical philosophy and in the writings of the Schoolmen.¹ His recourse to their ordered application, therefore, immediately implicates other texts, and traditions

¹Louise Vinge comments: “The series of five senses in a fixed or nearly fixed order was found in pagan and early Christian literature but not in biblical texts. The functions of the senses themselves and their relation to the soul was found to be a topic of serious debate in Aristotle, Lucretius, Cicero and Lactantius. In Aristotle, Xenophon and Lucretius, in Philo, Origen, Lactantius and Augustine, the series of senses was seen used as a structuring pattern, i.e., long passages, or even large sections of works, were found to be arranged in five parts, more or less parallel, with the quint of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch for a guiding concept. In particular, this was used in ethical expositions but

(both pagan and early Christian) in his poem. This reflected the understanding that no human author was the originator of the texts, as well as indictating the interlinking method of medieval poetics. The polyvalency that this allusiveness offers could be seen to be analogous to the perspectival nature of the means by which we “know”.

In the *Inferno*, the pilgrim has his experience reflected, and refracted, in the articulations of his guide which are steeped in the imagery of mirrors and mirrorings:

S'i' fossi di *piombato vetro*,
l'immagine si fuor tua non trarrei
 piu tosto a me, che quella d'entro impetro.
 Pur mo venieno I tuo' pensier tra'miei,
 con *simile atto* e con *simile faccia*,
 si che d'intrambi un sol consiglio fei. (*Inferno* XXIII, 25-30)²

Dante (the poet) expresses the thoughts of his subject, the pilgrim, in the mirror of his pilgrim's guide, (who is also the poet's literary forefather) in a particularly dense enactment of the Lacanian mirror stage. In this double alignment, the poet gains *auctoritas* – he is of “one sole counsel” with the classical author – but in the adoption of Virgil's voice, Dante also marks his difference. He, unlike the pilgrim, has the power to determine what “Virgil” (or rather the poetic construct which passes for the poet) will “think” and “say”. This is mirrored in the older poet's appropriation of the pilgrim's thoughts presented in “his” words. Dante, however, unlike Virgil, is still alive (in the writing of the poem) and vigorously exerting his agency. The older poet, in his relegation to Limbo and in his inability to progress spiritually, is debarred from such activity. This is made explicit in the limited journey of the guide – Virgil cannot accompany the pilgrim to Paradise. In this relatively early passage of the *Commedia*, sensory imagery becomes a sign of the limitations of human experience, as well as of poetry within its material sphere.

Virgil may to some degree be considered, in Dante's presentation of him, the pilgrim's saviour, and “maker”, as God is man's. St. Augustine also takes recourse to

also, as in Aristotle, in purely scientific treatises.” Louise Vinge, *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition* (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckeriet, 1975), p.46.

² “Were I of leaded glass I should not draw to me thy outward semblance sooner than I receive thy inward; just now thy thoughts joined with mine, being alike in action and aspect, so that of both I have made one sole counsel.”

sensory imagery in describing the relationship between man and his source. Again, these terms describe distance and difference as well as a very human intimacy:

It is not the beauty of a body or the glory of the world, not the brightness of the light, this friend of our eyes, not the sweet smell of flowers and ointments and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs agreeable for the embracements of the flesh: it is not this that I love, when I love my God. And yet I love a kind of light and a kind of voice and a kind of smell and a kind of food, embrace of my inner man, where that resound which no time does carry off, and where that smells, which no wind does scatter, and where that tastes, which no greediness diminishes, and where that sticks, which no satiety tears away. This is what I love, when I love my God.³

Dante's use of sensory imagery signs distance and difference as well as enabling expression: in Virgil, the referential nature of language and an almost Derridean sense of aftermath⁴ are "embodied". Virgil is also presented as a "shade" in this poem suggesting that Plato's understanding of art – in its imperfect mimicry of shadows of the real - is considered by Dante to be the condition of human reality. The authority conferred to Virgil and his role in the progress of the pilgrim, imply Dante's real understanding of the status of the Poet. Instead of being the lowest-ranking of craftsmen, the poet's activity is quite clearly allied with the work of Divine Creation which is, nevertheless distant from God.

Augustine argues that a literal application of the sense of sight, in particular, demonstrates the distance of the created universe from God. The verb "to see" may be used metaphorically:

For [the word] to see really belongs to the eyes. But we apply this word to the other senses, when we employ them in order to know. For we do not say "hear how red it is" or "smell how bright it is" or "taste how it glitters" or "feel how it shines" - all these things are said to be seen. But we say not only "see what it is that shines" which the eyes only can perceive, but also "see what it is that sounds", "see what tastes", "see how hard it is". Therefore the general experience of the senses is called "the lust of the eyes", as was said before, because the service of seeing, in which the eyes have the first place, also the other senses usurp by way of analogy, when they are investigating any piece of knowledge.⁵

In his observation of a general linguistic phenomenon, Augustine highlights a central concern in Dante's poetry. In the evidence of the above passage on Virgil, Dante is

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X: 6, trans. R. S Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin), p.211

⁴ See discussion in my Chapter 4.

conscious that the verb “to see” is used *de similitudine* and that, applied to the other senses, it connotes a “gathering of knowledge” rather than simply a “looking” – Virgil “sees” what the pilgrim “thinks”. Augustine concludes that the supremacy of the sense of sight over the other senses becomes the “lust of the eyes”. This conforms to the ladder of love motif: the most base experience (sensual) is intimately related to the higher experience (knowledge). Virgil is also, for the pilgrim, the first “rung” in the ladder to Divinity.

Cicero gives a metaphorical description of the roles of the different senses:

Next, the senses, posted in the citadel of the head as the reporters and messengers of the outer world, both in the structure and position are marvellously adapted to their necessary services. The eyes as the watchmen have the highest station, to give them the widest outlook for the performance of their function. The ears also, having the duty of perceiving sound, the nature is to rise are rightly placed high inasmuch as all sounds travel upwards, but also, because they have with good reason been brought into the neighbourhood of the mouth. Taste, which has the function of distinguishing the flavours of our various viands, is situated in that part of the face where nature has made an aperture for the passage of food and drink, they have with good reason been brought into the neighbourhood of the mouth. The sense of touch is evenly diffused over all the body, to enable us to perceive all sorts of contacts and even the minutest impacts of both cold and heat.⁶

Louise Vinge, in *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition*, claims that this passage is the starting-point of the tradition of metaphorical usage in language.⁷ The interrelation of the senses together with their distinct characteristics imply the distance of the fallen human being from his source as well as his connection to it. In both leading to the fall, and being signs of physicality, the senses are natural metaphors for the human condition.

The mirror appears as a metaphor of the higher potential of man in later medieval writing:

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions* X: 35.

⁶ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum, Academica* trans. H. Rackham, (London: Loeb, MCMLI), p.259

⁷ See Louise Vinge *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition* (Berlingska Boktryckeriet: Lund, 1975) p.33.

“Both the idea of describing man’s glorious and appropriate shape as a proof of the care of Providence the order in which the description is composed, and the imagery used by Cicero were to become popular among Christian writers, such as Minucius Felix and Ambrose, as we shall see later. The Ciceronian passage in fact appears to be the starting-point of a tradition in metaphorical language, a “topos” of remarkable durability. “

As he that is the welle of worthynesse,/Of trouthe grownd, mirour of goodlihed.⁸

In Boethius and in Aquinas it has already been used in presenting self-knowledge as a step in the journey of divine knowledge. In these examples, the sense of sight becomes the means to a sense of God. Chaucer, in other instances, used the mirror as a metaphor for the mind, implicating the subject in the creation of his own consciousness: the mind becomes a subjectifying glass.⁹ Here, the mirror is related to the motif of the circle. Chaucer warns against its potentially misleading and distorting effects and calls upon his audience's powers of discrimination in avoiding these:

O youge, fresshe folks, he or she,/ In which that love up groweth with youre age,/ Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,/ And of youre herte up casteth the visage/ To thilke God that after his ymage/ Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,/ This world that passeth soone as flouris faire.¹⁰

The mirror, in these writings, does not offer naïve confirmation of the divinity of man and the attainment of truth. Instead, it offers a reminder of the necessity of effort and will in covering the distance which the mirror – in offering *de similitudine* – inscribes. In its reliance on the imperfect human sense of vision, it signs man's ultimate distance from God within the frame of a greater relation.

St. Augustine implicates all five senses in the recollection of what may be termed his "vision" of God, or moment of conversion:

You called and shouted and broke my deafness, you flashed, you glittered and you turned away my blindness; you were fragrant, and I drew my breath and [since then] I pant after you, I tasted and [since then] I hunger and thirst after you, you touched me, and I was excited by a fire to reach your peace.¹¹

The senses, in classical literature, have a hierarchy of their own: sight and hearing are generally considered superior. In this example, although all five senses interact in the attainment of understanding, they cohere in the visual and auditory exposition of

⁸ Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: OUP, 1987), Bk.I, ll.365-7, p.478.

⁹ "And with that word he caughte a greet mirour,/ And saugh that changed was al his colour,/And saugh his visage al in another kynde" "The Knight's Tale", p.44, ll.1399-401.

¹⁰ *The Knight's Tale* p.534, Bk. V, ll.1835-41.

the self-consciously poetic passage in recounting the “vision”. In that this is a recollection - dependent on the reconstructive processes of memory as well as being a sensory experience - cohered in the experience of a Vision (the figurative application of the verb “to see”), this passage signs, very densely, the mimetic and imperfect nature of man’s existence.

In Dante’s self-consciously “original” poem,¹² the relationship between language and the senses, particularly vision and hearing, is carefully developed, confirming an engagement with the Platonic-Aristotelian debate. At the beginning of the *Purgatorio*, the sphere characterised by hope of progress, the spirit introduces herself in visual terms: “I am of the circle where are the chaste eyes of thy Marcia” (*Purgatorio* I, 76-9). The association of the circle with the figurative use of the sense of vision, suggesting the perspectival nature of the pilgrim’s experience (also in the subjective sense of “thy”), characterises the *Commedia*. It also suggests the nature of the “progress” the pilgrim is making – it is a circular rather than a linear experience. The subjective vision of the poem is not merely a facile device safeguarding a heretic poet’s attempt at immortality (though it may also achieve this). It is a discourse on the nature of communication between private minds in the terms which most closely characterise it.

The relation of the senses to poetry is founded on Aristotle’s argument of means to ends. To reach the fallen creatures whose experience is mediated by their senses, these senses must be stimulated:

For we get pleasure either by seeing varieties of colours and shapes in objects (whether possessed of physical life or not) or by hearing very melodious sounds or through touch in soft and warm and also in smooth substances. Now of the five, the three most animal and servile are taste, smell and touch, which cause particular excitation in the cattle and wild beasts [...] The other two have a link with philosophy and hold the leading place – hearing and sight.¹³

Later in *Purgatorio*, access to the higher realms is deemed to be dependent on faculties of perception rather than any more objectifiable means. The reader is

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, X: 27, p.232.

¹²the poem is written in a vernacular on a subject usually reserved for theology, which nevertheless reflects the works of other poets as well as this poet’s mind.

¹³ *Philo*, trans. F.H.Colson and G.H. Whittaker (London: Loeb, 1929-53) I-X, supp.I-II, *De Abrahamo*, Chap XXIX ff,147, Colson-Whittaker, VI pp.74-85, trans quoted from p.77, 148-50.

invited to play an active role in experiencing the “truth” to be told. Dante seems to be making explicit reference to St. Augustine’s identification of the linguistic particularities of vision:

Aguzza qui, lettor, ben li occhi al vero,
che ‘l velo e ora ben tanto sottile,
certo, che ‘l trappar dentro e leggero.¹⁴ (*Purgatorio* VIII, 19-20)

Dante clarifies his position on the importance of perception in the comprehension of higher truths.¹⁵ In doing so, he also implies the contingent nature of these truths. He acknowledges the existence of a supra-rationalistic realm accessed by vision:

[...] la mente nostra, peregrina
piu dalla carne e men da pensier presa,
alle sue vision quasi e divina,
in sogno mi pareva veder sospesa
un’aguglia nel ciel [...] (*Purgatorio* IX, 16-20)¹⁶

The eagle is, of course, an animal with a much sharper sense of sight than the human.¹⁷ The association of the dream – identified as both vision and prophecy – with a sharpened sense of sight, establishes the relation of Dante’s use of sight with the highest truths. The sense of sight, in its representation as a bird of prey, comes to be associated with that which is usually inaccessible to the earth-bound mortal. This sense is expounded later:

Ma delli occhi facea sempre al ciel porte (*Purgatorio* XV, 111)¹⁸

Here, the eyes are not windows into the human mind/soul¹⁹ but the means to the soul’s eternal (and external) source – paradise. The curious reversal of the dynamic

¹⁴ “Here reader, sharpen well thine eyes to tell the truth, for now, surely, the veil is so fine that to pass within is easy.”

¹⁵ See description of the Gifts of Nature, Fortune, and of God, in Chaucer’s *The Physician’s Tale* in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹⁶ “When our mind, more a pilgrim from the flesh and less held by thoughts, is in its visions almost prophetic, I seemed to see in a dream an eagle poised in the sky...”

¹⁷ “Of the senses, touch in man is superior to everything else, and so is his taste; as to the others, he is surpassed by many. Eagles see more clearly, the vultures smell more sharply, moles hear more distinctly.” *C. Pliny Secundi Naturalis Historiae libri XXXVII, iterum edidit C Mayhoff, II, libri VII-XV, Lipsiae (Teubner) MCMIX, p.276, Nat. Hist. X: 69 (88)*

Dante, in another level of allusion, suggests an alternative to the standard view that sight is the superior sense implying that the very nature of a hierarchy of the senses (which in themselves are utterly subjective) is perspectival and dependent on one’s “point of view”.

¹⁸ “But of his eyes he made all the time gateways to heaven.”

seems to imply that the external and the internal – or the subjective and the objective worlds - are not discontinuous but coexistent in the literal, which is also the material, text.

Louise Vinge comments on the role of vision in classical philosophy:

The ears are in a moral sense below sight, hearing being more passive. *The eyes turn to their objects and affect them* [my italics]. Sight has the highest place, exalted by God to be the Queen of the other senses. Philo takes up the image of sight being “as it were in a citadel” (150), an image probably derived from Plato’s *Timaeus* and here for the first time introduced it into biblical exegesis. The eyes, too, it is which expose the feelings and moods of the soul, which shows the images of dreams, and above all bestows on us the benefit of showing us light, and observing and judging the world and its pleasures. Because of this, Philo says, it was right that one of the five cities was allowed to exist after the destruction, for sight is not confined to mortal things but strives upwards, to the immortal things and rejoices in contemplating them²⁰

In line with this notion of the sense of sight being a means of transformation, it is in the *Paradiso* - characterised by interactive “seeing” - the Dante-pilgrim first intimates the means by which a human mind may perceive God:

Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
però che solo da sensato apprende
ciò che fa poscia d’intelletto degno. (*Paradiso* IV, 40-2)²¹.

Later in the canto, when he begins to perceive for himself the processes of representation and the ends to which they are intended, Dante returns to the imagery of eyes:

Così da quella imagine divina
per farmi chiara *la mia corta vista*
data mi fu soave medicina. (*Paradiso* XX, 139-41)²²

¹⁹ It is the soul that sees and hears, not these parts of the body that are “like the windows of the soul” (“*quae quasi fenestrae sint animi*,” I: 47) Vinge p.33 quotes Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* (I:20, 46-47)

²⁰ Vinge, *The Five Senses*, p.25

²¹ “It is necessary to speak thus to your faculty since only from sense perception does it grasp that which it then makes fit for the intellect.”

²² “Thus by that divine image was given sweet medicine to clear the shortness of my sight.”

Earlier, Beatrice acknowledges that Dante cannot understand her speech, and expresses her understanding of him in an explicit link between language and sight. She returns to Virgil's image of the darkened glass from *Inferno*:

Ma perch'io veggio te nello' intelletto
 fatto di pietra, ed, impetrato, tinto,
 si che t'abbaglia il lume del mio ditto[...] ²³(*Purgatorio* XXXIII, 72-75).

The link between vision and language grows closer in *Paradiso*: as the pilgrim approaches divinity, he appropriates the imagery of vision for himself. The verbs are presented in the first person, marking his growing self-possession:

[...] e vidi cose che ridire
 ne sa ne puo chi di la su discende
 perche appressando se al suo desire
 nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
 che dietro la memoria non puo ire (*Paradiso* I, 5-9). ²⁴

This progress, underlined by his self-aware subjectivity, is also, marked by his sense of limitation: his growing dependence on sight is a sign of the material/physical level to which he is bound.

Beatrice is the most frequent and intense object of the pilgrim's gaze:

La vista mia, che tanto la segulo
 quanto possibil fu, poi che la perse,
 volsesi al segno di maggior disio,
 e a Beatrice tutta si converse. (*Paradiso* III; ll.124-7). ²⁵

This is "the lust of the eyes". Dante's communication of truth to fallen human minds must of necessity rely on material means, and the most instantly recognisable of these is sensual love. The pilgrim's experience of this is articulated towards the end of the final canto:

²³ "But since I see thee turned to stone in thy mind and, being petrified, darkened so that the light of my speech dazzles thee and if not written at least pictured."

²⁴ "I saw things which he that descends from it has not the knowledge or the power to tell again; for our intellect, drawing near to its desire, sinks so deep that memory cannot follow it."

²⁵ "My sight, which followed her as long as it was possible, turned, when it lost her, to the mark of its greater desire and bent itself wholly on Beatrice."

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
 che 'l parlar nostro, ch's tal vista cede (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 55-6).²⁶

The continual indication of perspective in this imagery of the senses, and particularly vision, in this text is because of its engagement with and negotiation of the split between the temporal and the divine levels of experience.

Minucius Felix finds in the operation and form of the senses evidence for the providential nature of creation as well as for God's reflection in man:

The beauty of our shape in particular reveals God as artisan: the standing body, the upward-lifted face, the eyes set at the highest place as in watch-towers and all the other senses located as in a citadel.²⁷

If God can be understood to be an "artisan", particularly with regard to man, then there is a case to be made for the humble poet – he may be seen to be reflecting divinity in his craft. Dante's emphasis on the artifice, imperfection and distance inscribed in Creation furthers his own project.

Dante's introduction to the *Commedia* fuses the notions of God and artist in the deference the pilgrim shows to his "saviour", Virgil:

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore
 tu se' solo colui da cu'io tolsi
 lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.
 Vedi la bestia per cu'io mi volsi:
 aiutami da lei, famoso saggio.
 ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi. (*Inferno* I; ll.85)²⁸

Virgil is identified in terms which echo the imagery of the ideal/idealising mirror of man made in the image of God. The archetypal poet-figure in this poem is construed in terms which return to the Platonic debate surrounding the truth-value of art:

Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume? (*Inferno* I; ll.79-80)²⁹

²⁶ "From that moment my vision was greater than our speech, which fails at such a sight."

²⁷ Cap.XVII: 11 M. Minucii Felicis, *Octavius* trans. P. Waltzing, (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1912), p.23

²⁸ "Thou art my master and my author. Thou art he from whom alone I took the style whose beauty has brought me honour. See the beast for which I turned; save me from her, famous sage, for she sets the pulses trembling in my veins."

Plato's association of the classical poets with "reflection" (in creating poor imitations of reality is strongly suggested in this Narcissus image of the fountain and the stream. It is also continuous with this beginning in which Dante assumes the role of poet (rather than rhymer) allowing him, in a semi-ironic gesture, to assume the reflected glory of his poetic heritage - the charge of liar.

Circular imagery, involving a figurative reflection of an subjective inner state, permeate both Dante's and Silko's texts at crucial moments in the narrative. At the beginning of Tayo's recovery, the cattle (who later become instrumental) are described as watching Tayo in a "semi-circle". His passivity at this stage is communicated by Silko in a gaze appropriated both by the cattle and the narrator, who can, nevertheless only offer part of the story - hence the half-circle (*Ceremony*, p.78). Tayo's incompleteness at this point is subtly reflected in a "seeing" which is inhuman. Later on, when he visits Old Betonie for a medicine cure, Tayo begins to recognise apparent chance and chaos – the experiences which have caused him such anguish - as having a symbolic order of their own and notices that "the boxes and trunks, the bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern, they followed the concentric shadows of the room" (p.120). His growing sense of order is communicated in the patterns he begins to perceive around him. The material reflection of his inner state is evoked in terms which insist, however, on the subjectivity of the experience. As in the medieval examples discussed, the means of representation are fit to the subject. They are also cohered in circular imagery.

Tayo, at one point, watches "the circle of sunlight on the floor, next to them". As well as a physical location, this describes the sacred space of hope and renewal that Betonie's ceremony offers, and indeed, ultimately fulfils. The absence physically inscribed by the figure of the circle marks possibility not only abstractly but materially. Absence (the circle seems to contain nothing) is also a freedom. Tayo's appropriation of the gaze at this point in the narrative suggests the foundation of a new sense of identity (p.123-4). Silko evokes this not by telling the reader, but through a passage in which Tayo with greater confidence shakes out "a circle of snow" (p.209). We understand, in the full circle which he has thus created, (as in the first-person verbs of vision appropriated by the pilgrim) that Tayo begins to take an

²⁹ "Art thou then that Virgil, that fountain which pours forth so rich a stream of speech?"

active role in his recovery. There is an explicit connection in this text, as in Dante's poem between the figurative and the image of the circle.³⁰

The *Commedia* is famously structured on a circular principle; specifically descending or ascending concentric circles inhabited by appropriately base or divine souls. This structure is not merely conventional, however: the very method of punishment in the *Inferno* is of "like to like". Each sin is punished according to its nature. In *Inferno* VII, the priests, popes and cardinals who sinned in avarice are punished for their persistence in gathering worldly goods during their lives and are represented as tonsured spirits condemned to endlessly rolling enormous stones to no particular end. In *Purgatorio* IX, the punishment for a pope who gave up on attaining holy office because of a tendency towards avarice is lying face down on a path weeping and reciting the psalm "adhesit pavimento anima mea".

At the literal level the *Commedia* is ordered on the principle of circularity: it is circular in "shape". Each canticle ends with the words "stelle" and the end of the *Paradiso* directs the reader to the opening of *Inferno* in its claim of insufficiency. This structure may be understood, however, to reinforce the figurative significance of the circle, rather than vice versa. At the moral level, judgement is passed on the nature of the crime, and punishment is not only fit in the most literal sense but also in that it repeats – endlessly – the original trespass. At the anagogic level, the processes of the circle are also in evidence. Near the beginning of the *Paradiso* Piccarda Donati explains the nature of Divinity as existing in compliance with God's will: the *causa finalis* is dependent on the efficient cause.

Achebe's portrait of Igbo life also revolves, very literally, around the figure of the circle. Life in this community is organised around the "ilo" translated as the village playground in a nice, Derridean association of terms (*Things Fall Apart*, p.30). It is the communal place of the tribe, the space within which tribal life occurs. This is attested to in the careful descriptions of Okonkwo's compound:

his own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the *obi*. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.10)

³⁰ Julia Kristeva discusses the connection with the feminine "Chora" and the Symbolic.

These descriptions are dependent on, in that they exist within, the circular narrative which contains them. This suggests that the postcolonial “reality” accessible to the Western, English-speaking reader, is neither more nor less than the sum of a series of narratives. This is emphasised in the games and discussions that are described as occurring within the *ilo* as well as in the differences in perspective of Okonwko’s three wives - arranged physically at equal divisions of 180 degrees around him; and hierarchically as first, second and third wife. The literal and the figurative - the linear and the circular - intersect in these descriptions, reflecting the simultaneity of difference in Achebe’s work.

Tribal life in the novel is conditioned by the absolute rule of retribution. The story of Ikemefuna, a young boy offered to the village in return for the “daughter of Umuofia killed in Mbaino”, follows directly on from the illustration of the *ilo*. As in the *Commedia*, however, this is not presented as an item of incidental information – and particularly not of mere anthropological interest - but rather as a reinforcement at the allegorical level of the circular principle demonstrated at the literal level of the text. All three of these texts demonstrate integrity in their depictions of moral symmetry and go to some effort in suggesting, through the use of image and symbol, as well as through narrative statement, the relationship between cause and effect. The moral is retold, or rather, “translated” analogically at several levels of textual operation, in a process which ultimately reflects the truth of distance from source - and the centrality of this experience to the work.

Both Dante and Achebe have reason to be cautious of singular and linear versions of truth: their subjects as well as their means of presentation reflect this. Dante, even before his exile, was in several ways peripheral to sources of authority and power:

In late thirteenth to early fourteenth century Italy[...]authority in all areas (political, theological, philosophical, even literary) was conceived of as fundamentally impersonal. Originating in a timeless transcendental truth, the empirical evidence for *auctoritas* was antiquity (the great classical Latin texts which had survived the test of time were known as *auctores*), genealogical lineage (aristocratic families) or the hierarchical rights conferred by office (notably the papacy and the imperial throne, both obtained by election.) Dante, especially after his expulsion from Florence, had none of the attributes that could transform his personal ambitions and visions into an impersonal *auctoritas*: with claims to only the most minor of aristocratic origins (see *Paradiso* 15-17)[...] Moreover, his particular vocation as a

modern, vernacular poet was one that had no intrinsic authority – quite the contrary. Poetry though recognised as a vehicle of education (albeit at the most elementary “grammatical” level) and as the poetical bearer of allegorical truths and moral examples – was typically seen as distinctly inferior to other forms of cultural discourse, notably those of philosophy and of theology, “the Queen of sciences”.³¹

He attempts a subject – God - usually reserved for a different discipline. In this he subverts the accepted and clear – to his contemporaries – distinction between poetry and theology. He employs a vernacular synthesised (in a reverse of the destruction of Babel) out of innumerable Italian dialects. For Dante, innovation in choice of subject necessitated the same with regard to language.

Achebe also challenges the usual forms of theological rhetoric by presenting them in an ironic manner: as recorded speech within a greater, subversive narrative whole. His motivations for the subversion rather than reflection of singular authoritative voices - as a black Nigerian writer - are set out very clearly in the novel:

The Reverend James Smith [...] saw things as black and white [...] And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness [...] He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.130)

This section of narrative with its clear and moral tone is in sharp contrast to the non-judgemental simplicity of the previous descriptions of village life. The understated style of these earlier descriptions is associated with human value: they have been employed, very effectively, in creating the characters familiar to the reader. In contrast, “The Reverend James Smith” intrudes in this naturalistic discourse with his artificial divisions. The reader’s attention is drawn to the black and white print in which missionary zeal - fictively and as reported speech - is disseminated. It is “doubly removed” from the “reality” the reader has experienced so far in the novel. It is also the first time the reader is made consciously aware that the villagers are *black* villagers. The association is of language, specifically printed English, with self-consciousness and artifice – and also with lies. The apparent transparency and unmediated nature of this “reflection of the truth” is counterpointed by its context. Form and content interact to provide a distinctly different reading to either alone.

³¹ Albert Russell Ascoli, “The Unfinished Author: Dante’s Rhetoric of Authority in *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*”, repr. in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge:

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* thematises, rather than simply employs circular narratives, in, as I have suggested, a manner which echoes the emphasis laid on a fit of form to content in the writings of the medieval Schoolmen and poets.³² At a structural level, the novel both begins and ends with a poem, demonstrating a concern with symmetry rather than the prose characterising so much of the narrative. The effect is to reveal the opaque nature of language - and the subjectivity of its constructions:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman,
Is sitting in her room
And whatever she thinks about
Appears (*Ceremony*, p.1)

There is an explicit link between cause and effect. "Thought-Woman" is practising the nominative function of language - which is also the creative (Edenic) function and, by extension, the "true" poetic function. Silko highlights this aspect of language in the more immediately recognisable "form" of poetry rather than prose. The verse, in its naturalistic free-verse style, could have been presented as prose but significantly, is not. In this case the poetry is recognised visually, drawing attention to the words as organised on the page. The material effects of poetry - creating rather than merely reflecting - are writ large in this text which claims here, and in its title, to "incant" a world into being. The "creator" and final authority in this text, as in *Things Fall Apart*,³³ is specifically identified as being female; the effect of which

Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.45-67, p.46.

³² Vinsauf, among others, including Dante, comments: "Let that part of the material which is first in the order of nature wait outside the gates of the work. Let the end, as a worthy precursor, be first to enter and take up its place in advance, as a guest of more honourable rank, or even as master. Nature has placed the end last in order, but art respectfully defers to it, leads it from its humble position and accords it the place of honour.

The place of honour at the beginning of a work does not reserve its luster for the end of the material only; rather, two parts share the glory: the end of the material and the middle. Art draws from either of these a graceful beginning. Art plays, as it were, the conjurer: causes the last to be first, the future to be present, the oblique to be straight, the remote to be near; what is rustic becomes urbane, what is old becomes new, public things are made private, black things white, and worthless things are made precious." *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967) II:110-130.

³³ The Igbo cult of the earth goddess is reflected in the high-esteem in which the matriarch is held. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's father-in-law reminds him of this:

"Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or "Mother is Supreme?"[...]It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good

is redoubled in that it draws attention also to the gender of the author of the novel we are reading. Circular dynamics are associated with creation and with language as well as with the feminine. The literal aspect is highlighted by the fact that the reader is made aware (as well as of experiencing a “word-object” in the very deliberate arrangement of the poem on the page) that this “story” is being related by a narrator – “I’m telling you the story/she is thinking”. The narrative is highly self-conscious and self-referential. The multiple frames of subjectivity – the protagonist, Tayo, offers another - suggest that artifice, in this novel, is closely connected to non-singularising views.

Language’s ability to construct multiple alternative worlds is emphasised in the storytelling asides throughout the novel. These begin with the story of Reed Woman and Corn Woman (p.13), whose feud underpins Tayo’s narrative. The stories of K’oo’ko (p.37), Pa’caya’nyi (p.46), and Hummingbird, Fly and Buzzard (pp.54, 71,105, 113, 255), develop the Corn Mother narrative and return to the subject of famine/drought from different perspectives. These traditional stories are juxtaposed to the contemporary ones: “drought” is juxtaposed with alcohol-fuelled adventure; “famine”, with sensual satiety. Emo recounts a tale of his own to Tayo:

We went into this bar on 4th Ave., see,
me and O’Shay, this crazy Irishman.
We had a few drinks, then I saw
These two white women
Sitting all alone. (*Ceremony*, p.57)

The spatial arrangement of the words on the page aligns it with the first prayer cycle - seen in the opening pages of the novel - rather than with the prose narrative. Its first person delivery also separates it from the main text, largely given by an omniscient narrator - though often from Tayo’s point of view - and associates it again with the prayer/poetic interludes. These alternative discourses suggest postcolonial concerns more generally in the alternative perspectives they engender. Within the novel, different storytellers and tales are pitted against one another and parallel to one

and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme.” (pp. 94-5).

another reflecting the typically Native American trope of storytelling competitions on which matters of life and death frequently depend.³⁴

The closing poem observes:

Whirling darkness has come back on itself

The image of “whirling” suggests the movement of an object through a circular dynamic.³⁵ This poem is in sharp relief, however, to the clear and open simplicity of the first poem. It fulfils the circular dynamic introduced by the opening poem but in summarising it, modifies it, suggesting that such acts of return are not mere repetitions but “significant re-enactions”³⁶ which introduce difference. The closing poem of *Ceremony* concludes the discussion of the “witchery” – the misuse of language and power - which has dominated the second part of the novel. The predominant characteristic of this phenomenon is the circular relationship between origin/(motivations) and end/(effects).³⁷ This novel does not limit its comments on the nature of language to the postcolonial situation, but there is a clear relation between the two. Francis Barker and David Hume comment on the nature of this relationship:

Instead of having meaning, statements should be seen as performative of meaning; not as possessing some portable and “universal” content but, rather, as instrumental in the organisation and legitimation of power-relations – which of course involves, as one of its components, control over the constitution of meaning. As the author of

³⁴ See Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (London: Flamingo, 1994):

“I shouldn’t have been caused to live so long, shown so much of death, had to squeeze so many stories in the corners of my brain. They’re all attached, and once I start there is no end to telling because they’re hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail. During the year of sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story[...]I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and travelled on.” (p.46)

See also the gambling motif in *Ceremony* (p.171), given in the frame of a traditional “story”.

³⁵ This emphasis on circular narratives can be observed also in a number of medieval texts. For example, *The Kingis Quair*, attributed to James I, opens with the line:

“Hiegh in the hevynnis circulere” which it then echoes at the end of the penultimate stanza:

“Hich in the hevynnis figure circulere” repr in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature 1375-1707* eds R.D.S. Jack and P.A.T. Rozendaal (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1997), pp.17-56.

³⁶ See *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method*, p.1.

³⁷ “What Aristotle [On the Soul 432 a 7f] said of the individual man is therefore true of the race in general: *Nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu*. That is, the human mind does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression [...] from the senses.” Giambattista Vico *The New Science*, trans. of third edition (1744) Thomas Goddard Begin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.363.

one of the first modern grammars said, appropriately enough in 1492, “language is the perfect instrument of empire.”³⁸

These postcolonial writers are as sensitised to the constructions of language as they are to the construction of subjects. The interrelation of the literal with the figurative in these texts mirrors the relationship between the linguistic and power relations described above. In *Ceremony*, as in *Things Fall Apart*, there is a concern with things which “come back” on themselves and with the materiality of the circular dynamic. This is parallel to the spiral ascents and descents of the *Commedia* reflecting the state of the soul - and of the “gyre” of history found in W.B. Yeats’s poetry and writings. (I turn to the relation of these postcolonial texts to aspects of the Western literary canon in the final chapter.)

At the beginning of Tayo’s narrative we are told that he is subject to “two words again and again[...]y volveré”. Spanish for “and will return”, these words of a popular song suggest the nature of the recurring nightmares Tayo experiences on returning home from war. They are referring both to the seemingly endless “return” of the haunting images as well as to the experience of returning home. The Freudian economy of the apparently meaningless jingle links these two experiences so that, certainly for the reader – in that we only experience the jungle in Tayo’s nightmares once he has returned to Laguna - but also for Tayo, the jungle-nightmare exists most really/vividly in the experience of returning “home”. The nightmares, significantly, fade only when he begins to investigate his divided and hybrid heritage. Return, therefore, in this text is not to an indivisible point of origin, but to the location of schism – temporal and geographical but also in terms of consciousness and identity. The conventional sense of “returning home” is replaced by a rupturing of the coherent self.³⁹ “Home” - an apparent point of origin – vividly reflects the fragmentariness and division that an individual may otherwise attempt to cohere. It is, in other words, a fiction. The composite and plural nature of being is associated with the processes of art/ifice.

³⁸ Francis Barker and David Hume, “Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish: the discursive contexts of *The Tempest*” in *Alternative Shakespeares* ed John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), p.197.

³⁹ Tayo is sent home because he is considered to be “recovered” although it becomes clear very quickly that the worst is yet to come.

The parallels between the *Commedia* and *Ceremony* at the level of allegorical method are specific. In the first canto of the *Commedia*, the Dante-pilgrim travels from wood to valley and desert, which represent (in the scholastic progression) the categories of the material, the mental and the spiritual. In Dante's case specifically, these relate to worldliness, knowledge of Sin and finally, despair. The narrative of *Ceremony* can be seen to follow a similar progression. It begins with allusions to a jungle, then locates itself in the river valley of Laguna and finally, at the end of the novel, echoes Dante's desert experience in the descriptions of the parched mesas of the uranium mines and in the trials Tayo undergoes.

As in the *Commedia*, it is unclear at the beginning of *Ceremony* in what sense the narrative is "real" – whether it is a dream, a recorded history, a memory or a fantasy. The first sentence of the first (prose) page reads:

Tayo didn't sleep well that night. He tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again, calling up humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in the flood. (*Ceremony*, p.5)

The assumption of a narrator's insight into the subject's dreams calls into question the apparent objectivity of the narrative. This is a conscious device on the part of the author. She is highlighting the problems of perspective, subjective and objective knowledge and the distorting but authoritative constructions of historical narrative - the true subjects of her very politicised novel. This opening line induces a sense of vertigo which becomes manifest in the following descriptions: "He lay there early in the morning and watched the high small window above the bed; dark gray gradually became lighter until it cast a white square on the opposite wall at dawn."(p.6). Tayo is described as getting up, washing and feeding the black goat outside but very soon the jungle narrative - already associated with dream experience - interrupts:

Jungle rain had no beginning or end; it grew like foliage from the sky, branching and arching to the earth, sometimes in solid thickets entangling the islands, and, at other times, in tendrils of blue mist curling out of the coastal clouds. The jungle breathed an eternal green that fevered men until they dripped sweat the way rubbery jungle leaves dripped the monsoon rain. (p.11)

A sense of the indivisible nature of experience - whether waking or dreaming, present or past, human or vegetal - is evoked very strongly in this passage. This is underlined by the narrative continuity: the narrative simply runs on between the descriptions of Laguna and those of the jungle, the new paragraph belied by the continued discussion of the rainclouds/drought that mark the previous one.

The opening of the *Commedia* is also characterised by a confused, semi-conscious subject/narrator, a dense forest and a sense of infinity:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
 che la diritta via era smarrita.
 Ah quanto a dir qual era e cosa dura
 esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
 che nel pensier rinova la paura!
 Tant' e amara che poco e piu morte; (*Inferno* I;1-7)⁴⁰

In this opening image, the very notion of an objective “cammin di *nostra vita*”, or an experience which holds true for all of “us”- such as historical narrative- is undermined. Dante writes that he “came to [him]self” at the point at which this “straight way” (linear narrative) was “lost”. This is appropriate to a medieval poem written to be understood as such, rather than as “scientific” proof.

The story of an individual soul, according to the rules governing poetry set out in Dante’s *Convivio*, must be told in terms of individual experience rather than from an omniscient perspective.⁴¹ It is, therefore, appropriate that the narrator of the poem is not only lost and afraid but also in an indeterminate state of consciousness as he introduces himself to his reader:

Io non so ben ridir com’io v’entrai,
 tant’era pieno di sonno a quell punto
 che la verace via abbandonai. (*Inferno* I;10-2)⁴²

⁴⁰“ In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear!”

⁴¹ “And so, as the Philosopher says in the first book of the *Physics*, nature wishes us to proceed with due order in our acquiring of knowledge: that is, by proceeding from that which we know better to that which we know less well. I say that nature wishes inasmuch as this way of acquiring knowledge is naturally innate in us.” Dante Alighieri *Il Convivio* chapter 1, repr. in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p.397

⁴² “I cannot rightly tell how I entered there, I was so full of sleep at that moment when I left the true way;

The absence/vacuity inscribed by the repeated letter “o”, dispersed irregularly throughout the verse (“io”, “so” “com’io”, “pieno”, “punto”, “abbandonai”), evokes the experience of being “pieno di sonno”- which is to say, full of nothing. The “o” also signs the circularity of the “in media res” opening in which the pilgrim has explicitly survived the experience he describes, in the poem which conveys it – he returns from Paradise to tell of it. The open vowel sounds which rhyme the first and last lines of the verse “entrai”/ “abbandonai” fuse the vagueness of the pilgrim with the open-ended, circular narrative of the poet.

The pilgrim’s actual origins are not significant or interesting to the medieval/early Renaissance reader: the sense of mystery that the absence of an explanation creates is entirely appropriate to the subject of a divine vision. Material sources are beyond the reach of poetry and so do not constitute a fit subject for inclusion. The description of his “present” context, however, is crucial to Dante (the poet)’s purpose:

Ma poi ch’i’ fui al pie d’un colle giunto,
 la dove terminava quella valle
 che m’avea di paura il cor compunto,
 guardai in alto, e vidi le sue spalle
 vestite già de raggi del pianeta
 che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle. (*Inferno* I;13-8)⁴³

The singular “cammin di nostra vita” has been transfigured into the multiple “ogni calle” by the careful developments of the preceding lines with their cumulative discrediting of totalising views in the discrediting of the authority of the narrator. This discrediting, clearly, does not extend to the poet whose very skill and competency has created the effect so convincingly. The fact that they are apparently the same is further testimony to Dante’s methodological integrity. Dante develops a

⁴³ “but when I had reached the foot of a hill at the end of that valley which had pierced my heart with fear I looked up and saw its shoulders already clothed with the beams of the planet that leads men straight on every road.”

split rather than unified persona in his first person narration of a vision deeply concerned with perspectival truths.⁴⁴

A concern with perspective is evident in the above extract. It traces the journey in terms which reflect the pilgrim's material experience: the "pie d'un colle" is observed by and so suggested to be in relation to the "I" rather than being expressed as a topographical veracity – an objective fact. The same is true for the dynamic of the onward journey, which is implied in the emphatically personifying rays of light transforming a body of rock into a human with "spalle" which are "vestite". These powers, furthermore, are emanating from the otherwise - if objectively observed – markedly inhuman "body", the sun. The physical attributes afforded to the hill are also linked to verbs in the first person – "I' fui", "m'avea", "guardai" - referring to an action of the protagonist "as though" Dante (the pilgrim) were investing the objects around him with life. Dante (the poet) is doing exactly this in rendering natural forms in human language. This sense of doubleness – exactitude on the part of the poet rendering and communicating the confusion of the pilgrim - adds to the "unrealness" of the landscape described in these opening lines. It also echoes the medieval theological understanding of mystery/chaos or human ignorance existing within the greater order or knowledge of God. As Sinclair comments:

It was characteristic of Dante's thought – rather of medieval thought in general – to proceed from the reality to the symbolic meaning, and not to sing in his lines of simple abstractions.⁴⁵

Dante's personifications are clearly significant at the symbolic/allegorical level rather than being merely decorative.

The "selva oscura" in which the Dante pilgrim finds himself at the beginning of the *Commedia* has been understood to represent the spiritual wilderness in which the poet found himself during the period of the writing of the poem - after having been exiled from Florence. There are, however, further trees and forests encountered by the pilgrim on his journey. Dante's sustained use of these images, given the ambitions of the poem as a whole, suggests a deeper significance than poetic

⁴⁴Consequent on the efficient (i.e. persuasively functional) status of the narrator in medieval poetry, the author is relegated although the artificial nature of the text promotes his status as maker. See R. Jordan *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

autobiography. In the *Inferno* the pilgrim visits the “mesta selva dei suicidi”⁴⁶, and in the *Purgatorio*, the “albero capovolto” and the “arbore grande” of the sixth terrace of Mount Purgatory⁴⁷ before finally reaching the “divina foresta” of Earthly Paradise⁴⁸ which encircles the “albero della scienza del bene e del male”⁴⁹. Musa observes that in the canto describing the first “selva oscura”, “all is vague”. He goes on to comment that the forest “is not described except in terms that could apply to Sin itself”.⁵⁰ Dante’s descriptions are sparse and without detail which is appropriate to his method of *allegoresis* if the canto is to have more than simply a literal significance.

The forests/woods/trees that occur throughout the *Commedia* may be seen to allow all four levels of allegoric interpretation. On one level, the forest may be read as an allegory for the worldly ambition and life Dante embraced between the period of Beatrice’s death in 1290 and the time of the vision in 1300. At the moral level, the wood may simply represent evil, as Sinclair suggests.⁵¹ Anagogically, the wood becomes symbolic of the “terra babylonis”, or the state of sin after the fall. Here, the wood represents “la vita umana dominata dagli istinti e non illuminata dalla grazia e dalla ragione.”⁵² The “selva oscura” is symbolically positioned in a diametrical opposition to the “divina foresta” on the summit of Mount Purgatory which represents the state of perfect grace and harmony enjoyed by Adam. The “mesta selva dei suicidi” of *Inferno* XIII is, in contrast to the forest of *Inferno* I, chillingly detailed in its description. Whereas Dante omits precise topographical description when portraying the “selva oscura” in order to disassociate it from spatial or temporal constraints and to make it symbolic more generally, the wood of *Inferno* XIII is visualised in a place similar to “la maremma toscana” between Cecina and Corneto. The soul-trees are fixed in the reader’s mind by the very specificity and concreteness of this description, which is fitting, of course, to a place of punishment where those who would not accept their earth-bound state are now rooted in it. The

⁴⁵ Dante *Inferno* trans John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.30.

⁴⁶ *Inferno* XIII

⁴⁷ *Purgatorio* XXII-IV

⁴⁸ *Purgatorio* XXVIII-XXXI

⁴⁹ *Purgatorio* XXXII-III.

⁵⁰ *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1984), p.72.

⁵¹ Sinclair, p.31.

⁵² *Enciclopedia Dantesca* Istituto dell’ Enciclopedia Italiana 1970-6, p.138.

descriptions of these souls' fates are unforgettably visceral: the branches are "twisted and entangled", with "thorns of thick poison" and they ooze blood when the branches are broken. Sinclair observes that these woods represent "life poisoned at the heart and issuing in chosen, desperate death."⁵³

The narrative progression of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is also characterised by a series of woods/forests/trees bearing allegorical significance in the sense that they mark the different stages of Tayo's experience and, ultimately, his recovery.⁵⁴ I have already observed that the opening of the novel can be usefully compared with that of Dante's *Commedia*. Both open with protagonists "lost" in among the trees:

[...] humid dreams of black nights and loud voices[...] that drifted out in the jungle steam. (p.6)

In contrast with the simplicity of Dante's dark wood, the details of this jungle overwhelm the reader. They are, however, given without context evoking the disconnectedness of a dream-state - neither the location of the jungle nor the "speaker"/narrator of the visions is identified. The third-person narrative implies that the narrator is other than the protagonist and gives a seamlessly "bird's eye view" of the repeated shifts in time and space - between the Laguna of the past and the present and the different time frames in the jungle - which occur in these opening pages. This impersonal style is in keeping with Tayo's sense of disconnection with himself and could almost be seen to suggest that the narrator is just one aspect of the protagonist's fragmented experience of self. In this sense, the narrative is symbolic, providing the structure by which Tayo reknits his identity. Its very existence suggests his success.

The narrative of *Ceremony* may be considered to be circular in a similar manner to that of the *Commedia* in that the apparent "end-point" of the beginning is belied by the complex relationship of the protagonist to the narrator. The actual location of the jungle which features at the beginning of *Ceremony* is not given, although from the opening narrative it is clear, just as in the placeless "selva oscura",

⁵³ Sinclair, p.176.

⁵⁴ The Romance tradition in contrast frequently involves a single, continuous forest circumscribing states of loss and redemption rather than redemptive re-enactions of earlier versions of this forest.

that the protagonist must have survived its terrors in order for there to be a narrative concerning him in the present. This novel opens with a dreamer – “he tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again[...].” – which is further reminiscent of Dante’s protagonist who qualifies his narrative with the confession “tant’era pieno di sonno”. Both narratives begin with the experience of an awakening, Tayo as above, and the Dante-protagonist “coming to [him] self”. These apparent “awakenings”, however, precede experiences more usually considered to form the stuff of dreams – personal visions of heaven/wholeness. Both narratives consist largely of “conversations with the dead”, whether those of Laguna/the Second World War or the Italian quattrocento and earlier.

The jungle of the opening pages may be considered to be diametrically opposed to the forest Tayo rests in towards the end of the novel - in a similar manner to the dynamic described above between the wood of *Inferno* I and that of Earthly Paradise:

He lay in a shallow depression and heaped piles of dry leaves over himself until he felt warm again. (*Ceremony*, p.203)

In both of these cases, in *Ceremony* and in the *Inferno*, forests one and two represent, respectively, states of being “lost” and “found”. The second of these, in both cases, circumscribe a site of resolution of the difficulties characterising the forests encountered originally. For Dante, the experience of redemption takes the form of proximity to God - Adam and Eve inhabit this forest in their pre-lapsarian state. For Tayo, redemption and cultural re-appropriation has come, by this point in the narrative, to be represented by the mixed-blood cattle bred by Josiah to withstand the harsh environment in which they would live. Clearly, both Adam and Eve and Josiah’s mixed breed cattle are not just types but deeply and personally symbolic of the losses experienced by the protagonists. Dante’s sense of loss is deeply connected to his idealised love for Beatrice – represented by the original relationship between Adam and Eve. Tayo’s sense of cultural dispossession is a result primarily of his half white/ half Indian ethnicity but also the death of his beloved uncle. The cattle represent the fusion of these things. Tayo has located the runaway herd and is waiting for the opportunity to regroup them and, by extension, to gather together his

scattered identity. In this, he anticipates the sense of alignment that Dante experiences in the *Paradiso*:

He smiled. Inside, his belly was smooth and soft, following the contours of the hills and holding the silence of the snow. (*Ceremony*, p.205)

Dante is also emotionally connected to the landscapes around him particularly once the uncertain boundary between the internal and the external is finally erased by Beatrice, in *Paradiso* IV. She explains, as discussed earlier, that Dante's visions are fit to his understanding rather than the other way around – the things he sees are reflections of himself. There are closer resonances than even this would suggest, however, in *Paradiso* III:

Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
 o per acque nitide e tranquille,
 non si profonde che I fondi sien persi,
 tornan di nostril visi le pastille
 debili sì, che perla in bianca fronte
 non vien men tosto alle nostre pupille. (*Paradiso* III; ll. 10-18)⁵⁵

This canto is characterised by the intensity of its aural aspect both in the fact that the souls appear “cantante” and in the musicality of the poetry, which heaps plosive consonant upon consonant until the effect is of a profound stillness. The choice of “smooth” and the physicality of the terms applied to the silence that surround Tayo align themselves with the sentiments expressed in the *Paradiso*. That this canto is concerned with the phenomena of reflection, both material and inner, suggest that Silko's symbolism has at least a precedent in the Western literary canon as well as in Native American tradition.

The river valley of Laguna bears significant resemblance to the Wood of Suicides of *Inferno* XIII. *Ceremony*'s socially-enforced equivalent (the Indian reservation) is populated by people who, according Tayo's narrative – which has become his, although grammatically it remains in the third person – were “educated only enough to know they wanted to leave the reservation” (p.115). Their desire to

⁵⁵“As through smooth and transparent glass, or through limpid and still water not so deep that the bottom is lost, the outlines of our faces return so faint that a pearl on a white brow does not come less quickly to our eyes [...]”

flee the land to which they “belong”, as in *Inferno* XIII, binds them to it infinitely more strongly in a vicious cycle of self-abuse:

Hiding or sleeping inside shelters of old tin, cardboard and scrap wood [...] in the salt-cedar and willow thickets that grew along the stream banks. (*Ceremony*, p.108).

The trees of this wood show the marks of human abuse in such vivid form that it is difficult to separate the human from the vegetal - or to know which to which to pity more:

When the sun went down they built small fires from broken crates they found in the alleys and with branches they tore from the tamaric and willow [...]The only trees they did not cut down were the ones the people used. A strong stinging smell came from that place. (*Ceremony*, p.110-11)

The cruel physicality of the descriptions echoes those of *Inferno* XIII; the alliteration of “tore” with “tamaric” making strange and drawing attention to an otherwise ordinary verb. The co-dependence of the trees and the people in the economy of this paragraph dehumanises the inhabitants and personifies the vegetation. This valley is described in minute detail – down to the tangled hairpins in a woman’s hair “pulled loose and hung around her head like ornaments” (p.114). The valley is located very precisely and deliberately, from description of its local bus and train stations, to mention of “route 66” from which it can be reached. The alcoholism and prostitution that characterise its inhabitants - both forms of violence, as suicide (in the *Commedia* punished in the circle of the “Violent to Self”) – and the dirt shelters in which these beings reside, offer strong elements of comparison with Dante. These people are described in terms which suggest them to be as entrapped and punished within their very lives as the sinners of *Inferno* XIII are trapped within their “soul-trees”.⁵⁶ The comparison is sustained at the climax of the novel, when Tayo reaches “the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth had been laid” (p.246). Dante, at the end of the *Inferno*, arrives at “the point to which weights are drawn from every part and art now come” (*Inferno* XXXIV: 110-11). Dante is in the very pit of Hell; Tayo names this place “the circle of death”.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Inferno* XIII; ll.106-8.

⁵⁷ *Ceremony*, p.246.

Three wild animals characterise, in miniature, the trajectory of the *Inferno*. Each one, in a Classical progression, suggests one of the three divisions of Hell. The leopard evokes the weaknesses of the flesh, the lion violence and the she-wolf may be associated with sins of fraudulence. Silko's text demonstrates a closely parallel trajectory. Tayo is awoken from his fevered dreams by a "yellow striped cat" - at this point in the narrative he is physically very weak after his experience in the jungle. He has been dreaming of his sufferings in the tropical jungle and those of his cousin Rocky as well as his perceived failure to protect him. Later in the narrative, at the point at which Tayo begins to take an active role in his recovery, he encounters a mountain lion that in a very subtle and sensual manner, leads him to the cattle he has been tracking. Tayo, here, flouts white American society's laws protecting property and cuts through the wire fencing of the rancher's land in order to track the cattle in the traditional Indian manner. Tayo is essentially "rescued" by the lion that distracts the ranch guards. At the climax of the novel, the point at which Tayo identifies the "circle of death" that is closing in around him, he realises that his so-called friends are his very enemies and betrayers:

The witchman stepped through the hoop
 He called out that he would be a wolf
 His head and upper body became hairy like a wolf
 But his lower body was still human [...](*Ceremony*, p.247)

Further to the above parallels, this section is closely comparable with the appearance of the she-wolf in the circle of the fraudulent of the *Inferno*. Silko cannot be said to be merely following a Classical convention in the presentation of these symbols, but rather she may be seen to specifically be following Dante's use of them. The reflections of a symbolic order in another literary work occur, however, within the similar frame of an *imitatio Christi* narrative - of salvation through suffering, as discussed by Lyons et al,⁵⁸ - returning us to the greater complexity of re-enaction rather than simple imitation in the act of literary allusion. The key issue is not whether or not Silko is referring to a medieval Italian text in her postcolonial novel, but the poetic and political possibilities offered by this pattern of appropriation.

⁵⁸ *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method*.

The speakers in all three of these works are curiously isolated figures and seem to exist almost at vanishing point. A discussion of perspective in medieval literature relates to that of truth very closely and particularly to the defense of poetry.⁵⁹ A thing may be considered true “from the perspective of” and so anthropomorphised animals can be justified in Henryson’s *Morall Fabillis*⁶⁰ and in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*.⁶¹ In postcolonial writing there is an emphasis on the specificity of experience and the sense of its incommunicability. The number of hybrid individuals in, for example, *House Made of Dawn*,⁶² *Tracks*,⁶³ and the works of Soyinka, as well as in the postcolonial texts discussed here, insists on the uniqueness of experience. These protagonists emphasise the existential “otherness” of the postcolonial experience in standing outside of their own social/cultural “norms” which are peripheral to the centres of political and economic power. In this they are doubly removed. These characters are often marked by their silence rather than speech and find themselves without adequate means of communication. Obi, in Achebe’s later novel *No Longer At Ease*,⁶⁴ does not return for his mother’s funeral and sends money in his place, Lucy in Jamaica Kincaid’s novel, does not reply to her mother’s letters and does not return home after her father’s death but again sends money.⁶⁵ There is no “lingua franca” for these postcolonial writers who have experienced the death of the old order (the parent culture), and the only language available, English, is more a commodity than truly a means of expression. The English language accesses a world audience and so is a means to an end much as the

⁵⁹ See also *Epistle to Can Grande Della Scala*: “For the elucidation, therefore, of what we have to say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as “polysemous”, that is, having several meanings [...] This being understood, it is clear that the subject, with regard to which the alternative meanings are brought into play, must be two fold. And therefore the subject of this work must be considered in the first place from the point of view the literal meaning, and next from that of the allegorical explanation.” In Minnis, pp.459-60.

⁶⁰ “Thocht feinyeit fabils of ald poetre
Be not al grunded upon truth, yit than
Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore
Richt plesand ar to the eir of man;
And als the caus quhy thay first began
Wes to repreif he of thi misleving,

O man, be figure of ane uther thing” *Prologue to the Morall Fabillis* repr in *The Mercat Anthology* p280, ll:1-7.

⁶¹ *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp.310-18.

⁶² N. Scott Momaday *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

⁶³ Louise Erdrich *Tracks* (London: Flamingo, 1988).

⁶⁴ Chinua Achebe *No Longer At Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

bill notes these protagonists send home *promise to* “pay the bearer on demand” rather than actually do so. These postcolonial writers share with Dante a concern with the literal because their language is the sign of their fall as well as its means.

⁶⁵Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (London: Picador, 1994), p.127.

Chapter Three

Paradisical Concerns: fictive origins and rhetorical ends

For the medieval scholar, and for the postcolonial writers discussed here, the notion of origin is intimately bound with the nature of the sign. For both, writing is a measure of distance, difference and loss. To a significant degree, colonialism depended on identity-constructions: slavery depended upon artificial distinctions of race and gender. The postcolonial writer is particularly sensitised to the inherent division of the sign. This is reflected in the linguistic processes brought to attention in postcolonial writing. For the medieval scholar, there was the dialectical conviction that a return to origins provided a simplified basis for persuasive/imaginative development rather than there being a belief in the possibility of a return *per se*. In other words, for the medieval writer, also known as “makar” (or maker), the postulation of an origin was a rhetorical conceit facilitating the act of literary/fictional creation.

The medieval author himself could not, according to medieval scholasticism, be considered the origin of the text except in the most material sense. The “Author of Authors” (God) would always be considered the true source, and any number of classical predecessors alluded to as intermediaries. Furthermore, the fictionalisation of origins in which the authority of previous writer – whether invented or deliberately misread – was claimed, was a fairly standard *topos* for the medieval writer.¹ In this way, the creative act of writing was aligned with the - theologically - unquestionable, if non-investigable, “fact” of divine creation. The postcolonial writer, as well as being subject to a passing history (which cannot be reclaimed), has had some of the possibility of mythologizing usurped by the overwhelming rhetoric of the colonising agent. Derek Walcott in his essay “The Muse of History” asserts the

¹ R.D.S. Jack in his notes to Robert Henryson *Morall Fabillis* comments: “Henryson credits the Greek author Aesop with authorship of the collection of tales he is retelling, yet thinks Aesop writes in Latin (5.3) and is a Roman (“Fable of Lion and Mouse”, 8.2). In fact, he draws his fables from different collections within the broad Aesopic tradition[...].” He also comments that his quotation of Aesop is actually a mis-citation and comes instead from Gualterus Anglicus. *The Mercat Anthology*, p.281.

very real power of this rhetoric and denies, along with Fanon², the possibility of a return to pre-colonial innocence in postcolonial writing:

The myth of the noble savage would not be revived, for that myth never emanated from the savage but has always been the nostalgia of the Old World, its longing for innocence.³

Colonialism, at least in some sense, would seem to depend on an exploitation of this perception of innocence. Walcott indicates the complexity of the postcolonial project: the very origin of native identity, the pre-colonial, has already been constructed in colonial terms. This pre-construction seems to be at the origin of the colonising project. The influence of Eden and the biblical story of Genesis on the medieval scholar is mirrored in the pressures faced by the postcolonial writer: questions of source and origin are bound with processes of narrative.

The colonial site (parallel to the medieval notion of “origin”) according to Walcott, has been constructed outside of the confines – psychological as well as geographical - which regulate and presumably have soiled the homeland/present.⁴ For both the postcolonial and the medieval writer, the sign is operating at a significant distance from its source. The postcolonial writer is, in a sense, produced by the Western narratives which define, and may be said to be “originary” in their positions within, the Western canon. At a conceptual level the notion of origin, for the postcolonial writer, is tainted by the very process that writer seeks to redress. The notion of “origin” has been defined retroactively. This is a complexity contained within and argued around the very term postcolonial.⁵ David Punter explains:

² “Colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it [...] We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism’s attempts to falsify and harm [...] A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people’s true nature.” Franz Fanon, “On National Culture”, repr. in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.153-6, p.154.

³ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* (London: Faber, 1998) p.40.

⁴ The biblical Garden of Eden in Genesis and Dante’s *Paradiso*, arguably the two most influential representations of paradise in Western literary canon, are characterised by an absence of linear time scales.

⁵ As well as arguments concerning the specious activities of the World Bank and capitalist interests in the prolonging of a dependent state in the apparently *post*-colonial world, David Punter argues:

From this, naturally what flows is a question of “living after” in general; of an afterlife, certainly, but also the conduct of what one might loosely call an enquiry into the “post”: what it is like to live in a world of “posts” – postmodernism, poststructuralism, and of course postcolonialism. These, as we are well aware, are all formulations of the “after”, of what comes “after”; at the same time, however, they necessarily conjure up, make uncannily to appear before us, the very phenomena they have, in a different sense, surpassed, they prolong the life of their predecessors – unnaturally, some might say – giving them the status of spirits haunting the apparently purged landscape of the contemporary.⁶

The postcolonial, if it may be seen to fit this definition of an “afterlife”, is severally bound up with an “enquiry”. The species of afterlife under question is the paradisaical state. In this sense both terms – postcolonialism and medieval scholasticism – may be understood to remain under negotiation. Both are concerned with posing the appropriate questions to the conditions that engender them.

If the postcolonial is part of a more general contemporary state⁷, that of the “post”, then it is in terms of the transgression of linear time. Derrida in his 1993 work *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, identifies a central phenomenon in his identification of the spectre as the defining metaphor for the globalising project of modernity:

[...] one group of dominant figures in recent postcolonial criticism has included Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha; their authorities have been taken to be, respectively, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan. This is a caricature, but a significant one. My claim will be that in their deployment of Western theory they have become involved in prolonging and repeating imperialist subjugation, to the point at which Spivak can solemnly claim, in the teeth of the evidence, that the subaltern “cannot speak”. This disavowal, this wishing away of the complexities of the voice, of the defiles of the literary, is a move designed to silence, and it has only been very recently that alternative voices have spoken up, at least within the hearing of the all-listening ears, the patrolling listeners of the Western arena.” David Punter *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.9.

⁶ Ibid, p.62.

⁷ “Post-colonialism, as it is now used in various fields, de-scribes a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of “class”; as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third-World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional from of “reading practice”; and [...] as the name for a category of “Literary” activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called “commonwealth” literary studies.” Tiffin and Lawson, 1994, pp.16-17, quoted by Punter, p.5.

To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalised presents (past present, actual present: now, future, present.) We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the spectre does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: “Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost” (*Hamlet*, XX).⁸

Derrida’s careful rhetoric here implies that time exists within the terms we use to describe it. He does not, however, deny the possibility of another kind of time existing beyond the scope of human language. The sense of “modalisation” he introduces suggests two things. The first is a sense of time as narrative with a series of directional points. The second is a sense of the importance of perspective in identifying the characteristics of time. His final recourse to “that time” in his delineation of the possibility of an alternative in the spectre, confirms his use of the medieval concept of a double time scale in which God and man exist separately and yet intersect. He identifies the existence of a “moment” outside of the ordinary linguistic constructs of time. This alternative, as in medieval thought, depends on the notion of time, as reality, being perspectival and multiple rather than absolute.

The postmodern moment - and therefore the postcolonial moment - is suggested to be the condition of living in an “aftermath” – namely that of the Enlightenment project of Marxism. It could be argued from this that the term “postcolonial” is bound with a breakdown in Enlightenment notions of time and that postcolonial writing, therefore, is engaged with a critique of the universalising and objectifying tendencies of History. This may seem paradoxical as postcolonial writing is usually understood to be involved, *per se*, with the writing of recent history: the documentation of dramatic recent pasts often characterises postcolonial writing. One popular and strong distinction, however, between postmodern and postcolonial writing, as two contemporary and interrelated genres, is that the postcolonial has a political consciousness. The significance of alternative perspectives and multiple interpretative techniques revealed in the postcolonial project aligns very closely with the hierarchical, perspectival universe revealed in medieval writing. In medieval scholasticism, the fictive belongs to the same branch

of knowledge as the political/historical: all three exist at the lowest, broadly defined as the material, level. History, for the medieval scholar, is, in a very clear and simple sense, merely another form of narrative. This chapter is concerned with the ambivalence of terms such as History and more particularly Truth and the artificial divisions upon which communication, and the processes of signing, depend. I will move from a theoretical approach in the first half to a practical investigation in the second in order to explore, without reifying, postcolonial and medieval concerns with the notion of origin.⁹

Postmodern literary theory comprises a number of things, not least the question of its own coherence as a philosophy. It may be safest, in view of this, to use “postmodernism” as a term for the many different and often conflicting debates that have arisen since Arnold Toynbee’s first use of it in *A Study of History*.¹⁰ The Bible, ironically, is deeply implicated in the contemporary language debate which informs postmodern writing. The range of discourses which not only allude to Scripture but use it to exemplify their concerns suggests that far from dismissing this text, many contemporary schools of thought, from psychoanalysis to Orientalism to feminist criticism, are predicated upon or at least seriously engaged with it. Lacan illustrates the impossibility of escape from originary notions even for Saussure, who might be considered the “origin” of much of postmodern literary theory:

We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signifier – which F. de Saussure illustrates with an image resembling the wavy lines of the upper and lower Waters in miniatures from manuscripts of Genesis; a double flow in

⁸ Jacques Derrida quoted by Punter in *Postcolonial Imaginings*, p.62.

⁹ Punter comments: “Theorists in the realm of the postcolonial have become accustomed to sharing a common supposition, whatever their internal rivalries, which is that theory is the next “stage” on a path to truth. But this is an Enlightenment model writ large: theory is not a “stage of progress,” it is a stepping aside – of interest in itself, to be sure, but only insofar as it might, at some deferred point, resume its part in a dialectic with “practice”, which I take to include the literary as well as the political.” p.8

¹⁰ Arnold Toynbee *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934-1954)

this work was considered to have been motivated by the late nineteenth century desire to found a synoptic and universal history, a totalised human history:

“This demand was answered in Toynbee’s work by the fact that his own historiography is, in fact, a Christian theodicy. His task was, in a sense, to write a history which would redeem humanity, by discovering the trajectory of universal history to be a moment of divergence from an original theocentric moment – a sundering from God – driven subsequently by the impulse of return to that same origin: a narrative like the Odyssey, of adventure and return, in which secularity itself is seen as an enormous digression in what is fundamentally a circular narrative structure.” *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p.2

which the guidelines of fine streaks of rain, vertical dotted lines supposedly confining segments of correspondence, seem too slight.¹¹

Lacan goes on to investigate the significance of Saussure's choice of the word "tree"/ arbor as his example of the division between signifier and signified. That Saussure chooses a Biblical image, specifically the one central to *Genesis*, is clearly significant. At the literal level the story of the fall and that of Babel, and the Adamic naming of things - all of which are taken to be metaphors for, if not proof of, the truth-status of language - are found in the Bible. At another level, it was in medieval readings of the Bible and what became known as the exegetical method that non-literal analyses - which are predominant in postmodern readings - originated. Contemporary theory's return to its own origins for its examples and proofs is appropriate to a discussion of a signing system. That the terms of discussion come from within the canon suggests a precedent for the postcolonial writer's engagement with the very works it would seem, at least politically, to want to efface. It would also suggest the importance of Modernist poetry and its "make it new" manifesto - to the postcolonial project. The Western canon, as the colonising language, is employed by the postcolonial writer in a postmodern strategy of gesturing, from within, the violence that it engenders in its assumption of singular authority.

Medieval writers typically defend their craft in suggesting the perspectival nature of truth. Medieval man was considered a fallen creature - having wilfully turned away from God's counsel - and language was a fallen medium. Within the medieval hierarchy of imperfect knowledge, Poetry concerned fictive versions of incommunicable truths, its focus practical and political, by definition, rather than divine: "Let God be true but every man a liar" (Romans 2:4). Medieval poets, in their defence, drew attention to the fact that the Bible, understood to be the literal word-of-God, contains all the allegorical and figurative elements for which poetry was criticised - and yet was taken by scholars and theologians to be the word of God and so absolutely true (although as a "word" it was still artificial). An allegory is "[a] story that can be read, understood and interpreted at two levels (and in some

¹¹ Jacques Lacan "The insistence of the letter in the unconscious", repr. in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman 1988) pp.79-239, p.87

cases three or four levels).”¹² The word itself derives from the Greek *allegoria* – “speaking otherwise” or in Latin *alieni loquium* (talking differently). By the fourteenth century, a rich theological tradition had reinforced the legitimacy of the view that the stories of the Bible “spoke otherwise”. This enabled deeper spiritual truth to be revealed behind the surface text and allowed inconsistencies and obscure truth to be explained. Sermons employed the method to such an extent that it was “common and commonly understood throughout Europe”¹³ and came to be viewed as the literary mode favoured by the Holy Spirit - the highest level of spirituality and therefore the closest approach to truth. Non-literal readings were, for the later medievals, the closest one could come to God - who existed beyond linear time as experienced by man. The ultimate referent – God – is, therefore, beyond both time and man. This is in addition to being indecipherable. Strictly speaking, therefore, the practical/political focus of poetics could not pretend to such a subject: God is entirely “other”. The exegetical method may be seen to be central to the postcolonial literary project in its concern with alternative modes of discourse.

To Dante and his contemporaries, allegory had become, as Tillyard suggests “an index to a whole new way of thought [that] enabled a poet to penetrate into a superior world of transcendence.”¹⁴ Dante provides, most relevantly here, a detailed definition of the poetic concept of allegory in both the *Convivio* and his “Letter To Can Grande”. He reveals that his masterpiece, the *Commedia*, is “polysemous – that is to say, of more sense than one”,¹⁵ and “can be understood and ought to be propounded principally in four senses.”¹⁶ The literal sense, which to poets could be fictive, “does not go beyond the surface of the letter”¹⁷. At this level, a tree is just a tree (although an imagined one). At another level, however, this tree gives way to an allegorical sense: “truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction”. The third level (tropological) concerns the moral sense. Lastly, the anagogical level is “beyond sense” and signifies “by means of things signified a part of supernatural things of eternal glory”. *Allegoresis*, as understood by the medievals, allows for the growth of

¹² J. A. Cuddon *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Penguin, 1991), “Allegory”.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *Dante* (London: Faber, 1929), p.22.

¹⁴ Pietro Cali, *Allegory and Vision in Dante and Langland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1971), p.25.

¹⁵ A. G. Ferrers Howell, *Latin Works of Dante Alighieri* (London: J.M. Dent, 1904), p.347

¹⁶ *Convivio* (London: J.M. Dent, 1904), Bk 2, Ch. 1, p. 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

a text so that it becomes an “elaborately developed system of layered spiritual meanings.”¹⁸ The medieval approach to reading depends on a depth model rather than on a linear temporal model, suggesting a reliance on the spatial. Dante emphasises this in his insistence that the highest or anagogical level be understood to depend on the foundation of the literal.¹⁹ The literal level, associated also with the political and historical, is maintained as having not only a contingent but a necessary relationship with ultimate truths.

Both postcolonial and medieval writers, it seems, have the sense of being post-lapsarian, of existing and writing in a world where language has already betrayed its enunciator. The postcolonial writer is in this position for the reasons given by Walcott at the beginning of this chapter. The medieval writer is in a similar position because of the Christian doctrine that dominated his time. Eugene Vance argues that St. Augustine was the thinker who:

inaugurated the semiological consciousness of the Christian West[...]all of Augustine’s endeavours in metaphysics, epistemology and exegesis coincided with a relentless effort to define the functions and limits of human language.²⁰

Language was understood to be constitutive of reality – or at least as far as humans were concerned - rather than vice versa. St. Augustine, by inscribing temporality within discourse, differentiates between speech in the phenomenological world and its divine counterpart:

The mind compared these words, which it heard sounding in time, with your word, which is silent and eternal, and said, “God’s eternal Word is far, far different from these words which sound in time. They are far beneath me; in fact, they are not at all, because they die away and are lost. But the Word of my God is above me and endures forever[...]But there was no material thing before heaven and earth; or, if there was, you must certainly have created it by an utterance outside time, so that

¹⁸ Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London: Elek, 1973), p. 60.

¹⁹ “As the Philosopher says in his second book of the *Metaphysics*: “As a thing is in respect of being, so it is in respect of truth” [...] the work may be described as “polysemous” that is having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical.” “Epistle to Can Grande della Scala”: Extract, in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism: The Commentary Tradition* ed.s A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.458-69.

²⁰ Edward Vance quoted in *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method – Augustine to Descartes* ed.s John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols (London: University of New England Press, 1982) p.5.

you could use it as the mouthpiece for your decree, uttered in time, that heaven and earth should be made.²¹

As in postmodern theory, Augustine identifies a significant alternative to linear models of temporality:

Your years are one day, yet your day does not come daily but is always today, because your today does not give place to any tomorrow nor does it take the place of any yesterday. Your today is eternity. And this is how the Son, to whom you said *I have begotten you this day*, was begotten co-eternal with yourself. You made all time; you are *before* all time; and the “time”, if such we may call it, when there was no time, was not time at all.²²

The divine world may be understood to be perfect, without ambiguity or temporal limitations and defined by unambiguous speech – simultaneous rather than sequential. Human speech on the other hand is subject to a disjunction between the past (of origins, conception: writing) and the present (the execution: reading):

Since thought precedes speech, speech represents the futility of thought and thought itself constitutes the past of discourse. In this way, postlapsarian humans might be seen as constantly in motion between the past of conception and the future of execution, for example, “I am going to do this, now.” An atemporal present, motionless and enduring, disappeared from human experience as a consequence of the fall. All these conditions of temporality, including the past/ future dichotomy that separated a writer from his audience, contribute to the arbitrariness of the verbal sign, Augustine holds, and thus render problematic anything approaching unambiguous understanding among humans. Polysemia and complexity in discourse reflect the distance separating the world from its creator.²³

That medieval thought may now, in the light of postmodern theories such as Derrida’s treaty on Marxism, be seen to supercede later, Enlightenment, ideas of temporality is faintly ironic but also predictable if Derrida is correct. There is already a tradition of an Other (God) that reveals time - “what we call time” (Derrida); “if such we may call it” (Augustine) - to be a construct (existing within the complexities and failures of language) which exists prior to both colonialism and postmodern thought. This tradition is medieval scholasticism. Derrida’s criticism of theocentrism,

²¹ *The Confessions Of Saint Augustine* Book XI; 6, p.259.

²² *Ibid* Book XI;13, p.263.

²³ Vance in *Mimesis*, p.5.

that it constitutes “l’ethnocentrisme le plus original at le plus puissant”,²⁴ as noted earlier, is particularly astute if “theocentrism” is characterised by the medieval “world-view”. This term simplifies in a manner that is difficult to sustain from a contemporary theoretical position: the term “medieval” spans too long and varied a period to be reduced to a single “view”. Even if God can be said to exist at the centre of the thought of this period, the evidence suggests that “God” was ultimately mysterious and so unpositable. Furthermore, communication between humans of God-like truth was inherently flawed. The medieval Christian God may be considered synonymous with the postmodern “referent” in that he exists eternally “beyond” the possibility of signification.

This most recent breakdown in faith in the determinacy of language has culminated in a suspicion of the creative act itself. This uncertainty is not new as its opposite is based on the implicit “final destination” of Enlightenment thought rather than anything more tangible, or certain. One manifestation is the work of Barthes and his call for the death of the author:

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing) by refusing to assign a “secret”, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as a text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.²⁵

We have already seen, however, that medieval thinkers considered it impossible, even blasphemous to fix human meaning in an atemporal present, and they consciously overreached the accepted bounds of “reason, science, law” in their activity of *allegoresis* – this had literal and theological bases as well as poetic. Barthes claims to seriously challenge theocentrism in denying the stipulated author/(scriptor)’s control over his creation. I will suggest that the contemporary language debate has its roots more specifically in the Old Testament story of Creation and will develop the argument by exploring the ways in which medieval and postcolonial writing engage with and problematise representations of Paradise. Paradise, at least in its earthly (and inherently flawed) representation and its

²⁴ *De La Grammatologie*, p.3.

²⁵ Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author” reprinted in *Modern Literary Theory* ed. P. Rice and P. Waugh (London: Arnold, 1996) pp.118-22, pp.121-2.

evocation of an “aftermath” will be investigated as a possible metaphor for the “spectral moment” of what is loosely termed “the postmodern situation”. Both the postcolonial and the “fallen” medieval subject may be seen exist in a state analogous to the metonymic gap of the sign.

Chinua Achebe titles his collection of essays on postcolonialism *Morning Yet on Creation Day*.²⁶ This collection ranges over a number of issues relating to the postcolonial situation but centres on those of language and universality - particularly a defence of the use of English by postcolonial writers and the reception of this by the English-speaking world. Achebe, the son of a “Church agent” and educated at a missionary school, has some comment to make on the biblical tradition in the postcolonial situation. The Authorised Version of the Bible opens with a tract which could be read as divine authorisation of Apartheid. We may assume that Achebe was familiar with this definitive version of *Genesis*:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep...And God said, “Let there be light” and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. (*Genesis* I; 1-6)

[...] And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night: He made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon earth. And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good. (*Genesis* I; 13-8)

The arbitrary divisions and namings, followed by the privileging of “light” in this passage, is resonant with Achebe’s title. The title itself is not referred to directly in the essays, although the subject of creation myths is considered in some detail.²⁷ The title is, however, a part of the entire text and may be understood to derive and bestow meaning in relation to it, in a similar sense to the medieval discussions of form

²⁶ Chinua Achebe *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

²⁷ Although Achebe does make explicit comment on creation myths in native folklore:

“In small closely-knit societies such as we often call primitive the importance of language is seen with pristine clarity. For instance, in the creation myth of the Hebrews God made the world by word of

referred to earlier in the writings of Dante: a part must be subject to the whole.²⁸ In other words, it is an integral part of a text in which literal meanings are demonstrated to underlie figurative significations, and political communications are fused with fictive means.

Achebe's collection of essays centres on the postcolonial use of the English language and its reception by the West. Achebe seems to be deriding the association of light with life in his use of "morning": it is infused with Enlightenment values of progress. These came to associate darkness – and, by association, black Africa – with the unholy. The missionary project in Africa was inspired to no small degree by the urge to spread the word/light in the "dark continent".²⁹ The pun on "morning" implies that he is also "mourning" the dire, and very real consequences of an over-literal reading of a many-times translated/transcribed text – a text which belies such simplistic approach.³⁰ The over-literal reading clearly does not acknowledge the figurative nor, implicitly, the role of the literal as the first stage in a dynamic reading process involving the reader in an interpretative process. Instead, it remains flatly one-dimensional. Achebe's pun (alluding to the oral traditions of Africa) invites a suspension of the immediate (and written) and lingers on the sound of the word "morning" inducing a sense of the oral-aural based experience whose demise this collection "mourns". Achebe's commentary on the Western tendency to simplistic universalism supports this – as this misguided reading, via biblical indoctrination, is taken to the "Heart of Darkness" (Conrad comes up several times) and the pattern for Apartheid to Africa. Ironically, the evidence of *Genesis*, as Achebe's pun also highlights, goes the other way, with "creation day" for all its light, ending in Sin,

mouth; and in the Christian myth as recorded in St. John's Gospel the word became God himself." *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p.31.

²⁸ "As the Philosopher says in the second *Metaphysicorum*, "as a thing is related to existence, so is it related to truth," [...] Therefore if we desire to furnish some introduction to a part of any work, it behoves us to furnish some knowledge of the whole of which it is a part." "Epistola X" (To Can Grande) in *Latin Works Of Dante Alighieri*, p.346.

²⁹ See later discussion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* set in the African/Belgian Congo (my Chapter 7).

³⁰ "For Europe the Bible has always been a translated book. More than that: it is a book whose translated, and therefore foreign, status has always been a conspicuous part of our whole civilisation's historical identity – in a social, literary, and even religious sense. Almost every line of its text serves to remind us that it is about the people of another time and place who belonged to other kinds of societies from our own and who spoke different languages from ourselves." Introduction to *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xix.

expulsion and the promise of suffering. The binary divisions, even in the – apparently – most patriarchal of texts, collapse within its first few pages. Achebe’s collection opens with an assault on perverted universalism – that of the West - and closes with the hope that the centre of this “universe” might be shifted because of the fundamentally unstable nature of language and the centrality of language to its construction/s.

In returning to a founding text of the Western literary canon – a type of “origin” - Achebe uncovers the very site which enables the expression of a non-Western /non-central experience. The text used to teach English, the Bible, was not – originally - written in English although certain versions have been definitive in establishing the English vernacular. This vernacular itself was, originally, an “other” to the standardising Latin which was the rhetorical medium of the Holy Roman Empire as well as the Medieval West. Secondly, it is a text operating physically very far from its – English as well as ancient – origin.³¹ Achebe’s critique draws specifically on the representation of Eden in the book of *Genesis* and seems to emphasise its connection between the act of creation and a certain, inevitable failure. Achebe is identifying the fact that the Bible – a nexus of non-originary origins – is, most fundamentally, the origin and very document of non-Adamic language. The Bible, as a text, is the material correlative of the nature of the sign. It is the non-centralisable in form. The Bible in the Western tradition – the text through which the West validated the colonising project – narrates from its opening the failure of fixity in language. The commentary it provides on Adam’s task of naming the life around him suggests in its very existence the inability of language to inscribe truth: action has become, quite literally, “history”. Within a few lines of Adam’s naming, language is put to other, subtler uses: the persuasive ends of rhetoric. The Bible, as well as being the literal word of God, also signs the nominative function of language.

Achebe’s methodology evokes the nature of the Bible in which the Old Testament is understood to prophesy the New Testament. Certain tracts make sense only in the context of their elucidation and not simply in themselves. The truth of the Bible exists in the dialectic of the two testaments taken together. Again, returning to

³¹ “three-quarters of the Christian Bible [...] is acknowledged, even by its most fundamental adherents, to be originally the scriptures of another religion and written in a language never spoken by any Christian community.” Ibid, p.xx.

Walcott, the truth/meaning of this text is intimately bound to the allusions it sets up, depending on a circular logic rather than “solution” to the mystery of existence. Genesis reveals the circular method of biblical truth in its first few lines. This is revealed to be, in an almost biological sense, a methodology of “generative” meaning rather than a closed system of origin and destination:

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth and it was so. (I; 11)

Truth is described as a development through cycles rather than a linear progression. In a similar vein, St. John’s Gospel of the New Testament “rewrites” Genesis:

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. (I; 1)

In this case, as above, the origin is also the end - God substituting the metaphorical “earth”, as source.

This gospel, significantly, comes after several others in the New Testament which already succeeds the entire Old Testament, and all the words contained within it. In giving a slightly but significantly different version of creation it indicates that the hermeneutic circle does not collapse into mere tautology but rather, in its modest claims to truth, attends to the nature (and limitations) of the word. This “significant re-enaction” of the earlier gospel develops the inherent flaws in the original Garden of Eden into a fuller and subsequently “more true” truth in a way which an original story of lost origin could not, by its very nature, achieve. This second telling reinforces its subject’s sense of aftermath. Coming later in the Bible, it confirms the view that paradise was always going to be lost as far as language, and its representation in language, is concerned and furthermore that God – the ultimate truth – *is bound with* this very process. Achebe is arguing for the non-originary nature of language; that it may be transplanted and still be meaningful, that it can be used in ways contrary to its initial intention and interpreted at several levels. Implicitly, he is also identifying that, in western narratives at least, life is predicated on loss.

If man becomes man in the image of God (“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (I; 26)) then man’s expulsion from Eden, his submission to the workings of rhetoric, cannot be coincidental. We are told that there is a tree at the very centre of Eden, the Garden of ideal state, which is forbidden. This is the tree of knowledge. God warns that man shall not eat of this tree or else he will “truly die”. The use here of “truly” rather than “surely” or “certainly” is telling. There is a discrepancy in Eden, which the snake does not create but which he exploits. There is a weakness at the very epicentre of the ideal state: to remain in this state is to *be of* but not to *be* a god. The truth, if this may be defined in medieval terms, (and medieval typology seems here to apply), is in proximity to God or to a God-like state. This, it would seem, is absent from the garden. Achebe’s pun on “morning”/mourning is a deep one, suggesting both beginnings and endings simultaneously. “Morning” implies the beginning of a tradition, a colonial enterprise, a division of darkness and light. “Mourning” is the consequence of the death of cultural “innocence” (*pace* Walcott), which has instigated the search for new lands, and that of the native who dies – both literally and metaphorically - in the forceful implementation of a new cultural practice and order. Tradition, as we can see from the above, is a matter of perspective. Between the old and new, beginnings and endings, there are no clear divisions. This is the message of Achebe’s near-canonical collection. This emphasis on the power of perspective to create self-validating truth suggests a particular relationship between Dante’s *Paradiso* and Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*.³²

It is because language can be used as a means of rhetoric as much as truth that it is useful to postcolonial writers – it can travel far from its point of origin. The English language, in particular, may be considered to contain a history of the critique of notions of origin. Achebe’s allusion to *Genesis* – the originating story of rhetoric as well as creation – fuses the issues of language, origin and truth. The serpent uses language not in terms of naming but rather to persuasive ends in his discourse with Eve. “Paradise” is subject to the doubleness of the serpent’s tongue, it must, in the Miltonic sense, be lost/destroyed before it may be considered, truly, to exist. It can only “come into being” with the construction of the text – the Bible – which is itself

³² *Paradiso* XIX; 40-60.

an “aftermath” of the paradisiacal state. The Garden of Eden as it “exists” literally, rather than ideally, is the emanation of a “longing for innocence” because it is written in an (older) world, which has already fallen. The Garden of Eden exists (presently) only in the sign which inscribes man’s distance from God, the past from the present and, by extension, the periphery from the centre. Walcott’s notion of the self-referentiality of postcolonial texts is also in evidence in *Genesis*. The description of and expulsion from a virgin landscape is presented in terms which necessitate loss in the narrative’s very existence. The discourse between Achebe’s title and his essays suggest a medieval strategy of alerting his reader to his purpose³³: to persuade the Western world to permit its dominant language to speak for a tradition not its own but an experience which it has “created”, of which it is, in a sense, the “makar”. A dialectical interaction between title and work alerts the reader to a persuasive methodology and perspectival ethos. It draws attention to the literal sphere.

Neither the *Commedia* nor Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* claim to offer a vision of unmediated origins, whether of God or the pre-colonial. Both may be considered a meditation on the nature of Self as narrative. They do not deal with flawlessly ideal landscapes. Both are, in a sense, “corrupt” with pre-existing and self-constructed states. The *Commedia* was known originally as such, without the addition of “Divina” because the term was defined as a happy ending from an unhappy beginning and this implied divinity - a magical transformation which seemed impossible from the difficult conditions of the beginning. Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* is introduced as a self-made man, a great man of his tribe but one driven by his fear of failure and sense of shame at his father’s dissolute life.³⁴ Both describe, though in different senses, the “progress” of their main protagonists and both narratives suggest, overtly, the “madness” of the worlds they describe. Achebe’s emphasis on village life is very deliberate and given the definition of Comedy in the *Epistle to Can Grande* - a “village/rustic song”³⁵ - it would seem that the *Commedia*

³³ “it is not without value to call to mind what we see happen in the construction of buildings where first the foundation is laid then the structure is raised upon it, and finally then the work is all finished the house is decorated by the laying on of colour [...] the first course of stones to be laid upon the foundation is placed flush with a taut cord – and these are the stones upon which the entire weight of the others rests and to which they are fitted [...]” Hugh of Saint-Victor *Didascalion*: Extracts from Bks V and VI, in Minnis pp.74-9

³⁴ “He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father.” p.3

³⁵ “Epistola X” in *Latin Writings*, p.349.

and *Things Fall Apart* have more cause to follow similar trajectories than may first appear. The connection between Achebe and Dante becomes more overt in the light of Achebe's later novels.

The Dante-pilgrim reaches Paradise after a struggle originating in a moment of both allegorical and literal loss - recorded with unforgettable force in the opening line of the *Commedia*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita (*Inferno*, I:1-3)³⁶

The plural "nostra", as well as signifying an elevated subject (the poem as a divine vision), and referring to an average lifespan and so indicating the pilgrim's age, suggests a general state of loss in its reference to the lot of humanity as well as to a traveller who has simply lost his bearings. That a single line of poetry, in fact, just a third of a sentence, may bear so much information as to "locate" the reader with regard to the literal, allegorical and anagogical is testament to the poet's skill but also to his concern: orientation and the importance of perspective. The repetition of the harsh and emphatic "r" and "t" consonants of "diritta" and "smarrita" alerts the reader to the poem's challenge to singular readings and totalising truths: the aural association of the Italian for straight/direct with lost/blurred overlays the sense of the former with the latter. The narrowing of focus, from humanity to a single individual, between the first line and the second – from "nostra" to "mi" – enacts as well as suggests the original fall.

Dante's evocation of the Garden of Eden in his choice of language evokes both a context and a precedent in a similar sense to the description of village life in *Things Fall Apart*, which provides the background to the evolution of the narrative. Both Dante's poem, and the quasi-anthropological/historical terms in which Achebe's novel is presented, allude to different traditions. At the most superficial level, Achebe draws the title of his novel from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming", with its allusions to biblical prophecy as well as to the repetitions of history. Dante's use of the prefix "ri" rather than simply the verb "trovare", heightens this sense of re-

enactment as it suggests, along with the reference to trees, a landscape already familiar to the reader, and the post-lapsarian sense of alienation. The association of self-consciousness with this state of being “lost” conjoins from the outset the notions of origin and difficulty.

There are two ways of reading this first verse which hinge on Dante’s use of “che” rather than the more obvious “dove”. Sinclair has translated this “*where* the straight way was lost”, giving the more simple sense of a related narrative: a pilgrim comes to consciousness only to find himself lost. Dante’s text, however, allows for a second more impersonal reading: “In the middle of the journey of our life I realised, while in a dark wood, *that* the straight way *had been* lost.” This more literal rendition seems more in keeping with the unambiguous “Nostra” and the more general state it implies. In fact, it would suggest that Dante’s poem, though written by an individual, is intended for humanity - generally lost as it is – a reading which is borne out by his disclaimer at the beginning of *Paradiso*:

Trasumanar significar per verba
non si poria; pero l’esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba (*Paradiso* I; 70-2)³⁷

His experience is to act as a template for others’ experience rather than a substitute: the language in which it is communicated has already (in the *Genesis*-allusions of *Inferno* I) been seen to have failed in its function of unequivocally embodying truth. Dante clearly, however, “intends” both readings, the simple and the more ideal, and he intends them simultaneously, as he explains:

Nell’ordine ch’io dico sono accline
tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
piu al principio loro e men vicine;
onde si muovono a diversi porti
per lo gran mar dell’essere, e ciascuna
con istinto a lei dato che la porti. (*Paradiso* I; 109-113).³⁸

³⁶ “In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost”

³⁷ “The passing beyond humanity cannot be set forth in words; let the example suffice, therefore, for him to whom grace reserves the experience.”

³⁸ “In the order I speak of all natures have their bent according to their different lots, nearer their source and farther from it; they move, therefore, to different ports over the great sea of being, each with an instinct given to bear it on.”

Dante considers his poetic method: he intends to speak to natures as they are. Every reader is to engage at his own level with this text obsessed with the power as well as the limitations of language. The allusion to the possibility of polyvalent readings is a double one in that it refers directly to the biblical parable of the talents as well as, more generally, to allegoric readings of scripture. In this it enacts as well as describes its sense, reiterating Dante's own mission statement that every part must be true to the whole.

Another aspect, made explicit in these two works, concerns outer landscapes as intimately related to their main protagonists' inner worlds with the implication that the former, in their dependence on the latter, are perspectival rather than absolute. Beatrice, in the *Paradiso*, explains that paradise exists in the Dante pilgrim's own terms and reflects his level of understanding and inner closeness to God. The universe of Dante's *Commedia* – as the title, in its implication of the progression of the will towards God – implies that it is self-achieved in a double sense: Dante the poet has written the poem which embodies the spiritual journey which Dante the pilgrim has undertaken:

Qui si mostraron, non perche sortita
 sia questa spera lor, ma per far segno
 della celestial c'ha men salita.
 Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
 Però che solo fa poscia d'intelletto degno.
 Per questo la Scrittura condiscende
 a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano
 Attibuisce a Dio, ed altro intende [...] (*Paradiso* IV; 37-45)³⁹

God – synonymous with absolute truth – is here revealed to be a construct, not ultimately, but certainly in the limited terms in which humans can know and communicate.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the paradisaical aspect is subtly revealing of the Eden principle:

³⁹ “These have shown themselves here, not that this sphere is allotted to them, but in sign of the heavenly rank that is least exalted. It is necessary to speak thus to your faculty, since only from sense

If ever a man deserved his success that man was Okonkwo. At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi*, or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. (p.19)

This is a story of self-creation. Okonkwo speaks his world into being and his word is rendered physically. That his character is illustrated with the example of wrestling - clearly a very physical engagement - is significant. Achebe is mirroring the conditions of Eden in his deceptively simple tale. His comment is neatly summed up in the title: things fall apart. The rest of this quote, taken from Yeats - "the centre cannot hold" - may suggest, in the light of this discussion so far, further evidence of the writer's allusion to the Garden of Eden. That his trajectory appears to be the opposite to that of Dante - from happiness to misery rather than vice versa - is belied by the common theme of the nature and limitations of the human will. Dante's protagonist could no more sustain his vision of Paradise than Okonkwo could enforce the continuation of traditional values and way of life.

The perspective, in these works, is "earthly". The possibility of ideal perfection is interrupted by the very narrative. Dante is blinded and Okonkwo silenced by the ultimate truths they face, suggesting that the absolute/ideal delimits sensory experience - a phenomenon reflected in the language which communicates the experience. This is not, however, to say that these ahistorical landscapes are without beauty or the possibility of perfection. The Dante-pilgrim is so overcome by wonder in the first canto of the *Paradiso* that he excuses himself with the disclaimer given above. His wonder, as we have seen, is blinding in the sense that such visions of perfection are literally "beyond" him and have to be brought down to a lower, less perfect level, in order for him to understand, or to "see"- sight of course being the sense that experiences perspective - as Beatrice explains. Beatrice puts his astonishment "into perspective" by describing to him the grander scheme which directs his singular experience:

"Le cose tutte quante
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo e forma

perception does it grasp that which it then makes fit for the intellect. For this reason Scripture condescends to your capacity and attributes hands and feet to God, having another meaning [...]"

che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante[...]" (*Paradiso* I; 103-05)⁴⁰

The equal emphasis on the first three significant words of her explanation is designed to elucidate her point. The repetition of the "e" ending of "cose" "tutte" "quante" combined with the regular beat of the three two-syllable words echoes the mystery of the simultaneously divided and unified trinity; the father, the son, the holy spirit. The division – or apparent disorder – symbolised by the double/divided sound of "cose" (things) is contained at a greater level and put into perspective by the rhythm-repetition combined with the implication of "tutte" (all) and compounded by the further repetition of these elements in "quante" (how much). These reflections are bound finally in Dante's rhyming of "quante" with "simigliante" (similar) so that the verse enacts at the literal and aural levels the message of the discourse: complexity finds its order in reflecting the nature of God.

God is synonymous with the perfect. Truth and order, in the medieval scheme, is the first reflection of this perfection. As Sinclair elucidates:

Beatrice's account, here and later, is the statement in scholastic terms of the conception of the universe as a spiritual and comprehensive order working to spiritual and final ends (Sinclair's commentary to *Paradiso* I, p.30)

The *Paradiso* is introduced at near-to the vernal equinox, noon-time, which is traditionally the season of perfection and the temporal co-ordinate to Creation:

Surge ai mortali per diverse foci
 la luce del mondo; ma da quella
 che quattro cerchi giugne con tre croci,
 con miglior corso e con migliore stella
 esce congiunta, e la mondana cera
 piu a suo modo tempera e suggella. (*Paradiso* I; 37-42)⁴¹

The image of the operation of the distant bodies of the stars on the earth strongly asserts the influence of a non-human authority. This is compounded by the ritualistic quality of Dante's economic but dignified exposition. Again, the aural echoes and

⁴⁰ "All things whatsoever have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe resemble God."

enacts the sense: plosive consonants alternate, mingling the cool planetary “k”-sounds with the softer “s”, “qu”, “ch” sounds, to suggest the greater impressionability of the world to celestial influence, or creation, at this time. The synaesthetic effect also suggests the interaction between the dual realities of man and God.

In Achebe’s novel the council of elders may be taken to represent the integrity of the pre-colonial world. The narrator of *Things Fall Apart* explains:

most communal ceremonies took place at that time of the day, so that even when it was said that a ceremony would begin “after the midday meal” everyone understood that it would begin a long time later, when the sun’s heat had softened. (p.62)

Both texts make a point of identifying order, and therefore perfection and by extension, their respective gods, with an ineffable centre which may be identified but which cannot be the subject of their discourse – this can only be “near to”. In other words, language is an approximation. The Igbo community gathers together in the village ilo (a circular ground at the centre of the village) and speaks together in response to the promptings of the “ancestors”, representing the unity and order of the clan:

“*Umuofia kwenu!* Roared Evil Forest, facing the elders and grandees of the clan. “Yaa!” replied the thunderous crowd, then silence descended from the sky and swallowed the noise. Evil Forest began to speak and all the while he spoke everyone was silent. The eight other *egwugwu* were as still as statues. “We have heard both sides of the case,” said Evil Forest. “Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute. (p.66)

The purpose and effect of the ritual is restored peace in the community, a practical end like the Aristotelian ends of poetry: persuasion rather than the discovery of truth.

Both visions of order, if order may be taken to be synonymous with truth in these texts, depend on an element of displacement. Dante opens his representation of paradise with the disclaimer that it “cannot be set forth in words”. Ultimate truths cannot be inscribed in language: the “truth” is distance between man and God. The

⁴¹ “The lamp of the world rises on mortals by different entrances; but by that which joins four circles with three crosses it issues on a better course and in conjunction with better stars and tempers and stamps the wax of the world more after its own fashion.”

power of the *egwugwu*, similarly, is revealed to be dependent on a suspension of their human identities. The narrator explains:

These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, in the clan they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult of the clan. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.63)

Power and secrecy work together. The enabling feature of the ceremony is segregation: men from women, inside from outside, character from role – as signifier from signified. Achebe's "Morning" commentary can be felt here too: colonialism is enabled by pre-existent factors within the community in that it operates, as can be seen in the novel, by a process of systematic segregation. He is careful to imply that there is something beyond the unseen, although it is neither available nor useful to the community. It does not pertain to the ends of the ritual. As with the manifestation of the souls to Dante in the *Paradiso*, the "truth" revealed is modified so that it may be better assimilated. The point of the *egwugwu* is to enable order within the clan, to do this they speak as disembodied voices: "Uzowulu's body, I salute you." (p. 64) But the narrator explains:

Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might have also noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. (p.64)

Ultimate truth is not the same as the effective truth, the truth which is necessary to the well-being and survival of the community, although its possible existence is not denied by the author. The narrative of *Things Fall Apart* is explicitly concerned from the outset, as the title implies, with the existence of other, ultimately more powerful, truth-systems. Both Dante and Achebe conduct their "enquiry" in terms of ends, recognising the limitations of human knowledge in their very human art.

I have already suggested that *Paradiso* and *Things Fall Apart* describe ahistorical landscapes. I mean this in the sense that there is an emphasis on the physical/spatial rather than the temporal as the organising principle in both works.

Time is not described directly, in terms of day or hour but in terms of heat and light and the movements of the planets. It is not related in standard terms but in symbolic form, appropriate to a symbolic medium. *Things Fall Apart* talks of the “two or three moons after the harvest” (p.4), *Paradiso* describes “that which joins four circles with three crosses” (Canto I; 39) in suggesting ideal times of year. It is a typically medieval strategy to open a work with some indication of its nature in giving the season in which the action is carried out. In both of these works the first indication is the “ideal” time of year. In *Paradiso* this is the vernal equinox, which was considered to be the time of Creation. In *Things Fall Apart* this is Okonkwo’s father’s favourite time of year. Both, however, carry flaws: Creation also brings the memory of Original Sin and the loss of the first, earthly paradise because of the failure of language to inscribe truth; Okonkwo’s father is the source of Okonkwo’s fear of failure and all that pertains to him he remembers with a sense of shame. These fissures reveal underlying narratives, which determine the movements of the surface plot: Okonkwo is primarily motivated by his sense of inferiority, the pilgrim by his sense of transgression – for both the sense of inadequacy precedes them.⁴² The metaphors used to describe temporal location also suggest transitoriness, intimating that such moments – whether ideal or flawed - are neither fixed nor enduring. The spatial metaphor suggests constant motion, both in its physical representation (the planets) and in the terms it describes - the ideal and the fallen.

The sense of displacement these metaphors evoke results in a reliance on the less tangible senses of sight and sound rather than taste or touch. This is appropriate to a literary text, which may access the imagination via the former but not so easily the latter. That metaphors for variability depend on these senses, which classically occupy the higher levels of the hierarchy of the *Sensorium*, and so dominate sensory perspective, is appropriate. The written word has a visual and aural location but no taste or smell particular to itself. The fit of form to subject is a particularly Dantean concern, as seen in his writings. The *Paradiso*, as its opening line confesses, is predicated on the qualities of the visual and the phenomenon of light:

La gloria di colui che tutto move

⁴² Okonkwo is “shamed” by the legacy of his father (*Things Fall Apart*, p.3); the pilgrim, by Original Sin.

per l'universo penetra e risplende
 in una parte piu e meno altrove.
 Nel ciel che piu della sua luce prende
 fu'io [...] ⁴³ (*Paradiso* I; 1-5)

The simplifying variation into an *abab* rhyming scheme here, infused with the open vowel “e” ending of all four lines is facile - and suggests the inability of the poet to materially grasp his subject. It creates the sense of vagueness and distance which is the poet’s real concern. This is confirmed in its closing line, which associates the Christian God with the impossibly distant:

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. ⁴⁴ (*Paradiso* XXXIII; 145).

Light, and so vision, also determines community activity in the village of *Things Fall Apart*:

It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because he would hear. It was called a string [...]. On a moonlight night it would be different. (p.7)

An appeal to vision, a sense that can be stimulated by the written word is here associated with the signifying aspect of language – the snake cannot be called by its name but by a term which suggests it, the string suggesting also the signifying chain which allows an object to be substituted with a sign. That the serpent, the prime user of rhetoric as opposed to Adamic language, is taken as an example here is deliberate. Achebe’s writings are continually returning to a concept of Eden, or origin, or the “East” (as opposed to West), which is always already doubled and flawed.

The aural aspect is emphasised throughout the *Commedia* in the conceit of the *terza rima* structure. This is particular to the Italian language and its propensity to feminine rhyme patterns. ⁴⁵ The *terza rima* forms a linking chain between stanzas: the

⁴³ “The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less.”

⁴⁴ “The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

⁴⁵ It has not been successfully rendered into English.

first line rhymes with the third and the second with the fourth and the sixth, the fifth with the seventh and the ninth to create a three-line stanza with an aba, bcb, cdc rhyme pattern. Within this, ideas may carry over from one stanza to the next. Repetition is also used to emphasise certain points so that the power of the aural combines with that of the visual. For example, in the second canto of the *Paradiso*, which is concerned with presenting the structure of Heaven, the verb “vedere” (to see) is repeated three times to deepening significance:

accender ne dovria piu il disio
 di veder quella essenza in che si vede
 come nostra natura e Dio s' unio.
 Li si vedra cio che tenem per fede,
 Non dimostrato, ma fia per se noto
 A guisa del ver primo chel'uom crede.⁴⁶(*Paradiso* II; 41-5).

At each successive usage, the verb “to see” becomes more passive and the subject is further effaced.

The mystery of the experience is bound up with the nature of vision and is, according to Sinclair

at once unreal and undeniable, at once supernatural and natural to the new conditions; and the newness of it, realising what was not even conceivable before, seems to him a promise that the last mystery of the Word become flesh will at last be plain as faith passes into sight. For the whole ascent in the *Paradiso* is essentially a perfecting of the soul's vision, and this is indicated here in Dante's characteristic diction [...] In this first ascent the ultimate Beatific Vision is anticipated and the whole story is one. (Sinclair's commentary to the *Paradiso*, p.44)

The material and fictive intersect here: the scene is visible but not tangible, it is simultaneously both “real” and spectral. Dante is physically engulfed by the sphere of the moon, in which this structuring principle (word made flesh, mystery revealed through vision) is explained. It is this experience which suggests Dante's progress rather than the passage of time.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the use of Igbo, left untranslated in the text and the very deliberately stilted English which characterises this postcolonial classic, testify to the

⁴⁶ “it should the more kindle our desire to see His being in whom is seen how our nature was joined to God. There will be seen that which we held by faith, not demonstrated but known in itself, like the primal truth that man believes.”

power of the visual and aural in the written text. The reader does not have to understand the words in order to understand Achebe's intention. The aural aspect is emphasised in the importance of the drums in the ceremonies of Umuofia and the call "gome, gome, gome, gome" (p.62) of the gong, both of which create the atmosphere of tension and excitement necessary to the segregation of everyday life and people from their ceremonial and ritualistic counterparts. Defensive rather than explanative language may be seen as the very message of the text. Language operates across but also inscribes distance,⁴⁷ both geographical and metaphysical. Achebe's text reminds his English-speaking reader that the experience he describes has been lost by the very force of the language in which it is given, that language is never one with the object it describes but only an approximation. Okonkwo is presented from the outset as determining his passage in life, not simply accepting the terms of his inheritance (his father) but creating his own through very physical means. (The echoes of Eden are strong here: man not simply accepting the conditions created by his "father"/God, but striving for knowledge and advancement through the exercise of his free will.) He is introduced, as noted above, as the greatest wrestler in the land, a man who has made his reputation and fame through physical engagement:

He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough he would use his fists. (p.3)

Progress in these two texts is demonstrated to be a physical rather than temporal phenomenon. This truth seems to necessitate the loss of Eden.

Both the *Commedia* and *Things Fall Apart* are concerned with a journey originating in failure or loss inscribed in a language which draws attention to its artificial nature. *Paradiso* is the "origin" of the Dante-pilgrim's journey through hell and purgatory. Beatrice (from her seat in Paradise) sends Virgil to rescue Dante from the confusion and fear he faces in the valley at the beginning of the *Commedia*. *Paradiso*, figuratively and literally, is the source not only of Dante's vision but also of the poem. The opening canto of *Paradiso* is the one in which

⁴⁷ Dante's synthetic vernacular, covering many different dialects spoken across the present Italy; in Dante's time, only a loosely-associated group of regions.

For the first time in our literature the name of poet was used [by Dante] for a writer of vernacular verse a title that was reserved solely for the Greeks and the Latins, while modern writers were merely rhymers. (G. Mazzoni, quoted by Sinclair, p.28)

The *Paradiso* is self-consciously the source of modern vernacular poetry. Achebe's alignment with this text, via his allusions to the Christian tradition - given his concern with language and its relation to power-structures - is no surprise. Both Dante and Achebe produced their texts under conditions of Empire, and were intensely concerned with the nature of Empire (although for very different reasons).

The Holy Roman Empire, together with the Papacy, determined not only the conditions under which poetry could operate and be received for the medieval poet but also the pattern of reclaiming a pagan past to further a later project as well as the writing of this past in terms of the present.⁴⁸ Charles Till Davis comments: "the memories of the past became [in Dante] a living part of the present." The source comes to emanate from the aftermath: the Dante-pilgrim is saved by an emissary from paradise, which is reached afterwards via several guides who in their spectral nature are able to transcend such boundaries. Dante appeals to Apollo - the pagan god of sun - which would seem transgressive from a contemporary perspective in such an overtly Christian text - to give him the power to articulate a vision of the Christian God (who has just been centrally identified with Light). As for Achebe, there is no "purity" to be found in representations of cultural innocence. Poetry, it seems, exists on a spectral plane which transcends linear time and can move simultaneously backwards and forwards in the pursuit of truth.

The writing of both texts implies at their very beginning their end. The paradisiacal landscape, or pre-colonial past given in *Things Fall Apart*, is achieved in a language which the colonials brought to Africa and which in fact "created" Nigeria as a nation, as Achebe points out in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*.⁴⁹ That Dante's poem was ever written suggests, at several levels, that he did not remain "lost": his

⁴⁸ Charles Till Davis *Dante and the Idea of Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

⁴⁹ "What are the factors which have conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa? Quite simply the reason is that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British [...] the fact remains that Nigeria was created by the British - for their own ends. Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before [...] Today it is one country." "Thoughts on the African Novel" in *Morning*, pp.49-54, p.57.

earthly vernacular insists that he returned to tell of his vision. Sources in *Paradiso* and *Things Fall Apart* are not originary points in time or space but a dialectic of movement inscribed within language for which language itself is the prime (primal) metaphor and exemplar.

This representation of origins as self-originary, has a precedent in the Bible. The word “paradise” comes from the Greek “around” and “shape”. The origin and end of the Bible, are of course the same and so the biblical story of beginnings concerns the generation of “form” and that this should be a cyclical process: the fruit which contains its own seed. The repetition of “And the evening and the morning” after each act of creation lends a rhythmic aspect to the telling. That it initiates with the communication that the earth was “without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” and goes on to report “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light”(I; 3) associates the act of Creation with its aural and visual presentation. Genesis may be seen to be a highly self-conscious and rhetorical text from its opening lines. Its concern, and therefore the concern of the western literary canon, may be seen to be with loss, a Lacanian concern I will discuss later.

Both the *Paradiso* and *Things Fall Apart* are structured around and within circular imagery. The same may be said for the entire *Commedia* but it is only in the *Paradiso* that the Dante-pilgrim enters “bodily” into the sphere - in the earlier *cantiche* the pilgrim is very separate in his physicality from the spirits and their sufferings. This is most evident towards the end of the *Inferno* as the Dante-pilgrim encounters Ugolino and Fra Alberigo:

E avvegna che, sicome d'un callo
per la freddura ciascuna sentimento
cessato avesse del mio viso stallo[...]
E io non lil'apersi;
ecortesia fa lui esser villano” (*Inferno* XXXIII, 100-50).⁵⁰

The Dante-pilgrim states explicitly that he will not interact with the figures presented to him, he is left “cold” by the sight of their suffering.

⁵⁰ “And although from the cold all feeling had left my face as in a callous [...] I did not open them for him; and it was a courtesy to be a churl to him.”

In *Things Fall Apart*, the villagers of Umuofia inhabit their own kinds of spheres in the sense of each family's compound being separated by an earth wall and each wife having her own circular hut:

His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind his *obi*. (p.10)

All the villagers live in spherical structures within which stories are told and passed down from generation to generation, children are “made” and food is prepared and eaten – in short they are the centres of the villagers lives. Village life also organises itself around the “ilo” or village playground, a circular area in which the community meets to confer with its elders, to discuss and to play. The source of both knowledge and pleasure in Achebe's novel is a space which is actually an absence.

The *Commedia* ends each *cantica*, as I have already observed, with the world “stelle” (stars), referring each apparent ending to another, in a cyclical movement, as well as to bodies which are distant and mysterious to the confines of a poem written in a very “earthly” language. The concern with repetition and distance is heightened in *Paradiso*, the opening of which disclaims authorial power:

Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda:
 forse di retro a me con miglior voci
 Si preghera perche Cirra risponda (*Paradiso* I; 34-6).⁵¹

The disclaimer is further underlined by the fact that Cyrrha is the second peak of Parnassus regarded as sacred to Apollo who has already been called upon for inspiration as a result of the “fault and shame of human wills.” (30) The *cantica* ends with another disclaimer that returns the pilgrim and reader to the very beginning – creating a circular narrative in which there is neither beginning nor end:

Veder volea come si convene
 L' imago al cerchio e come vi s' indova;
 Ma non eran da cio le proprie penne:
 Se non che la mia mente fu percorsa

⁵¹ “A great flame follows a little spark. Perhaps after me prayer will be made with better words so that Cyrrha may respond.”

Da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
 All'alta fantasia qui manco possa;
 Ma gia volgeva il mio disio e'l velle,
 Si come rota ch'igualmente e mossa,
 L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. (*Paradiso* XXXIII; 36-45).⁵²

The association of representations of truth with movement is pervasive. The epigraph of *Things Fall Apart* with its insistence on the inevitable cycling of history rather than progression in its image of the gyre is again, in this story of non-originary origins, emphatic of the mystery at the source of man's history. The ending of the novel reveals History to be just another construct and a specious one at that. The reduction of this subtle and involving discourse on origin to "interesting reading" by the District Commissioner,⁵³ strengthens rather than undermines the pathos of Okonkwo's end. Okonkwo has "killed a messenger" of the court, though the pathos we feel at the close of the novel is testament to the fact that he has not thereby killed the "message". Truth in these texts has never been understood to reside in language but rather in its significations: truth is a process mirrored in but not contained within language. Okonkwo's silent protest, his strangled body is, arguably, his most eloquent moment.

Both texts concern journeys defined in spatial rather than temporal terms. The structure of the *Commedia* echoes Christ's salvation of the world: a three-day harrowing of hell followed by the resurrection and ascent into heaven. This is the source of the physical emphasis of *Paradiso*: God, the word, is made flesh. The priestess Chielo of *Things Fall Apart* renews the life of Okonkwo's sickly but favourite child, Ezinma, suspected of being a manifestation of the evil ogbanje spirit, by taking her on a circuitous tour of all the villages of the clan by night. She emerges from the cave at day-break with a cured child. The temporal aspect is symbolic – light signifying new life - but it is the physical enactment of the journey which saves. This is a function of the fact that these paradises are constructed in terms of the

⁵² "I wished to see how the image was fitted to the circle and how it has its place there; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, had not my mind been smitten by a flash wherein came its wish. Here power failed the high phantasy; but now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were resolved by the love that moves the sun and the other stars."

⁵³ "The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details." p.148.

protagonist's own experience: they relate to physical beings (the reader as well as the author). Beatrice explains to the Dante-pilgrim the nature of what he sees, and it is at several levels related to his own perspective rather than to an objective reality⁵⁴ – starting with the fact that she herself is his childhood love: a symbol of his love, rather than the “true” Bice – her real name - Portinari, is his guide. She is not only dead, but also fictitious. *Things Fall Apart* opens with a description of the self-willed nature of Okonkwo's character and early on develops a theory of chi – or personal god - which enforces the sense of a “self-made” man. Okwonkwo is not only clearly living in an Igbo-speaking environment but manifestly silenced by the very language (English) which has “constructed” him; in terms of this novel and the colonialism which drives him to his fate. Language is clearly a means only to a certain kind of truth which is demarcated in the opening lines of both texts. For both Dante and Achebe as well as in the reading of *Genesis* given above, this is that absolute Truth can only be achieved through a kind of death. Fixity, in human terms (these are language itself), is irrevocably bound to original loss.

The means to paradise - the location of truth - are physical in these texts but also spectral. In other words, they are ambivalent, or double. A spectre has form but no body, both does and does not exist at a material plane. Beatrice both was, and no longer (even in the poem's setting) is, a living being. Neither is the priestess Chielo of *Things Fall Apart*.⁵⁵ They are both constructions of the texts, and more subtly, also of those they are meant to guide. This duality suggests the allegorical model described earlier in which conflicting truths may co-exist. That both of these figures are female, and necessarily so – one is the object of love of a male protagonist, the other a human representative of the feminine-characterised earth - returns us to the original paradise from which this discussion initiated. In Eden, Eve is the means of passage to mortality both metaphorically and physically; the second is a result of the first and is her punishment - the name Eve is related to the Hebrew verb “to be”. She also represents the journey between the origins of language: naming, and its end-point: rhetoric. Both of these figures are essentially sublimated in their functions of

⁵⁴ “It is necessary to speak thus to your faculty, since only from sense-perception does it grasp that which it then makes fit for the intellect.” *Paradiso* IV; 40-3.

⁵⁵ “Ezinma started to cry. She was used to Chielo calling her “my daughter”. But it was a different Chielo she now saw in the yellow half-light.” p.71

bearing the truth. In becoming the messenger, they become spectral. In Achebe's later novel, *The Anthills of the Savannah*,⁵⁶ a female protagonist, (significantly, an English Literature graduate), is the message-bearer for a Minister of Information forced into hiding. He is the man identified to be in possession of "all the words"⁵⁷ in a corrupt third world regime. And yet this figure is doubly cowed: he cannot be explicit – he must remain in disguise and obscurity – and he is dependent on a woman for his safe-keeping. Her name is Beatrice, but she is known by her lover – the same minister – as the priestess/prophetess and so is explicitly linked to the Chielo figure of Achebe's earlier *Things Fall Apart*.⁵⁸ In a sense, the female becomes the "keeper" of language: in her the sources of language and life converge. She has a double identity in these texts: both real and fictional; everyday and in terms of her role. She is the means to new life: her body can literally carry two – as the figure of Elewa, the mother of Ikem's child, emphasises. It would seem that Achebe's alignment with the *Paradiso* is more conscious and direct than hitherto appeared. Truth, as language, in these texts is multivalent, it transcends its origin and exists in a dialectic between the material and immaterial. The feminine principle of law in *Things Fall Apart*⁵⁹ and Dante's identification of himself as a vessel, relate to Eve's discovery in the Garden of Eden: language is the means to life but also to death.

⁵⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The Anthills of the Savannah* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987).

⁵⁷ "But Your Excellency, if I may – erm - crave your indulgence – erm – Your Excellency's indulgence – and – erm – put in a word for the Honourable Commissioner? [...] the Honorable Commissioner for Information." There is a long and baffled silence. Then His Excellency who, I should admit, is extremely good at such times says:

"He doesn't need a word from you. Remember, he owns all the words in this country – newspapers, radio and television stations..." *The Anthills of the Savannah*, p.6

⁵⁸ "You called me a priestess. No a prophetess, I think[...]As a matter of fact I do sometimes feel like Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves." *The Anthills of the Savannah*, p.114

⁵⁹ Atrocities, in this novel, are those acts which go against the earth, and for which the earth must be appeased.

Chapter Four

Feminine figures: language and magic

The figure of woman, in her capacity for doubleness, provides a central means to otherness in these texts. The figurative aspect of the female subject in these writings will be discussed here.¹ If metaphor may be seen as the single unit of allegory at the level of language – metaphor as allegory in miniature – then Julia Kristeva’s discussion articulates the “space” which allegory and the figure of woman offer to postcolonial and to medieval writers:

Metaphoricalness consequently appears to me as the utterance not only of being as One and acting, but rather, or even on the contrary, as the indication of uncertainty concerning the reference. *Being like* is not only *being* and *nonbeing*, it is also a longing for *unbeing*.²

In other words, the representation of one thing by means of another not only aligns the two subjects but also implies their difference.

Jacques Derrida emphasises the range and limitations of metaphoricity:

plus de metalangage, plus de metalinguistique, donc plus de meta-rhetorique, plus de metaphysique. Toujours une metaphore de plus au moment ou la metaphore se retire en evasant ses limites.³

The French “plus de” means both “more than” and “no more”. His repeated use of it here enacts the doubleness of metaphoricity and suggests it to be characteristic of language in general. This is Derrida’s “logic of contamination”: the metaphorical

¹ Levi-Strauss comments on the relation between real women and their signification within the signing system from an anthropological perspective:

“Marriage rules and kinship systems function as a sort of language that is to say a set of operations designed to ensure, between individuals and groups, a certain type of communication. The fact that the “message” would here be constituted by the *women of the group* who *circulate* between class, lineages or families (and not, as in the case of language itself, by the *words of the group* circulating between individuals) in no way alters the fact that the phenomenon considered in the two cases is identically the same.” (Claude Levi-Strauss *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), p.69, this translation by Edmund Leach in *Levi-Strauss* (London: Collins, 1970), p.110.

² Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (NY: Columbia UP, 1987), p.271.

nature of language - its doubleness - problematises the terms of binary opposition, the real and the representation, the “proper” and the “figuration”. Derrida discusses this insufficiency of the metaphor as the “corpse” haunting “the (last supper) scene of language.”⁴ The metaphor can never be fully present for “If there were only one possible metaphor [...] there would be no more true metaphor but only, through the one true metaphor, the assured legibility of the proper.”⁵ In the *Commedia* and *Things Fall Apart* both “legibility” and the “proper” as singular phenomena are systematically undermined. The forms of these texts, the language(s) they employ as well as their central characters, are marked by a relentless polyvalency. I will suggest, in this chapter, that this is a specifically similar polyvalency based on the specifically similar use of the feminine motif.

Both medieval and postcolonial writing, as discussed earlier, are engaged with the relationship of periphery and centre, in other words, with a sense of being distant from a “source”. These texts probe the possibility/impossibility of communion between the two, for the reasons discussed earlier. The difficulty with the representation of ultimate difference is summarised by Derrida:

The problem in a nut- or egg-shell, is that the moment of systematic constitution is necessarily one of external intervention, producing an inside which must thereafter efface its outside in order to maintain its identity.⁶

Consequent to the period of the Holy Roman Empire, poetry was required to provide its own defence. A significant portion of its content as well as style would, of necessity, be engaged in self-justification. *Poesia*, as we have already seen, was considered to bear the least resemblance to “reality”. Both the accusation and defence of poetry were drawn from classical philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle respectively. The absorption of classical writings into Christian doctrine, may, as I have discussed, be identified as a highly literary – in modern terms – practice. Derrida notes that “historically, the problem of the constitutive outside has been

³ quoted by Marian Hobson in *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London and NY: Routledge, 1998), p.209.

⁴ Jacques Derrida *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p.8.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p.255.

⁶ Paul Bowman, “Conference Report: Politics, Friendship and “democracy to come”: Jacques Derrida’s Politics of Friendship”, *Parallax*, 4.3 (1998), pp.159-160, p.160.

solved by the death or departure of the originary force.”⁷ It would seem that the very “distance” of classical writings from the medieval world is what legitimises them, and that metaphorically as well as very literally, this is what justifies the use of “lies” more generally. Presence, for medieval poets, is very clearly predicated on absence.

The “speaking otherwise” of postcolonial writing – both of and by a cultural other, as well as in an-other way (the innovations of language which are generated by this) – suggests the genre shares much with medieval writing. Both seem to speak, quite literally, of other terms. “Medieval” comes from the latin *medium aevum* meaning “middle age”, implying both earlier and later ages – the Ancient and the Modern. The term *postcolonial* is, of course, a contradiction in itself. It engenders the colonial in its very attempt to progress beyond the experience and results in the sense of “aftermath” described by Derrida. To describe language as being allegorical in nature suggests that it gives a “narrative description of a subject under the guise of another having similarities to it.”⁸ The terms “medieval” and “postcolonial” describe their relation to other terms – those immediately preceding and coming after the periods they only manage to allude to – rather than something in themselves. They are also terms coined by “others” to the phenomena they describe: Dante would have considered himself “modern” as opposed to “classical”, and the postcolonial writer, particularly if writing in English, would see him or herself as a contemporary writer.

The categories of “medieval” and “postcolonial” are created at a remove, spatially, temporally or both, from the activities they attempt to cohere. The reasons for this “coherence”, whether political or historical, may be seen to influence what is now understood by these terms. They do not offer “windows onto worlds” but may be considered perspectival. Language, in these cases, is not synonymous with the thing it describes but rather with what is “other” to it and how this other constructs it. The metaphorical/allegorical nature of language is particularly apparent in these texts because of the historio-political contexts that determined their production. This is a sense of displacement, or exile that comes from being at the periphery of a world-view but also geographically distant from the centres of power. One may be distant from God and the other from government, but the writers of these two genres may be seen to have a comparable sense of exile. The medieval writer has been banished

⁷ quoted by Paul Bowman, *Ibid.*

from Eden and the postcolonial writer from the “paradise” of cultural innocence. Both, in essence, are coming to terms with narratives of History and are centrally concerned with the process of its construction.

That the terms “medieval” and “postcolonial” are so overtly constructed from other terms creates a narrative of etymology - a “tale, story, recital of facts”⁹ - which suggests that even in the simplest employment of language (its nominative function) we engage in a process which is part construction, part information but always some kind of “utterance” in the Kristevan sense given above. According to Derrida it is speech more so than writing that uncovers the problematical nature of language. Its spontaneous, unfixed nature highlights the instability and metaphorical nature of language. Speech, in other words, reveals language to be other than simply the literal, and so reveals its persuasive, constitutive power:

If one were justified in trying to capture it in categories that are subsequent to and dependent upon the history thus opened up, categories arising precisely *in the aftermath of decision*, one would have to speak of the “irrationality of living *logos*, of its spell-binding powers of enchantment, mesmerising fascination, and alchemical transformation, which make it kin to witchcraft and magic. Sorcery (*goeteiai*), psychagogy, such are the “facts and acts” of speech, the most fearsome of *pharmaka*. In his *Ecomium of Helen*, Gorgias used these very words to qualify the power of speech.

“Sacred incantations sung with words (*hai gar entheoi dia logon epoidai*) are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for merging with opinion in the soul, the power of incantation is wont to beguile it (*ethelxe*) and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft (*goeteiai*)[...]”

Persuasive eloquence (*peitho*) is the power to break in, carry off, to seduce internally, to ravish invisibly. It is furtive force *per se*.¹⁰

Poetic language may be seen to have properties which however “temporarily articulating”,¹¹ surpass the limits of reason/reality. This is certainly the case in the texts investigated here in which the processes of language overcome the divisions of time and space. They allow access to an otherness belied in the terms of the texts themselves: Dante’s language is fallen, Achebe’s and Silko’s are foreign.

⁸ O.E.D: “allegory”.

⁹ O.E.D: “narrative”.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, from *Dissemination: The Pharmakon*, repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (NY: Norton and Company Inc, 2001), pp.1846-63, p.1862.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, from *Revolution in Poetic Language, Part I. The Semiotic and the Symbolic*, repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp.2169-79, p.2171.

Julia Kristeva argues for the corporeal origins of subjectivity and relates this to artistic practice:

What is nevertheless lost along the way are the other meanings of the predicative copula, notably the function it has to designate the acting being [...] The philosophical salvaging of analogy by Aristotle had the advantage of opening up the question of *being* as act [...] Certain Aristotelian expressions, moreover, state this rather clearly: "The metaphor signifies things in action" (*Rhetoric* III, II, 1411b, 24-5); Let us not forget that advantage [...] For such a dynamic will enlighten us concerning the significance of the other metaphor, the real one, the poetic one.¹²

She proposes a model of "dialogism" suggesting that a text contains language from more than one "world". For her, poetry consists of two forces competing for expression. The "Symbolic" is referential and systematic, dependent on social order and a non-functional separation between subject and object. The "Symbolic" is capable of existing independently from the referent. The "Semiotic", on the other hand, bears traces of the language user's own body and the mother's protolinguistic presence. The "music" of poetry is seen to arise out of this dimension.¹³ For Kristeva, all signification entails a dialectical interaction of the Symbolic and Semiotic – the discharge of pre-Oedipal instinctual energies and drives from within language, a location she terms the *chora* after Plato, meaning receptacle/womb:

The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e. it is not a sign); nor is it yet a signifier either; it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularisation, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm. [...] The theory of the subject proposed by the theory of the unconscious will allow us to read in this rhythmic space, which has no thesis and no position, the process by which significance is constituted.¹⁴

The Semiotic *chora* is mysterious, unintelligible and unsignifiable. It is the breaking-through of the Semiotic within the Symbolic which provides the impulse of poetic language.

It is the emphasis on "doubleness" in the significant female characters of these works that provides the means to "otherness" - to that which is outside

¹² Julia Kristeva *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.271

¹³ This reflects the Harmony of the Spheres in medieval theology.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva from *Revolution in Poetic Language: Part I. The Semiotic and the Symbolic*, repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp2169-2178, p.2170-71.

language. These central female figures are both spectral and physical beings: the “lost”, though real, Beatrice reappears as a spirit guide in the *Paradiso*, (the fictional) Chiello is “priestess of the hills and the caves” with fantastical night-time powers (as well as neighbour and second mother to Ezinma). Both figures are also associated with the workings of language, specifically, its non-informational aspect. Beatrice first appears in the section of the *Commedia* – terrestrial paradise – associated intensely with sound. In *Purgatorio* XXVII, just before passing into Eden, the Dante-pilgrim is informed that a wall of fire now stands between him and his love/desire (Beatrice). He must be purged of sin, however, in order to reach her. The implication is that this is the sin of lust which must be sublimated into a divine love. Beatrice is the focus here but it is the aural which acts as guide:

Guidavaci una voce che cantava
 di la; e noi, attenti pur a lei,
 venimmo fuor la ove si montava.
 “*Venite, benedicti Patris mei,*”
 sono dentro a un lume che li era,
 tal, che mi vines e guardar nol potei. *Purgatorio* XXVII, 55-60¹⁵

The sound emanates from “di la”, the “other side” where Beatrice awaits. Dante is led to his object of desire by the medium of sound, and the two - Beatrice and the song (with its promise of God) - are fused in this image of sound within light, which overwhelms him (the “light” may be understood to refer to the sublime image of Beatrice). The words are, appropriately, in Latin, and so at another level of remove from the audience as well as the body of the poem which is in Italian. That the “beatitude which is the sum of all beatitudes”¹⁶ - “*Venite, benedicti Patris mei*”- is given in Latin suggests that the invitation, although in the plural, is selective/elite: the musical appeal to the ear will have to lead where the content is not understood.

It is a singing voice that guides Dante to his new guide again implying that the pilgrim has difficulty in understanding his guide, though this does not prevent him from following her. The figure of Beatrice is intimately bound not to reason but to the senses. The trope of the “strada al dio” alludes to the fact that divinity is

¹⁵ “Guiding us was a voice that sang beyond, and giving all our heed to it we came forth where the ascent began. “*Venite, benedicti Patris mei,*” sounded within a light that was there, such that it overcame me and I could not look at it.” *Purgatorio* XXVII, 55-60.

accessed through real human feeling rather than simply by reason. Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio* XXVII) is introduced “cantando” and Leah and later Matilda – “cantando come donna innamorata” (XXIX, 1) - characterise the aural emphasis of the *Paradiso* and the displacement of pure reason by the effects of sound. Much is made here of the persuasive, effective ends of language rather than its informational or truth content. Dante can only be enticed to enter the agonising fire of purgation by the beauty of song. Language divorced of its content has the power to enchant and transform, suggesting that it is most powerful in its sensory effects.

The protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* are also explicitly led to their gods by the medium of sound/incantation rather than by reason:

a loud and high-pitched voice broke the outer silence of the night. It was Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, prophesying[...]once in a while Chielo was possessed by the spirit of her god[...]“*Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o-o,*” came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. “*Okwonkwo! Agbala ekene gio-o-o-o! Agbala cholu ifu ada ya Ezinmao-o-o-o!*”

At the mention of Ezinma’s name Ekwefi jerked her head sharply like an animal that had sniffed death in the air. Her heart jumped painfully within her. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.70.)

Achebe uses words he knows the majority of his audience will not understand. They are, specifically, Igbo words which are not necessarily understood even by Nigerians of another tribe. He uses them, however, to great effect, judging by the reaction to them by that other “reader”, the girl’s mother Ekwefi. She reacts *instinctively* to the mention of her daughter’s name -“like an animal” - afraid that its use in this context will mean for her the loss of another child. She has been subject to the fate of the *ogbanje*¹⁷ child many times over; the evocation of which is Achebe’s way of reminding his audience that they are at a great distance from the cultural and linguistic practices he describes. The sounds speak to her “mothers’ instinct”, not to her reason.

As a non-Igbo reader, however, the main import of these words is clear. The reader is told it is a “prophesy”. The names “Agbala”, “Okwonkwo” and “Ezinmao-o-o-o” are familiar, although this last in particular is distorted by the means of its

¹⁶ John D. Sinclair, commentary in *Purgatorio*, p.361.

¹⁷ “a changeling; a child who repeatedly dies and returns to its mother to be reborn”, “Glossary of Words and Phrases Used in the Text”, preface to *Things Fall Apart*, p.iv.

delivery. Like Ekwefi – although she would, presumably, understand the Igbo - the reader relies on instinct rather than reason. The incantatory repetition of the o-o-o and its evocation of lament, and the circularity the “o” images, links Agbala, Okonkwo and Ezinma together in an immediacy which suggests their fates are intertwined, and tragic, even though the reader cannot understand the prophecy itself.¹⁸ The reader is left - like Ekwefi in “the thick darkness”, and the Dante pilgrim in the blinding light - to follow “the direction of the voices” (TFA, p.72). In these texts the incantatory power of language is shown to lead where reason cannot.

Kristeva’s innovation with regard to post-structuralism – the relation of subjectivity to language – depends on her distinction between the energies that bring the text about, the “genotext” or Freud’s “latent dream content”, and the “phenotext” or “manifest content”- the linguistic product which results. She identifies a *sujet-en-proces*, the French *proces* indicating both “process” and “trial” so that the subject of the text is both “in process” and “on trial”. A text is composed of incompatible forces of constant change and constant judgement: “The subject both cannot and must present itself in stasis”. Okonkwo and the Dante-pilgrim are such *sujets*. Both present themselves, ultimately, in stasis, and not only in that they “exist” within linear printed texts. Okonkwo presents the reader (and his village peers) with the spectacle of his self-killed body. The Dante-pilgrim confesses his poetic impotence and human limitations in the closing lines of the *Commedia*. For both figures, a confrontation with the unsignifiable constitutes their final “utterance”.

These protagonists are both “on trial”, in several different ways, in these narratives. Okonkwo’s character is established in opposition to his father’s, and is judged, at least by himself, to be superior:

He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father [...] When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? [...] To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. (*Things Fall Apart*, pp.5-6)

¹⁸ See *Purgatorio* XXIII: “He that reads OMO in men’s faces might easily have made out the M there.”

He also undergoes several “trials” within the narrative, by the clan for crimes “against the earth goddess”¹⁹ and later, by the white man’s “court” for crimes against colonial authority.²⁰ He is judged from both within and without. There is no neutral space, no alternative position available to this *sujet* as every experience, every level of narrative is constituting the subject of the novel.

I have suggested that in this text, the process of colonialism starts from within: Okonkwo himself is a “self-made man”, he rejects his father’s example and heritage entirely and very manifestly brings his own power to bear on forming a new identity for himself. It comes as no surprise that it is his very power, his attempt to be “one of the lords of the clan”, that renders him, finally, powerless. Early on in the narrative it is disclosed that his father’s “love of talk[...]tried Okonkwo’s patience beyond words” (p.118), a figure of speech which is shown, at the end of the narrative, to take a physical manifestation – he is exiled as a result of “trial” severally. The banishment is initially from his father’s to his mother’s village and then from the earth itself – his self-killed body cannot be buried with his “ancestors” but must be taken to the Evil Forest where his father’s body was left. The pattern of self-rejection initiated by the rejection of his feminised father reaches its nemesis in the loss of the cult of “the earth goddess”, and replacement by Christianity. “Spoken” words are self-fulfilling in this novel centrally concerned with the disappearance of oral culture.

The Dante-pilgrim is closely watched, and mirrored, by his successive guides.²¹ The pilgrim’s location and guide, at any given point is subtly matched to the progress of his understanding as well as the “argomento” of the poem. The pagan poet, Virgil, leads the pilgrim through the godless underworld, defined by the lowest acts and most literal punishments (lowness and the literal being in the medieval

¹⁹ “The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who had committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. [...] And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender” *Things Fall Apart*, p.88.

²⁰ “We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen [...] I have decided that you will pay a fine of two hundred bags of cowries.” *Things Fall Apart*, p.137.

²¹ Different guides overlap at certain points. For example, Statius and Virgil, provide a matrix location where the characteristics of both are combined and separation into forward/backward motion is determined by the Dante-pilgrim’s own freewill.

hierarchy together with poetry almost indivisible). Virgil and Dante converse in the “veiled” manner of poetry because of their ultimate distance from God:

“Dimmi, maestro mio, dimmi, signore,”
 comincia’ io per volere esser certo
 di quella fede che vince ogni errore:
 “uscicci mai” alcuno, o per suo metro
 o per altrui, che poi fosse beato?”
 E quei, che ‘ntese il mio parlar coperto,
 rispuose: “Io era nuovo in questo stato,
 Quando ci vidi venire un possente,
 Con segno di vittoria coronato.”²²

It is proper to their location in Limbo that the name of Christ is not mentioned, as the first circle is constituted of “The Virtuous Heathen” who lived before the dawn of Christianity. Dante is drawing attention to his double role of writer and character – self-creator - in several ways here. He makes explicit reference to poetry in talking of “il mio parlar coperto” - his speech is directed to the universally recognised poet Virgil. He is also creating a sense of the possibility of his (impossible) journey by reminding the reader of Christ’s harrowing of hell, thus giving his own journey a precedent. That the relation of Christ’s journey is put into the mouth of Virgil, who as a “heathen” cannot know Christ, testifies at once to the power of the poet who may speak truth without knowledge and to Dante’s poetic ambition in being “in the same circle as/in conversation with”, through the *Commedia*, the greatest poets ever to have lived.

It is his internal progress, as Beatrice reminds the reader in the *Paradiso* (Canto IV), that propels him through the *Commedia*. This must be judged by his guide. His progress very literally forms the material of the poetry: he is simultaneously the subject of a flight through heaven /hell and their creator. The images become clearer, the language more precise, and the quality of the poetry changes, as the pilgrim’s consciousness sharpens. In *Paradiso* images of narrowness, steepness and fire, are replaced by those of light, water and space:

²²“Tell me my Master, tell me, sir,” I began, seeking to be assured of that faith which overcomes every doubt, “did ever anyone, either by his own merit or another’s, go out hence and come afterwards to bliss?”

And he, who understood my veiled speech replied: “I was new in this condition when I saw a mighty one come here, crowned with a sign of victory.” *Inferno* IV; ll.46-54.

Parev' a me che nube ne coprissi
 lucida, spessa, solida e pulita,
 quasi adamante che lo sol ferisse.
 Per entro se L'eterna margarita
 Ne ricevette, com'acqua recepe
 Raggio di luce permanando unita.²³

This image, symbolic of the pilgrim's bodily entrance in to the *Paradiso* - the *cantica* and the heavens - is, however, qualified by the important "Parev' a me" which suggests that this place is a state of mind *as well as* a physical object. Beatrice explains - two cantos later - that what he experiences is fit to his understanding rather than what "really" is. It is not an external mechanism that propels him but his reactions to the landscapes he encounters: he is repelled by the sights and smells of the *Inferno*, he "sleeps" up the steps of *Purgatorio*, and is mesmerised at the beauty he encounters in the *Paradiso*. All of these are evoked by the power of the poet's art. The poet and pilgrim of this piece are necessarily the same.

Both Dante and Okonkwo fail, necessarily according to Kristeva, in their final utterances. Kristeva identifies the "fantasy" of wholeness - Dante's divinity, Okonkwo's traditional culture - as a function of the obstacles to that wholeness, rather than something that is accessible beyond them. The source of the *chora*, the mother, is split into two, into an object of hate and one of desire. Thus the abject comes into existence - what the subject's consciousness has to expel or disregard in order to create the proper separation between subject and object. What is still unconsciously desired must be transformed into the undesirable/disgusting to sustain the fantasy of self-creation. In order to remain, or indeed become the subject of the poem (as well as to have, practically, been able to write it), Dante must forget his vision - his consciousness must "expel" the experience. The figure of Beatrice is gradually occluded by her very beauty and holiness until she disappears and is replaced by the very different (and rather less desirable) figure of St Bernard. Centrally, his object of desire, Beatrice, must be lost for a second time. Similarly, in order to "remain" the figure he has created and not revert to the "womanliness" he

²³ "It seemed to me that a cloud covered us, shining, dense and smooth, like a diamond that is smitten by the sun; the eternal pearl received us into itself, as water receives a ray of light and remains unbroken." *Paradiso* II; ll. 31-6.

detested in his father, Okonkwo must expel himself from the realm of the earth-goddess and commit suicide. Although this very act is performed in protest at the decimation of the goddess cult, it banishes his body from her presence both literally and metaphorically – he must be buried outside of her realm, like Unoka.

Language is the other *sujet* in these texts. It both is and is not fixed: its poetic function transgresses the thetic boundary of the Symbolic/Semiotic to offer polyvalent cultural meanings. In *Things Fall Apart* it simultaneously offers a critique of colonialism and performs a “colonisation” of a native experience whilst suggesting the metaphysical impossibility of retrieving any kind of past at all. The *Commedia* recounts the story of a man’s divine vision while denying the possibility of such communion between fallen men and urges instead personal communion with truth and integrity. In these texts, language sets out to do exactly what it claims it cannot do, but must, of necessity, try.

The previous chapter argued that representations of Paradise in these texts reveal it to be subject to a circular rather than linear dynamic. The sense is not that Paradise itself is always already lost but that it becomes corrupted in literature because language is, in different ways for these different genres, a fallen medium. One effect of this, as I shall investigate in the second half of this chapter, is the onus thus placed upon the writer. Gregg notes in her discussion of West Indian writing that: “a master-biographer sometimes reveals himself a necromancer.”²⁴ Both Dante and Achebe may be seen to be biographers in that they relate - with artistic licence - the lives of people who really lived and events that have historical credence.²⁵ The poet/writer takes on an almost shamanic/magical role, certainly one more closely aligned to the spectral than the material: a leap of imagination as well as faith is required in the overcoming of the limitations that these texts make explicit. This aspect of writing, especially in those genres so concerned with the fallibility of language, can be seen to be reflected in the figures/subjects they describe. In order to discuss this, I will introduce several texts from the Creole tradition. This tradition is

²⁴ Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p.104.

²⁵ Dante populates his afterworld, particularly the *Inferno* but also *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* with real figures from his past as well as famous historical figures. For example his own tutor, Brunetto Latini, is confined to the circle of Sodomites. Achebe’s description of the “mechanical horse” and murder of its rider (the first missionary to reach the Ibos) is also based on a true story.

specifically concerned with hybrid experience; of being even “originally” of several different indigenous worlds at once. The most significant and complex protagonists of these novels, again, are female.

I have suggested that it is the double nature of the female protagonists that embodies the paradox of the texts discussed so far. Kristeva implies that the distinctive aspects of poetic language are feminine in nature in that they transpire from the pre-Oedipal experience of the *Chora*. Both Chielo and Beatrice are severally identified with apparently meaningful though to some degree unintelligible language. Both are identified with the practice of incantation and effect mysterious transformations through these utterances. Both are to some degree spectral or inhuman. I suggest that it is the “space” which these figures offer, distinctively feminine in nature, which contains and “plays out” the tensions of *proces* in these texts. Hilary McD. Beckles argues:

The history of representations of women can be seen as the recreation of gendered political subjects, which allows us to redefine narrative history as the politics of a process by which power and knowledge are perpetually constituted.²⁶

Beckles chooses “woman” as the subject for his illustration of the objectifying processes of history and narrative. The very figure of woman is, it would seem, the epitome of Kristeva’s notion of *proces* and the constitutive dynamic the term’s dual meaning implies. If the paradisaical landscapes identified earlier can be associated with the female body, and Kristeva’s theory of *chora*, or the “space” of the female body, offering the possibility of poetic language, be seen to hold, then there is also an association of femininity with corruption. There is certainly a strong tradition of this in the Christian West, testified to by the proliferation of feminist theory.²⁷ The figure of woman was a powerful object of abjection – in the Kristevan sense of being denigrated because she was also desired - in both the middle ages and during the development of colonialism. It is also this doubleness, the bivalent perception of woman, that we see reflected in these texts. The middle ages are remembered for the witch-hunt as well as for the cult of the Virgin Mary. It is also

²⁶ Hilary McD. Beckles, *Centring Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999), p.xxi.

²⁷ There is no real “masculinist” theory to speak of - as there has been no political need for one.

possible to argue that the exploitation of the female body (in its capacity for reproduction) was the enabling factor in the growth of colonialism.

Milton's Eve, in his *Paradise Lost*, it may be argued, is tempted by Satan's promise of knowledge and power because she is allowed so little. Adam insists that she would be stronger by his side than alone, but this insistence (albeit on God's orders) on having her within sight is more ominous than at first it seems. He claims:

I from the influence of thy looks receive
Access in every virtue, in thy sight (IX; 310-11)²⁸

There is a power play inherent in the very act of representation. Adam repeatedly claims that Eve's fairness is testament to her goodness - that is, an aspect which he, though not she, can appreciate. That she is created from and for him, in conjunction with this, suggests acute narcissism. It may be argued that Milton uses the figure of woman to uncover the state of man's inner servitude (literally his self-servingness, as well as his unwillingness to question the authority of God). The vote of sympathy, in terms of poetry, clearly goes to Eve:

The Virgin Majesty of Eve
As one who loves, and some unkindness meets,
With sweet austere composure thus repli'd (IX; 270-3)

Milton demonstrates the power of re-presentation here. He furnishes her with the attributes of the mother of Christ and of the religion which both creates her and demonises her as the origin of sin. By renaming her, in his poem (albeit with her original biblical name, though in translation) he rewrites the story of *Genesis* in English - as well as performs an act of genesis, the creation of a new Eve - and the story of Sin. Milton demonstrates, through the figures of Adam and Eve, that truth is constituted, that it has a history and is not an origin in itself but is *written*. He does this through the original story of the creation of gender in the garden of Eden, which is telling for this discussion of the relevance of the question of gender to that of language. The inception of gender, it seems, is also the inception of loss. If

²⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1971).

postmodernism is the loss of the sense of centrality of the dominant culture,²⁹ and therefore is synonymous with postcolonialism, then the Garden of Eden is a central site.

The (female) protagonists of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Creole novel *I, Tituba* are both banished from their homelands as a consequence of marriage.³⁰ This is, arguably, the point at which they become “gendered”: they are required to take up a role and identity with regard to their spouses. Tituba is sold into slavery as a direct result of her desire to remain with her husband (a desire exploited by Susanna Endicott, who gives her little choice).³¹ Tituba resorts to the practice of “obeah” because she is wronged. The word “obeah” is derived from the noun “obi” and is East coast African for witchcraft, sorcery and fetishism. Antoinette, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also resorts to obeah as a desperate measure - an attempt to win back the affection of a neglectful husband:

Christophine, he does not love me, I think he hates me. He always sleeps in his dressing-room now and the servants know. If I get angry he is scornful and silent, sometimes he does not speak to me for hours and I cannot endure it any more, I cannot. (p.82)

Both John Indian, Tituba’s husband, and Antoinette’s husband are repelled by the knowledge of their wives’ inheritance - their mother’s identity (which has a significance to which I shall return) - and physically abandon them. The term “obeah” derives from the ancient Egyptian “ob” or “aub” meaning serpent.³² The centrality of this theme to two novels set in the idyllic – or paradisaical – landscapes of Jamaica and Barbados begins to take on a new resonance. Pere Labat’s recounting of the serpent cult in Africa supports this: the serpent, hidden “in a tree” would give prophecies and impart knowledge to the tribal king via a priest.³³ The emphases on

²⁹ “Postmodernism can best be defined as European culture’s awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world” Robert Young, *White Mythologies: White Mythologies and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.19

³⁰ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); Maryse Conde *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philson (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

³¹ This is an act of revenge by her husband’s mistress on whom Tituba casts a spell of sickness. Tituba is moved to this by Susanna’s accusation that Tituba’s mother killed a white man (she wounded the man who tried to rape her, and was hanged) and that she was subsequently brought up by “a certain Nago witch called Mama Yaya”. p.26.

³² H. J. Bell, *Obeah: Witchcraft in the West Indies* (London, 1889), p.6.

³³ *Obeah*, p.7

paradisical imagery, secret knowledge, and the serpent connect these texts at several levels.

Toni Morrison argues that “modern life begins with slavery”.³⁴ If we can take *modern* to mean the latest point in a series of points,³⁵ then it is a perspectively defined term. It is the moment of self-consciousness, the moment when a society or individual recognises his/her presence and agency. Milton’s version of Genesis is bound up with the experience of modernity. “Paradise” was lost because it was the site of slavery. Eve explains:

If this be our condition, thus to dwell
In narrow circuit strait’n’d by a Foe, [...]
How are we happy, still in fear of harm?
[...] Eden were no Eden thus expos’d.” (IX; 322-40).

The conditions of the fall are set up by Adam’s more real weakness, his lack of will: “best are all things as the will/ Of God ordained them...” In this, he denies his own as well as Eve’s free-will and creates the conditions of dissent which are then exploited, rather than created by, the serpent. Both John Indian and Antoinette’s husband suffer from a distinct lack of will which leads to their imprisonment, as well as that of their wives: John Indian remains a slave though his mistress has freed all the others, and Antoinette’s husband takes part in a marriage on the orders of his father, rather than of his own volition. Both Tituba and Antoinette find slavery (actual or professed psychological: Antoinette’s desire for her estranged husband) to be coterminous with the state of “presence”, or adulthood which may be identified (in some sense) as sexual maturity.

Morrison goes on to argue:

From a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with “postmodern” problems in the nineteenth century and earlier [...] certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.³⁶

³⁴ Toni Morrison, “Living Memory”, in *City Limits* (31 Mar.-7 Apr. 1988), pp.10-11, p.11

³⁵ from Latin “modo” indicating “just now”.

³⁶ *City Limits*, p.11.

The slave-trade had a great investment in the question of gender. In *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*³⁷, it is argued that black females in eighteenth century representations were not considered “women” on the basis that they did not nourish or care for young and were seen not to demonstrate loyalty or subservience to a male spouse. The middle class white spouses of the colonists “existed” in contrast to this. (That their privileged lifestyles also existed as a result of the pitiless labour to which their black counterparts were subjected, was not represented - the conjecture that modern life begins with slavery takes on a further significance here.)³⁸

This supports the reading of *Paradise Lost* given above and the relations of knowledge, power and gender in Rhys and Conde. Beckles continues:

The slave mode of production by virtue of placing the black woman’s “inner world” - her fertility, sexuality and maternity - on the market as capital assets, produced in them a “natural” propensity to resist and to refuse as a part of a basic self protective and survival response. (p.xxxii)

As Tituba’s self-induced miscarriage illustrates, these women consciously resisted the propagation of their state:

There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave. It is little more than the expulsion of an innocent baby who will have no chance to change its fate, into a world of slavery and abjection. [...] Throughout my childhood I had heard slaves exchange formulas for potions, baths and injections that sterilise the womb forever and turn it into a scarlet shroud. (p.50)

The practice of obeah can be understood in part to be a practice of resistance. As well as being used to reconstitute another’s identity, it can also be used, from within, to doctor the individual’s vulnerability to tyranny. Woman’s control of her fertility is symbolic of the postcolonial writer’s control over language.

The constitution and exploitation of gender was a primary factor in the growth of colonialism. Most slaves in West Africa from 1500-1800 were female:

³⁷ Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999).

³⁸ See Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*: “The various offerings of the world appear [...] And Betty’s praised for labours not her own.” ll.130-8. *Poems*, selected by Douglas Grant (London: Penguin 1985).

the specific focus on the female in the conception, design and reproduction of these slave systems was the result of discernible social and managerial imperatives (Beckles, p.3)

However, she in whom the seeds of slavery were planted gave rise also to revolt: “woman” in African social legacy was culturally invested with political leadership. As in *Paradise Lost*, it is the condition of weakness which stimulates the regaining of freedom. This is seen in the stimulus to revolution Imoinda in *Orinooko* provokes in her growing pregnancy (though her pregnancy begun in slavery is, symbolically as well as actually, the reason for the rebellion’s failure - her child conceived in slavery must remain a slave).³⁹ This may also be the reason for Tituba’s late and unexpected pregnancy when she returns, finally, as a free woman to Barbados; again the female “figure” becomes a focus for rebellion.

Beckles implies, though not in so many words, that the experience of postmodernism was the case for all - not just black - women from an early stage. The analysis of Milton’s treatment of Eve – archetypal/original woman - supports this. While African propertied men demanded wives and concubines who were kinless/ displaced so that their alienated-ness deemed them suitable for marketable labour, in the late seventeenth century English planters turned from an emphasis on class to gender so that white women were no longer allowed to work in sugar plantation labour groups. Thousands of female indentured servants had been imported from Europe between 1624-1680 to work on the plantations alongside black and white counterparts of both sexes. This was stopped, he argues, because of the social needs of patriarchy to idealise and promote white woman as symbolic of white supremacy, moral authority and sexual purity. White women were, therefore, socially constituted as much as black women. Antoinette and her mother, as white Creoles, experience the effects of societal pressure and are essentially treated as commodities both by black and white society according to their fortunes.⁴⁰ Tia, the black girl who appears after the “white cockroach” incident⁴¹ and disappears after

³⁹ Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* ed. K.A. Say (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977).

⁴⁰ “ In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.40.

⁴¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.23.

accusing her of not being a “real” white with gold money⁴² reappears at the burning of Coulibri to throw a stone directly at her namesake and at the very end of the narrative as Antoinette leaps, presumably, to her death. The laws of race and privilege do not allow the two girls to be truly friends⁴³ - they are mutually annihilating - but one depends on the other for existence. Hester, the young white woman imprisoned with Tituba for adultery - the ultimate white woman’s crime - is convinced that her unborn child is a girl and so commits suicide. It is a parallel act to Tituba’s abortion. It is no coincidence that she refers Tituba to *Paradise Lost*. As a liberally educated woman, one who possesses another kind of “forbidden” (to women) knowledge, she is painfully aware of woman’s fate.⁴⁴

Beckles draws attention to the fact that masculinity was also abused under slavery and that the question of gender was generally problematic for the colonists. The Caribbean became the site of an encounter between two contradictory gender orders; the European and the African. In Africa, women were valued above all as workers: the more labour-intensive, less desirable, low status work was constituted as women’s work, although white managers considered black men best equipped for the physical task of frontier plantation. They imposed a work and ideological regime counter to black gender identity:

The European male held clear views with regard to gender and the sexual division of labour that differed from those of the African male; both sets of men however, shared many common gender values and attitudes with regard to masculinity and the relation of “woman” to patriarchal power. (Beckles, p.7)

⁴² “Real white people, they got gold money”, p.24.

⁴³ “The Rhys text displays its own contradictions, offering its own internal critique” Gregg argues that the narrative of friendship is undermined by the textual, which insists upon racial divisions. Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), p.89.

⁴⁴ “I’d like to write a book, but alas, women don’t write books! Only men bore us with their prose. I make an exception for certain poets. Have you read Milton, Tituba? Oh I forgot you don’t know how to read. *Paradise Lost*, Tituba, a marvel of its kind... Yes I’d like to write a book where I’d describe a model society governed and run by women! We would give our names to our children, we would raise them alone...”

I interrupted her, poking fun: “We couldn’t make them alone, even so!”

“Alas no,” She said sadly. “Those abominable brutes would have to share in a fleeting moment”

“Not too short a moment,” I teased. “I like to take my time”.

She ended up laughing and drew me close to her.

“You’re too fond of love, Tituba! I’ll never make a feminist out of you!” (p.101)

The irony of the Abolitionist movement which led, eventually, to the state now known as postcolonialism, was that it sought to undermine slavery on the basis of a re-evaluation of gender. For the first time, black women were considered the fairer sex - and this was a weakness. Slave owners claimed to promote an egalitarian ideology - black women were not recognised as inferior or subordinate to black men, as demonstrated by labour productivity, and there was no intention of weakening the dominant patriarchy to which black men also subscribed and were partially empowered:

The subsequent conceptual imprisonment of the black woman within a restructured gender representation that promoted notions of difference and inferiority had the effect of supporting her claim to legal emancipation but at the same time deepening her victimisation within the gender order. Slave owners, however, while promoting gender egalitarianism under the whip, sought to defeminise her in this way by inferring a sameness with males. (Beckles, p.17)

The social construction of gender is seen to leave woman prey to dominant ideologies. If postmodernism is coterminous with the discovery of other realities, gender seems to be the prime subject of reconstruction.

Gregg, in her discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, observes:

the husband is as much enchanted by the “obeah” of European supremacy as Antoinette is by a belief in the cultural practices she attributes to Christophine. (Gregg, p.105).

The husband’s hypocrisy is highlighted by his treatment of Amelie which is subsequent to his criticism of the behaviour of the colonialists.⁴⁵ His appearance at the ruined priest’s house - a place of spirits and obeah⁴⁶ - when under psychological stress, further links him with this theme. The effect of his broken and confused narrative towards the end of the novel suggests that it is *he* who is suffering the insanity he inscribes onto Antoinette by calling her “Bertha” – another instance of

This could be an analysis of Milton in its suggestion that Eve actually provides the will rather than the sin which initiates society.

⁴⁵ He sleeps with the mulatto girl in the room next to where his wife is sleeping, and then pays her off.

⁴⁶ “Who lived in that house?”

“They say a priest. Pere Lillievre. He lived there a long time ago.”

“A child passed,” I said. “She seemed very frightened when she saw me. Is there something wrong about the place?” He shrugged his shoulders.

obeah. Evans-Pritchard observes that “witchcraft is thought to be an innate - sometimes inherited, sometimes acquired - characteristic whereas sorcery implies the use of rites, spells and material objects and is believed to be learnt.”⁴⁷ Brain explains: “there does seem to be a tendency to ascribe witchcraft to women and sorcery to men, the difference between ascribed and achieved status.”⁴⁸ - He also claims that sorcery is more powerful.

Tituba is, arguably, subjected to “sorcery” in the witch-hunt of the puritanical Salem community: she is violated with a sharpened stick by the (respectable) elders of this community and then subjected to the “rite”/trial of a public interrogation, where the conclusion is foregone. Antoinette’s husband, also in a position of power over her, practices a virulent, and seemingly effective, strain of sorcery in his casting of her as *Jane Eyre*’s mad Creole.⁴⁹ Lemert observes “in all cases the [anti-sorcery] movements had a mystical religious quality in the sense that some form of spiritual experience and mystical communication mediated their origin and subsequent operation. These ranged from divination to visions and conversations with God”⁵⁰ Tituba is accused by the fits the children have in her presence, claiming to be “possessed”(which is taken very seriously in this very “religious” community), and Antoinette’s husband seems to be “inspired” by his visits to the ruined house/obeah-site in the forest. As Adam “created” the weaker Eve in order to fall - his constructions and representations of her resulted in her need for other knowledge and power - the dominant powers in these works have “created” a version of the other against which to formulate themselves.

Obeah, in these two postcolonial texts, appears as the abject expression of the other - it is the power to which both women turn when abused by the dominant patriarchy. It is also revealed to be a practice to whose existence and power the accusers subscribe far more assiduously than the accused. Tituba is advised by Hester (an “insider” to the culture: both white and a minister’s daughter - “trust a

“Is there a ghost, a zombie there?” I persisted.” *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.79.

⁴⁷ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: O.U.P, 1937), pp.9-10.

⁴⁸ Witchcraft in Africa: A Hardy Perennial”, James L. Brain in *Colonialism and Change*, ed. Owusu, (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) pp.179-201, p.185.

⁴⁹ “Bertha is not my name”, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.115.

⁵⁰ Edwin M. Lemert, *The Trouble With Evil: Social Control at the Edge of Morality* (Albany: State University of N.Y. Press, 1997), p.90.

minister's daughter to know a thing or two about Satan !"p.99) to confess, to "give them their money's worth" (p.99). She does, and is acquitted and lives to witness (from the safe remove of the prison-house) the decimation of an entire community as everyone in turn is accused, and the accusers become the condemned.

Brain's argument is that witchcraft flourishes in advanced societies and that it is a symptom of the irreconcilable difference between the sexes, a binarism that is a result of evolutionary advantage in the division of labour:

witchcraft is in fact associated with quarrelling, not with naked midnight revels or keeping pet snakes. It is malice and hatred, and not sinister mystical powers, that disrupt the small community and that the villagers want to drive out, not foreseeing that they must endlessly return.⁵¹

In Bantu thought, individuals are not discrete entities. In their philosophy, all things have vital force, affording an explanation for witchcraft:

[Bantu thought] contains the idea of continual conjunction of the vital forces of all things that are in significant social interaction [...] if a person loves, he increases the vital force of the one he loves or at least does not cause it to decrease. But if he hates he decreases the vital force of the one he hates so that ultimately the hate can kill the flesh, though not the vital force which continues to exist in the ancestral world exerting force on its descendants.⁵²

This is close to the heart of postmodern thought, in its sense of the relativity of terms and the mutually-constructive nature of meaning. In postmodern theory, as in the medieval and postcolonial writing discussed, identities are created by the projections of others: both Tituba and Antoinette find themselves reconstructed by the desires and experiences of others. Beatrice and Chielo, similarly, are figures created by the forces of others' desires. Both postmodernism and postcolonialism can be considered to be the result of confrontation. For the medieval poet, writing occurs at the interface of the "impossible"; for the postcolonial writer it is at the absolute boundary of different experience. A type of obeah is emblematic of medievalism and postcolonialism, as well as of gender.

⁵¹ Lucy Mair *Witchcraft* (New York: World University Library, 1969), p.152.

⁵² H.K. Schneider, "The Lion-men of Singida - A Reappraisal", *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 58 (1962), p. 125.

Lucy Mair suggests that people may admit to witchcraft for inner reasons, even if innocent of its practises:

The witchcraft explanation rests on the boundless possibilities of sheer human malevolence: it is because we know the depths of our own hearts (Mair, p.13).

We have seen that language, in the medieval and postcolonial texts discussed, allows for the loves and hates of its speakers: its terms are elastic and may “bend”. If obeah is a phenomenon parallel to the divisions of gender - the division of the sexes - it is an expression of difference and resistance. But as Tituba’s bowl of water symbolises (“To try and console myself I used a remedy. I filled a bowl with water, which I placed near the window so that I could look at it while I busied myself in the kitchen and imagine my Barbados.” p. 62.), obeah - and the writings of postcolonialism/medievalism - is about the projection of worlds rather than their true nature. The question of gender, may reveal aspects of the constructed-ness of reality where medieval and postcolonial writing may be tempted to occlude their own limitations.⁵³

There is a history of the association between letters and female charms. The modern term “glamour” is an eighteenth century variation of grammar and signifies “magic, enchantment, delusive or alluring beauty or charm (esp. feminine), physical attractiveness” and “glamorousness” meaning “to affect with glamour, to bewitch, enchant.”⁵⁴ The term “grammar” is related to the medieval English “gramayre” meaning “learning, specifically, of Magic/necromancy”.⁵⁵ The association of these - letters and the feminine - with magic would seem to be even older. We have seen that obeah - a “kind of sorcery practised by Negroes[sic] esp. in W. Indies⁵⁶ - is an important theme in Jean Rhys’s postcolonial novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Oubois is the name also of the royal serpent emblem of the sun which is the ancient oracular deity of Africa and so may be seen to be related to the physical act of enunciation “speech” and the “pharmaka” powers described by Derrida.

⁵³ Dante’s self-alignment with Virgil; Achebe’s deeply affecting, though “foreign”, narrative.

⁵⁴ O.E.D “glamour”, “glamorousness”.

⁵⁵ Ibid. “gramayre”, “grammar”.

⁵⁶ O.E.D. “obeah”.

Names play a significant role in this novel. The protagonist's husband insists on calling her "Annette", prefiguring the fate she will share with her mother, and frequently distorts her name to his own ends in a seemingly mindless way: "marionette. Antoinetta". Antoinette reminds her husband several times of the power invested in a name:

Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too.⁵⁷

Gregg observes that the objectification of others demands first and foremost an objectification of the self, and the evidence in the text is that the processes of obeah tend to reflect the intentions of the inquirer – the ends of the "magic" bear the traces of their source.⁵⁸ In this, obeah may be likened to Kristeva's explanation of "poetic language" which also bears the physical traces of its source – the *chora*.

Antoinette's husband's sense of anxiety manifests in the obsessive renaming of his new wife, binding him with the processes of colonialism that this novel traces. In giving her his own name – in marrying her – he performs his own uneasy act of colonisation. Much is made in the novel of Antoinette's hybridity: "she is not beke like you, but she is beke, and not like us either" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.122). Her straddling of the old and the new worlds, whiteness and poverty – her "white cockroach" status - disturbs the usual assumptions of a society match - the barely-veiled motivation behind his courtship. Significantly, he cannot separate her from her colonial context, experiencing disgust at Amelie's (the Creole servant-girl) smile as he wonders whether she is related to his wife, and remaining oblivious to the irony of naming his wife after the first Creole woman of the Western canon – Bertha Mason. Antoinette belongs in neither category – is no longer a coloniser nor, because of the colour of her skin, was ever colonised as the African slaves of the Caribbean location – and yet her ambivalent position points to the fate of women in the postcolonial world - they remain doubly colonised, being the subjects both of Empire and of patriarchy - and suggests the position of women more generally within the Western

⁵⁷ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.115

⁵⁸ Christophine's warning to Antoinette about love magic: "So you believe in that tim-tim story about obeah, you hear when you so high? All that foolishness and folly. Too besides, that is not for Beke."

social hierarchy as being more subtly subject than is recognised. Amelie may be racially Creole where Antoinette is socially so, and yet the former has a freedom and independence denied to the latter.⁵⁹ Indeed, Christophine's insight - the figure most closely identified with the practice of obeah - is that Antoinette's prospective husband symbolises nothing more than complacency:

To me you are not the best, not the worst. You are" – she shrugged – "you will not help her".

Both husband and wife may be seen to be victims of, as Sartre put it, "that other witchery [...] Western Culture."⁶⁰

There is an allusion to the Garden of Eden in the opening scene of *Wide Sargasso Sea* which sets the tone for the novel:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild.⁶¹

Veronica Marie Gregg observes that this "beginning"- in true Old Testament fashion - intimates also an "end", or Apocalypse.⁶² Her contention is that, unlike the Biblical garden, the period of West Indian "post" slavery was not a beginning *sui generis* but was born out of the nightmare of history. I have argued that the presence of the serpent in Eden suggests the inherent flaw in Paradise and that a state of loss is literally written into the history of the Christian West. I have also traced Achebe's interest in the Biblical story of *Genesis* with regard to the impenetrability of cultural otherness and the constructions rather than the perceptions of Western narratives of History. The very title of this novel suggests the unending nature and sense of cyclical return of its subject. The original title of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was *Le*

Bad, bad trouble come when beke meddle with that[...] You foolishness. Even if I can make him come to your bed, I cannot make him love you. Afterward he hate you." pp.85-86.

⁵⁹ Amelie manages to extort money from Antoinette's husband (as a result of their illicit affair) and is free to leave, which she does, whereas Antoinette cannot because her fortune has passed over to her new husband who is now in command of every aspect of her life. It is no subtle irony that it is Antoinette's money which is used to "pay off" her husband's mistress.

⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre in *Preface to Franz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p.19

⁶¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.19.

⁶² *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination*, p.85.

Revenant, suggesting a subject who/which has “returned” to an original scene.

Lennox Honeychurch summarises the novel’s concerns thus:

Slavery had ended, but the problem of labour and the creation of a new society had only just begun.⁶³

The old order was passing but the emergent bears its marks and is deeply implicated in the old. There is a sense of eternal continuity in this text ostensibly concerned with the beginning of a “new” age: the freed slaves “stayed because they wanted somewhere to sleep.”⁶⁴ Fanon argues that there is no beginning or end to the processes of colonialism:

In the colonies, the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.⁶⁵

Language is palpably demonstrated to be distant from its source and depending very much on context for definition, just as, the implication is, light and dark are defined contrastively. This is manifest also in the evidence of Rhys’s text in the disembodied voice which “speaks” to the reader:

He [her half-brother] looked at me and spoke to me as though I were a stranger. What do you do when something happened to you like that? Why are you laughing at me?⁶⁶

There are no quotation marks in the text, instead, the words appear to float in an undifferentiated text in which narrative and speech co-mingle. The use of “stranger” here is singularly appropriate as the reader has little idea of who the speaker might be, when she is speaking or to whom. The husband’s rhyme of “Antoinette” with “Marionette” takes on a new resonance. Does she survive her own death (implied, though not stated, at the end of the novel⁶⁷) to speak her truth? Must she have died -

⁶³ Lennox Honeychurch, *Dominica*, 94, quoted by Gregg in *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination*, p.85.

⁶⁴ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.22.

⁶⁵ *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.40.

⁶⁶ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.184

⁶⁷ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp.151-52.

and become spectral – in order to speak at all as a woman/Creole subject? The protagonist who is also, suddenly, the narrator, is in excess of the text.

As in the *Commedia*, *Things Fall Apart* and *Ceremony*, there is a sense of infinity in the constructions of the processes of being so that the textual and the real overlap and become at a certain point indivisible. The disembodied nature of language, returning to Fanon, is played out in the disembodied nature of this novel's protagonist. Tia – her very name a diminutive form of Antoinette, suggesting she is her counterpart - taunts the little French girl with the observation that “Real white people, they got gold money.”⁶⁸ In this scene, Antoinette is left with the dress of the black girl in place of her own. That she is left to “take[s] on the mantle of nigger”⁶⁹ suggests her position to be between these two, to be hybrid, and so in some sense “obscure”/shadowy – “dark”. Gregg observes that in this novel:

The problematic of textuality can be read as an explicit intentional and constitutive aspect of the structure and characterisation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.⁷⁰

This text is revealed to be a force of obeah, in that it is a process of highly self-conscious constructions, a series of symbolic and contrastive renamings. It also offers its own critique in that it demonstrates itself, in the overt subjectivity of its narratives, to be ultimately self-defining.

In both the medieval and the early colonial period, the figure of woman was fused in the cultural consciousness with otherness.⁷¹ She was other to Christianity in the pagan practices of witchcraft and other to God as well as to man in being the means to God-as-man - the mother of Christ. The value of the female slave was, at several significant points in the history of colonialism, valued at double that of her male counterpart because of her function as producer of more slaves as well as a worker (this in itself predicated on her otherness to white femininity – particularly before emancipation). Again, woman may be seen to be in the ambivalent position of being “post” in being both physical and spectral, in being outside of patriarchal history and yet its very means.

⁶⁸ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p.24

⁶⁹ *Jean Rhys*, p.25.

⁷⁰ *Jean Rhys*, p.87.

Women offer the ultimate metaphor for language because they embody transformative powers. That they have been central, in the ways described above, to the processes of Imperialism is no surprise. “She” is revealed to be the very condition of Empire, whether Holy Roman or British. Perhaps what we see in these texts is that the objectification of these female characters – the emphasis on their figures, the “space” they offer – is an objectification of the role of writer. The magical properties attributed both to these female characters and implicitly, to their authors, are signs of “glammering”⁷² - mystification in order to better reveal to the particular beholder. Perhaps this is what makes these texts so supremely postmodern. Frederic Jameson’s insight of the illusion generated by ideologies in order to better restrict may be a useful model here.⁷³ If space is *explicitly* demonstrated to be illusory, a construct of the author in his/her writing, then s/he may reveal truth in method if not in content. The figure of woman, given its connection with the processes of narrative – naming/history/representation – is the ideal means for postcolonial and medieval writers in their concern with the ultimate boundaries of language.

⁷¹ See discussion of St. Catherine in William Calin *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp.102-103.

⁷² “She had used the word “glamour” in a way I had never heard before, so she explained that it was an old Scottish word, brought into general English before its meaning became corrupted. In the original sense a glammer was a spell, an enchantment. A young man in love would approach the wisest old woman of his village and pay her for a charm of invisibility to be placed upon her beloved, so that she should no longer be coveted by the other young men. Once she had been glammered, or made glamorous, she was safe from prying eyes.” Christopher Priest, *The Glamour* (London: Touchstone, 1996), p.169.

⁷³ Frederic Jameson “The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate” first published in *New German Critique*, 1984, reprinted in *Modern Literary Theory*, pp.373-383: “So it would seem in the postmodernist debate, and the depoliticised bureaucratic society to which it corresponds, where all seemingly cultural positions turn out to be symbolic forms of political moralising[...]” p.383.

Chapter Five

Signs of Loss: Scholasticism, psychoanalysis and the subject

The sign, according to contemporary literary theory, presupposes the absence of the object it signifies. In post-structuralist thought, the sign “stands in for” the object signified and gains meaning because of its difference to other signs. Psychoanalytic theorists see this to have definitive effects in human functioning. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan insists: “For symbols or things to become language – to be verbally represented – they *must first* [my italics] disappear as object or image”¹ In this, the psychoanalytic approach to literature may be seen to unsettle fixed epistemologies which would impose a governing and finally determining frame of truth onto a subject. What matters, ultimately, in a psychoanalytic reading, is the impact of a text upon its subjects in what may be identified as an Aristotelian emphasis on audience rather than author. Shoshana Felman comments: “The signifier can be analysed in its effects without its signified being known”.² The implication of this for the subject is seen in Lacan’s identification of the “Mirror Stage”. This involves the production of a gestalt image with which the child identifies. The child is transformed into a subject through an act of identification not with itself but *with an image of itself* in a mirror: the mirror may well be the child’s mother.

Lacan rereads Freud in the light of post-Saussurean linguistics so that language becomes a focal point in the development of identity. Indeed, according to Lacan, it is only at the moment of entry into the symbolic order of language that full subjectivity comes into being:

The important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction³

¹ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, quoted in *The Symbolic in Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.421.

² Shoshana Felman quoted in *The Purloined Poe*, eds. J.P. Muller and W.J. Richardson (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p.148.

Identity, like language, is based on an illusion which, although fictive, is enabling:

Lacan compared the first scene to a primal scene, a scene of sexual intercourse between the parents which the child observes, *or his fantasy of what he observes* [my italics]. Freud emphasized how the primal scene is grasped and interpreted by the child later, when he can put it into words; in Lacanian terms, when he can link the imaginary experience into the symbolic order.⁴

Before the symbolic stage is reached, however, the infant experiences the mirror stage described above, entering the realm of the imaginary (which the subject never entirely leaves):

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.⁵

In this the infant begins to recognise a distinction between its own body and the outside world: it lacks control of itself at the motor level but its image in the mirror appears unified and in control. The child recognises its image and merges with it in a process of identification, creating an illusory experience of control of the self and the world – an imaginary correspondence between self and image. Absence, illusion and constructions form the basis of the subject's introduction to language:

The child passes from the alternative (thesis versus antithesis; presence versus absence of the penis) to the synthesis (the phallus as a sign of the fact that the child can only enter into the circuit of desire by assuming castration as the phallus's simultaneous presence and absence, that is, by assuming the fact that both the subject and the object of desire will always be substitutes for something that was never really present.⁶

³ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", trans. Alan Sheridan, in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed.s Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (Arnold: London, 1989), pp.126-31, p.127.

⁴ Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), p.94.

⁵ *ibid*, pp.128-9.

A discussion of the spatial in Dante, Achebe and Silko is closely connected to the constructions of gender. Following medieval tropology, material concerns in these texts also seem to be related to their literal and fictional aspects: there is a significant parallel between the character Chielo in *Things Fall Apart* and Beatrice in Dante's *Commedia* which is founded in the process of their textualisation. Both figures are self-consciously fictional and "constructed" within the space of the text, as I shall discuss below. They are also significantly female, and representative of a "feminine principle" according to psychoanalytic models based on the fictionalising origins of human identity.

Achebe's cross-referencing between the figures of Chielo in his earlier novel and the heroine, Beatrice, from his later novel *No Longer at Ease*, discussed at the end of my Chapter Two, invites further attention. At a literal/material level, the name "Chielo" reads as an English transcription of the Italian term for sky - il cielo. The "sky" is, of course, the material location of Dante's *Paradiso*, the section of the *Commedia* in which Beatrice spends most time with the pilgrim – quite literally guiding him "heavenward". Beatrice is, therefore, closely associated with this sphere, she may even be said to be representative of it, microcosmically, in the description of her blinding brightness - which frequently overwhelms the pilgrim to the degree that he has to avert his eyes.⁷ Achebe's choices of name for these two characters seem to be deliberately as well as severally allusive: he is not concerned with alluding to a character from a medieval text in a general, superficial way but seems to be concerned with her function, location, and effects, or, in other words, with the character as symbolic rather than merely evocative. His doubling of the allusion in the Chielo-Beatrice matrix of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* suggests a highly worked-out and sophisticated use of allusion, as well as a particular reading of the Dante-pilgrim character. The original Beatrice has such power (to access God) not only because she is no longer mortal but also because she once was – in that she has a personal connection to the pilgrim (see *Inferno*), which was the first cause of his rescue in the valley and because she was beloved by the poet (see *Vita Nuova*) during her lifetime. Her duality is intimately bound also to her fictionality – the reader could

⁶ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), p.122.

⁷ See my Chapter 7

have little sense of an immortal Beatrice if there had been no poet/poem to immortalise (and fictionalise) her.

There is, in these texts, a clear working out of the “strada al dio” trope involving an accretive structure from materiality to divinity. Both Achebe’s and Dante’s heroines act as guides. The symbolic figure of Beatrice in this “sacra poema” is the means to a vision surpassing the material (and mortal) realm. It was the sensual love (material) inspired in the poet (literal), which provided the means (fictive) to such an ascent. Achebe, in his sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, also suggests a fundamental duality in the state he describes: he is concerned with the otherworldliness of the pre-colonial site juxtaposed with the aftermath of colonialism. In his Chielo, the spoken word is fused with her power, in his Beatrice it is the written word (she is, as already noted, an English Literature graduate). However, Chielo’s speech is presented in written form while Beatrice’s erudition is demonstrated in dialogue – we are “told” of her “letters” as she becomes a point of national pride and is specially (and spuriously) invited by the President to be presented to an international company.⁸

Both Dante’s Beatrice and Achebe’s Chielo-Beatrice figure appear to exist “in excess” of the linear print narratives that present/ create them. Both exist out of the time of Western chronological history, one is dead (within the text), the other belongs to a different tradition altogether (which in Achebe’s Beatrice is revealed to be inescapable, despite her Western education) but both effect ends beyond the power of their male counterparts – and, it seems, their (male) narrators. Achebe, in his return to Chielo in the references to her in *No Longer At Ease*, and his allusions to Dante’s muse and guide, Beatrice, seems to be making a case for the centrality of these female characters to his “mission”. The political is, of course, the other analogue of this medieval tropological level.

⁸ Chinua Achebe, *The Anthills of the Savannah* (New York: Doubleday, p.1988):

“Come and meet Miss Cranford of the American United Press. Lou is in Bass to see if all the bad news they hear about us is true.” [...] Meanwhile His Excellency was literally reciting my c.v. “Lou, this is one of the most brilliant daughters of this country, Beatrice Okoli. She is a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance – the only person in the service, male or female, with a first-class honours in English. And not from a local university but from Queen Mary College, University of London. Our Beatrice beat the English to their game. We’re very proud of her.” “Wow,” said Lou. “That’s terrific. How did you do it Beatrice?” The rest was routine. There were I think eight men and seven women including myself.” (pp.68-9).

Both Dante's and Achebe's key female figures, in the dual states they embody, may be said to "exist" in the spectral moment of Derrida – in "a moment that no longer belongs to time". In these texts, questions of source and origin may be seen to reveal circular patterns, doublings, submissive and passive behaviours as well as dualities rather than being direct, linear and progressive. They reveal, what could be termed "feminine" characteristics rather than the patriarchal assurances we might expect of such canonical works.

They adopt the feminine "figure", meaning here both a female protagonist and what may be termed feminine characteristics, in expectation of criticism levelled at them as authors: what can a poet working with fictive means and a writer with imaginative rather than political power contribute to understandings of God and nation, respectively? The modesty *topos* was one of the methods employed by medieval writers to defend themselves from the Platonic charges brought against poetry. The *topos* developed from an understanding of the Aristotelian causal line in which, in the case of writing, no author could be said to be the prime cause but only the effective cause of the work, as God was the prime cause of all.⁹ The two causes of a single object, the material and the divine depends, on the dual time model of medieval cosmology discussed earlier. The female figures in these texts may be considered to operate as "modesty topoi", as well as having naturalistic representation: as a verbal article, "she" may be seen to become a strategy. Their political status in both genres is inferior – we see that they are the "means to" the activities/narratives of the male protagonists – and secondary. The "truths" they convey take on some of this condition. Foucault comments on the Western tradition of disempowered figures:

There exists in our society another principle of exclusion, not another prohibition but a division and a rejection. I refer to the opposition between reason and madness.

⁹ "As for the objection that only Christ is the teacher and author, we must say that, to quote Augustine in his *On Christian Doctrine*, teaching can mean one of two things, just as "making someone see" can be taken to in two different ways. For the person who restores a man's sight makes him see in one way, while he who points out with his finger that which is already visible makes him see in another way. God does the first; man, the second. In the same way, the man who presents and reveals the knowledge which he has in his soul in word or writing is doing something quite different from He who imprints the condition (*habitus*) of knowledge [on men's souls]. Each is called a teacher and author, but God is the more principle one. The same is true of the book [i.e. the *Sentences*] set before us." St Bonaventure *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences: Extracts from Exposition of the Prologue* in Minnis pp231-2

Since the depths of the Middle Ages, the madman has been the one whose discourse cannot have the same currency as others[...]It is curious to note that for centuries in Europe the speech of the madman was either not heard at all or else taken for the word of truth[...]he was only symbolically allowed to speak in the theatre, where he would step forward, disarmed and reconciled, because there he played the role of truth in a mask.¹⁰

The use of dualised figures – ones that have a double value - to convey difficult or tenuous truths has a precedent. The association of the female with the operations of anti-reason (the lunic) have, traditionally, a material basis in her association with cyclic processes. This is one source of her literary symbolic value, or, as a figure for allegory. Her “changeability” is connected to the fact that she is generative, can literally “double herself” in being two things (beings) at the same time.

I am investigating the relationship between the self-consciously male poet/creators who “speak” through these texts and the feminine and feminising figures they adopt in their articulations. This can be seen within a Lacanian psychoanalytic frame, particularly with reference to his discussion of the “phallic mother” and the implication that identity is constructed on the basis of a *perception* of loss, or, in other words, that identity is predicated on artifice. This echoes medieval perspectival definitions of reality and truth. Ted Hughes writes of the continuity of a psychoanalytic paradigm with an earlier God-centered universe. He validates this inquiry with the observation:

We have no problem nowadays in seeing that the God-centred metaphysical universe of the religious suffered not so much an evaporation as a translocation. It was interiorised. And translated. We live in the translation, where what had been religious and centred on God is psychological and centred on an idea of the self – albeit a self that remains a measureless if not infinite question mark.¹¹

Hughes suggests that the end of psychoanalytic inquiry, as of theological questioning, is the appreciation of an ineffable truth. In this process, the inquirer is an integral part of the subject of inquiry. Dante and Achebe fit neatly into the above categories; of presenting a “God-centred metaphysical universe” (the *Commedia*) and “an idea of the self” (Achebe and his discourses on identity). These texts also demonstrate

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, from “The Order of Discourse” in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young, repr. in *Modern Literary Theory*, eds Rice and Waugh, p.240

Hughes's theory of continuity - both are deeply implicated in processes of translation/translocation as well as demonstrating not only significant parallels but also conscious allusion. Truth, in these texts, is demonstrated to be not eternally "fixed" but mobile and subject to context. Both writers are concerned with the adoption of material and means of enunciation, which leave, to complete the metaphor, neither parent nor child unchanged. There is some discussion as to whether Dante would have "left" Virgil in Limbo, had the poet felt the same way about him as he reveals later in the *Commedia*¹² – the poet's judgement is questioned by the force of his own poetry. Okonkwo accepts Ikemefuna as a son not only formally but also "in his heart" as the narrative progresses – although again this is not stated but rather demonstrated in the emotional force generated by the narrative.¹³ Relationships develop between these characters which belie their simple functions within the texts – they quite literally go "beyond" the mere facts. Here I intend to focus on the female figure as a metaphor for how language signs in these material-orientated texts.

Conrad, in his definitive colonial text, *Heart of Darkness*¹⁴ identifies a "superb" African woman/goddess figure who, in her presentation may be seem to bear some resemblance to Achebe's Chielo:

And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (*Heart of Darkness*, p.125)

This compares with the description of nature that introduces Chielo in her guise as priestess:

¹¹ "The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T. S. Eliot" Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) pp.268-92, p.274.

¹² See Kevin Brownlee's discussion of Dante's Virgil and Dante's Aeneid in "Dante and the classical poets" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp.100-119, p.102.

¹³ "For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household [...]He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life. He had become wholly absorbed into his new family. He was like an elder brother to Nwoye, and from the very first seemed to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy [...]Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna." p.37.

"Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor." p.44.

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp.124-25.

There were no stars in the sky because there was a rain-cloud. Fireflies went about with their tiny green lamps, which only made the darkness more profound. Between Chielo's outbursts the night was alive with the shrill tremor of forest insects woven into the darkness [...] (*Things Fall Apart*, pp.73-5)

Both descriptions suggest the female figure provides an object for meditation on the “interconnectedness” of the world that surrounds her. Both depend on the operations of an observer, or rather a series of frames both within and without the narrative. Conrad's woman is “looked at” by the jungle as well as by the men on the steamer, all of which is described by Marlow to an unidentified “listener” who is the original narrator – all of which appears within Conrad's narrative. Chielo is watched by Ekwefi, who in turn is being followed, unknown to her, by her husband, all of whom are monitored by the impartial voice of the narrator who may or may not be the author but remains distinct from the anthropologist historian who threatens to intercede at the end of the narrative. Both of these characters are explicitly bound to the constructing processes of narrative as well as the spurious effects of perspective on the object beheld.

The clearly beatified image of Beatrice in Dante's *Paradiso* resembles these others in her relation to and reflection of her surroundings and in the infinite distance between perceiver and perceived suggested in the terms of her representation:

Beatrice tutta nell'eterno rote
fissa con li occhi stava; ed io in lei
le luci fissi, di la su remote (*Paradiso* I; 64-6)¹⁵

There is a sustained emphasis on the visual and perspectival. The verse suggests the centrality of a circular motif: the description of Beatrice envelopes the image of a wheel which then fuses with the last term of the description concerning the pilgrim – “rote”: (wheel) rhymed with “remote”. The effect is multiple and complex. That the stress falls in Italian on the third syllable of *Be-a-tri-ce*, and creates an alliterative connection between her name and the other “r” sounds of this verse, fuses her figure with the “rote” and “remote” which characterise the *Paradiso*. It does this both

¹⁵ “Beatrice stood with her eyes fixed only on the eternal wheels, and on her I fixed mine, withdrawn from above.”

aurally in the rhyme and visually (as an echo of the content) in the semantic structure of the verse. This concretises the relation between the woman and the viewer as one symbolised by the figure of the circle and defined by a function of perspective. That the aural depends on the stress in Beatrice and the visual on the reference to the pilgrim is entirely appropriate to the respective status of these two figures. In the medieval hierarchy of the senses, the aural is above the visual and considered superior and closer to God in its association with the music of the spheres, which is one manifestation of his being.¹⁶ The presentation of the female figure is here suggesting, very literally, proximity to God.

These female figures are characterised by displacement. Once it is accepted that the translation of “things” into “words” changes their nature and that in the processes of textualisation characters become strategies because words are not facts but fictions in themselves, this dualism is “natural”.¹⁷ The dual symbolism of the feminine makes female characters particularly suited to the demonstration of this phenomenon. Chielo is described distinctly as being “a different woman”(p.75) when in her role as priestess and always ahead of Ekwefi and Okonkwo despite her heavy load and the parents’ anxiety to catch up:

Chielo’s voice rose again in her possessed chanting, and Ekwefi recoiled, because there was no humanity there. It was not the same Chielo who sat with her in the market and sometimes bought bean-cakes for Ezinma, whom she called daughter. It was a different woman – the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves [...] She greeted her god in a multitude of names – the owner of the future, the messenger of earth, the god who cut a man down when his life was sweetest to him [...] (*Things Fall Apart*, p.75)

Conrad’s “African Woman” is also viewed from a distance, both physically and symbolically:

“Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene.” (*Heart of Darkness*, p.125)

¹⁶ See discussion of the hierarchy of senses: Vinge, Aquinas etc., in my Chapter 2.

¹⁷ Jaroslav Prusek *Chinese History and Literature: A Collection of Studies* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1970). Prusek comments in his introduction that once the historian translates from one form into another he can “do anything”.

She is viewed from the safe distance of the steamer by a company of men representing the commercialising colonial world, as opposed to her native experience. Both women are associated with the otherness of something unknown or not understood by the viewer. Chielo is described as greeting her god, Conrad's woman as "touch[ing] the sky". Both of these references to divinity are qualified by the speaker's/narrator/s perspective: Chielo's god is *her* god, as priestess. Conrad's woman's gesture is described in simile-form -"*as though*" - suggesting that the import of the image is from the viewer/narrator's experience rather than describing her own.

Conrad has been severely criticised for his colonialist view of Africa but the distance inscribed in this figure may be seen to align him with a more contemporary view and the means of signing with medieval methodology:

Africa's postcolonial novelists – novelists anxious to escape neoclassicism – are no longer committed to the nation; and in this they will seem, as I have suggested, misleadingly postmodern. But what they have chosen instead of the nation is not an older traditionalism but Africa – the continent and its people.¹⁸

Both Achebe and Conrad seem to be suggesting types rather than flesh-and-blood people in their depictions of these women. Beatrice also is represented as a distinctly other-worldly creature rather than the real person who first inspired Dante's love, one who clearly belongs to another sphere – he cannot even look upon her without having to avert his gaze as a result of her transcendent beauty:

Beatrice mi guardo con li occhi pieni
di faville d'amor cosi divini,
che, vinta, mia virtue die le reni,
e quasi mi perdei con li occhi chini (*Paradiso* IV; 139-42)¹⁹

The moral hierarchical sense evoked by such terms as "divini", "virtue", "perdere" and "chini" suggests that this figure belongs to a different category of being altogether. All three female characters, become, in different senses, "unreal" or

¹⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, from *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992), in Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed.s, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.119-124, p.120.

¹⁹ "Beatrice looked at me with eyes so full of the sparkling of love and so divine that my power, overcome, took flight and, with eyes cast down, I was almost lost."

ghostly in their stylised representations in these texts. In a sense, they become “types”, dependent on being viewed, interpreted and “read” for their meaning. They seem to be representing another sphere or reality, distinct from the one in which they appear to the reader. Their stylisation suggests that the truths they inscribe, whether of God or of Africa, are in some way distant - though not non-existent – and render them signs in the service of these and the text, rather than ends in themselves.

The closing “truths” in both the *Commedia* and *Things Fall Apart* come via these female figures: in both texts women act significantly as “guides” or “means of passage” for the main (male) protagonist. These female figures are highly fictional in the sense that they exist as characters in a literary text (and both of these texts are highly, in their allusions and borrowings, literary), and are unknown or unknowable in the senses we have already discussed. Achebe, in his careful cultivation of idiom, keeps his reader “at arm’s length” from his subject to better appreciate the pathos of the story, as well as emphasising the mysterious nature of Chielo’s dual identity. Dante’s Beatrice, from the little we know of her historically, was a young girl with whom he barely exchanged a word in her life time, so his representation of her is unlikely to bear much resemblance to her “true” nature. In fact her real name was Bice Portinari and she was the daughter of a banker, Simone de’Bardi - Dante gives her the more poetic name Beatrice meaning “the bringer of blessings” suggesting as it does her function as a “means” within the poem. As we have seen, the portrayal of these figures connects them more with those in other texts, than with anything “real” so that they “exist” now, and eternally, in a matrix of literary “ancestors” and “descendants” across a spectrum of literary works. That female characters, who remain largely characterless, are contrived to form the visible parts of a strategy which enables the conceit of these texts is revealing. They betray a connection between the motif of the circle, the ladder and the model of perspectival truth in their engagement with material which traditionally, at least, remains outside of the scope of poetry.

We have seen that the *Commedia* and *Things Fall Apart* delineate mysterious as well as personal experiences. The objects they describe are revealed to have been related subjectively and to be in a number of different senses “reflections” of the observer’s understanding. Beatrice is introduced into the *Commedia* at the

point where the Dante-pilgrim becomes aware of experience as a phenomenon of individual perception rather than generalisable truth:

[...] la Scrittura condescende
a vostra facultate (*Paradiso* IV; 43-4)²⁰

The Italian here demands close attention: “scrittura” suggests, very literally, writing, such as the writing we are presented with in the *Commedia*, as well as Scripture in the biblical sense, so alluding to the process of reading Scripture, *allegoresis*, which depends on different possible levels of meaning within a text. This revelation, of course, comes only after the reader has already absorbed two lengthy cantiche (the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*) which appear to be direct first-person observation of a progressive journey, a kind of “pilgrim’s diary”. This highlights the problems of readerly expectation and the suspension of disbelief that the reader, according to habit, has performed in his reading of the poem so far. Dante is drawing attention to his method, and insisting that his readers remain alert to as much truth as they are each individually able to take from the figures he presents.

This explanation follows the canto describing Piccarda Donati’s fate, offering another level of emphasis. Piccarda was a kinswoman of Dante’s wife, Gemma. Her tale is one of the impermanence of human will no matter how well-intentioned: she is a nun forced to marry by her brother and although she resists, his will is carried out. She enters heaven, but only the lower reaches of it and Dante is puzzled as he considers her behaviour impeccable. Beatrice, significantly is responsible for enlightening him. Dante learns a universal lesson about human nature through an example close to home – in other words, he learns about the nature of the divine through an experience of the sensual. He too had pledged himself to one – the entire *Commedia* is testament to his love for Beatrice - and married another. Dante’s poem can be read at multiple levels as we have seen elsewhere but it seems significant here that he chooses the example of a woman for what would seem to be a very personal admission. The connection between femininity and multiplicity is writ large.

²⁰ “Scripture condescends to your capacity.”

The emphasis on subjectivity in these texts is connected to experience of loss and displacement. Beatrice was lost to Dante and is rediscovered through his experience of being lost (at several levels), as described at the beginning of the *Commedia*. Chielo is initially associated with the potential loss of Okonkwo's favourite child (her connection to the child is underlined by the fact that she calls her "my daughter", *Things Fall Apart*, pp.71-2) and then the actual loss of his cultural way of life (p.101). Chielo is introduced, as discussed earlier, as subject to multiple identities depending on context. As we have seen, "she greeted her god in a multitude of names."²¹ The significance of both the Beatrice-figure and the Chielo-figure is dependent on context and their identities remain fundamentally unknown in these narratives. In this, they take on symbolic significance, suggesting both the fictive scene which is the basis of identity according to Lacanian theory, and forming the first rung of the ladder of love which accesses the divine in medieval schemata.

A sense of loss is all-pervading in the *Commedia*, and characteristic elements of the *Commedia* as well as *Things Fall Apart* connect loss specifically with the feminine. Dante introduces himself before the poem even begins as an exile – "A Florentine by birth, but not by disposition".²² This experience may be seen to inform much of the political/historical comment of his poem.²³ In this he indicates the general conditions of human generation – born of woman and so originally fallen - but also draws attention to the state of exile out of which his poem, specifically, arises. His other inspiration is, of course, Beatrice – another woman - and the pain to him occasioned by her death/loss. The truth is of course that he barely, if at all, knew her.²⁴ Again, the loss is in a sense "original" – there *never was* a presence. His role in the poem, although he is very clearly identified as the author of the text, is passive, even feminised, in that he must be led by a series of guides who are all, in different senses, his superiors.

The poet is met first by Virgil, his literary elder and, the clear implication is, "better". This is a further example of the standard trope by which authors justified

²¹ Okonkwo's father had no title either: "When Unoke died he had taken no title at all", p.75.

²² *Epistola X* (to Can Grande) in *Latin Writings*, p.349.

²³ See in particular *Inferno XV*; 73-8, and *Paradiso XV*; 139-148

²⁴ "Dante's life and writings were also influenced by his *acquaintance* [my italics] with a noble Florentine woman of outstanding grace and beauty. He had named her among the sixty fairest women of Florence, but it was not until later that the poet truly "discovered" her." *The Portable Dante*, ed. Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1995), p.xi.

their writings. The Classical poets had quasi-divine status for the medieval Scholastics. Conferring authority on Virgil for the experiences he undergoes is also a symbolic way of reiterating the fact that the poem was not only poetically (in terms of subject matter) but also actually (in terms of a first cause) divinely inspired. Rather than executing a logocentric authorial move in this, Dante presents his causative role as both secondary and submissive. Conferring divine status is not, in this case a means of fixing the definitive intention of the author and so the possible interpretations of the text. Instead, it offers the possibility of signification beyond the control of the writer. In other words, this strategy allows for infinite possible readings. The feminisation of the author incurs a loss of direct control over the ends of the text but the means to access levels of signification which poetry could not normally, according to medieval tropology (or contemporary theory), hope to attain.

In *Things Fall Apart*, it is apparently the loss of traditional life which provokes the climax of Okonkwo's suicide. The opening of the novel, however, betrays a deeper and more fundamental kind of loss (or rather, as above, the sense of never having had) in Okonkwo's drive to justify and prove himself in the face of his father's perceived "womanliness".²⁵ For Okonkwo, as we have seen, the threat of emasculation, in the memory and example of his father, is ever-present. This fear is reinforced by the voice of the third-person narrator who offers a passive and somewhat "flat" narrative. It is entirely consistent that this feminised narrative generates a sense of inevitability which leads to the ultimate "female" crime, suicide. This is described as an "abomination" against the earth goddess – although in an utterly unimpassioned tone - for which reason Okonkwo's body is interred in the Evil Forest. The trajectory begins with his banishment to his mother's village (a complex parallel with Dante's exile from his native city²⁶) as a result of a crime overtly identified as "female" – the accidental murder of a kinsman:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the

²⁵ "Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: "This meeting is for men." The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit." p.19. It is noted earlier he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?" p.6.

²⁶ Dante is also banished from his home, also for a crime of a "mixed" nature, for being both Guelf and Ghibelline, white and black, nationalist and imperialist.

female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (*Things Fall Apart*, p.88)

The emphasis on “inadvertent” culminates a series of feminising indignities suffered by the very masculine protagonist. In Achebe, as in Dante, the issue of will is explored with reference to the feminine. Okonkwo - a man originally characterised by his “will” – suffers loss in an emphatically gendered way in this novel.

There is also a strong connection in these texts between discovery and the feminine. In the *Commedia*, the Dante pilgrim is “found” by a complex chain of events, facilitated by a series of interventions by female figures. The poem is, avowedly,²⁷ inspired by the loss of a woman who, within the poem, is revealed to have pleaded on his behalf to St Lucy to petition the archetypal female persona: the Virgin Mary. The narrative is a process of discovery for the protagonist as well as for the reader. This process is explained to the pilgrim at the beginning of the *Commedia* in the figure of Holy Church, who, significantly, appears as a woman.²⁸

Okonkwo is “found out” in the process of the narrative, as above, by his acts which are most feminine in nature. This gendering is symbolised by and made manifest in the recurrent motif of the ogbanje spirit to which he and his wife Ekwefi are subject. The ogbanje is a mischievous spirit perceived to be reborn many times over to the same parents in the form of a child, or series of children who die in infancy or very young. The ogbanje born to Okonkwo is a girl child. She is also revealed to be Okonkwo’s favourite child though much against his better instincts – he is observed to have several times wished that Ezinma had been a boy.²⁹ His affection for this girl-child and the difficulty this symbolises reaches its nemesis in the necessity of submitting to a woman’s authority - Chielo’s - to secure her survival. The scene where he secretly follows his wife (who is secretly following Chielo),

²⁷ Singleton comments: “Then afterwards, reading in the book of his memory, he also could see that the death of his lady stood at the centre of his New Life. And we in our own turn as readers of this copy from the book of his memory, may see that the poet’s new life in love is very much like a little world reflecting the larger one.” *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1983), p.24.

²⁸ *Inferno* II. Sinclair comments: “Beatrice, the personal embodiment of heavenly truth, is in a sense the representative of the ideal Church, as Virgil of the ideal world-Empire, so that her prompting of Virgil here for Dante’s deliverance suggests the co-operation of Church and Empire to which Dante appealed for all human well-being.” p.44.

²⁹ Okonkwo ate the food absent-mindedly. “She should have been a boy”, he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old-daughter. He passed her a piece of fish.” p.44.

reveals the degree of his tenderness (despite the public persona he would portray) as well as his position in the hierarchy of those able to effect his desired ends – he arrives last.

Hughes's connection of the ritualistic with the feminising process of writing suggests a particular kind of mimicking/imitation which is generative rather than simply repetitive. T. S. Eliot in his acute poetic sensitivity to the historico-political suggests the link between Conrad, Achebe and Dante. Hughes identifies the “overwhelming desacralisation of the Western world” that followed in the wake of the First World War - the defining experience of Eliot's lifetime:

that desacralised landscape had never been seen before. Or if it had it had never before been real.³⁰

He goes on to imply that this “real” is *an effect of* the writing of poetry and describes the poet as the “midwife” to reality. For Hughes, the poet is responsible for delivering the world *in new form*, which is a concern already identified in the political consciousness of both Dante and Achebe as well as being manifested in their texts in the feminisation of the authorial role and/or narrative voice. Most explicitly, he relates the process of writing to childbirth:

In retrospect, *The Waste Land* can look like the full-term accouchement where this “Death of Saint Narcissus” would be a surgical colour-slide of an early stage of the foetus. (Hughes, p.280)

This is a conceit carried through in the metaphor of the “dark embryo” (Hughes, p.291), the “squirming, bared foetus” (Hughes, p.283) which describes the “final poetic object [...]” this is, he goes on to reiterate, “partly the result of the contractual labours of a go-between or mediator” (Hughes, p.277). He discusses the work of T.S. Eliot as the poet who formalised the experience of this particular transitional period “Eliot found it, explored it, revealed it, gave it a name and a human voice.” (Hughes, p.270). If Eliot may be seen to have articulated the stark “reality” of the twentieth century he has also defined the position from which we view the past and the ways in which we may read Dante – it is well-documented that Eliot has been influenced by

³⁰ Ted Hughes “The Poetic Self” reprinted in *Winter Pollen* p.270

Dante; he has also written on him definitively.³¹ It seems appropriate that it is another highly influential poet, Hughes, who fixes Eliot's importance in such concrete terms. Hughes does not shrink from using the most visceral terms to evoke the work of a poet whom he considers to be deeply committed to poetry as a means of redemption/rebirth. In Hughes's observation of Eliot, there is a pattern for the connection between the apparently diverse texts of Dante and Achebe: "almost every poem [...] seems related to it in some uterine fashion." (Hughes, p.280)

Hughes's conclusions regarding Eliot may be seen to focus the discussion so far:

What had begun as a shamanic crisis-call to regeneration, in the depths of the adolescent, matriarchal psyche, a dark place of savage drumming which he referred to often enough but never tried to disown, drew him through those flames of the tragedy of Eros into an *imitatio Christi* and the paternal authority of a high priest in a world religion. (Hughes, p.290)

I have already suggested the *imitatio Christi* of Chielo's journey with Enzima and Achebe's relation to Dante. The chronology of this relation, involving a progression from world religion in the Holy Roman Empire (the cultural context and moral content of Dante's overtly Christian text) to a novel located temporally after but physically in "a dark place of savage drumming", suggests that there is some comment to be made on the assumptions commonly surrounding these texts. Eliot's work, as I will go on to discuss in my Chapter 7, materialises the connection between these two genres, revealing that their interrelation is better described by the circular figure than by chronological and patriarchal linear orderings.

Lacan claims that there is "an antimony internal to the assumption by man of his sex."³² In this, Lacan suggests that the castration complex - a sense of loss - is central to the development of human identity. He argues:

the relation of the subject to the phallus is set up regardless of the anatomical difference between the sexes ("The meaning of the Phallus", p.121)

³¹ See Eliot/Dante discussion in my Chapter 7.

³² Jacques Lacan "The meaning of the Phallus," repr. in *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) pp.120-29, p.120.

The notion that identity is based on a loss or on a fear of loss can equally be applied to the processes of writing. Lacan poses his question thus:

why must he take up its attributes only by means of a threat or even in the guise of a privation? (Lacan, p.120)

I have suggested that Dante and Achebe are related in their concern with original loss : the loss of Paradise, if this may be considered to be synonymous with origin. I have suggested that this paradise is feminine in nature; thematically in these texts, the postulated origin is not only imbued with feminine characteristics – the passive sensual stimulation of light/sound and joy in submission to a greater will are defining aspects of the *Paradiso*, the law of nature (the earth goddess) to which Okwonkwo must submit is ever-present in *Things Fall Apart* - but the characters identified as central to the symbolism of these texts are women.

These figures are clearly very feminine as well as being female. They lead their respective protagonists across states of mind as well as landscapes: the outer landscape is a physical manifestation of the inner through which the protagonist experiences a transformation, a kind of rebirth/death. Both the Dante-pilgrim and Okonkwo are immortalised textually not only despite but also because of their failure to speak their truths. Both authors are also self-fictionalising - they draw attention to their acts of representation as artifice as well as creating author-protagonists within their texts: the Dante-pilgrim in the *Commedia* and the District Commissioner/historian of *Things Fall Apart*.³³ I have suggested the relation of these scenes to one another and to the Christian three-day rebirth cycle. The feminisation of this process in these texts and the implication in terms of the nature of this truth-quest is something I will develop later in this chapter with recourse to the feminine-centred psychanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva.³⁴

It is useful in this discussion to observe Lacan's conviction that:

at a more primordial level, the mother is for both sexes considered as provided with a phallus, that is, as a phallic mother. (Lacan, p.121)

³³ *Things Fall Apart*, pp.147-8.

The meaning of castration acquires its full weight “when it is discovered as castration of the mother” (Lacan, p.121). It is, specifically, the relation between the feminine and the experience of loss which will help to answer Lacan’s central question: why must we take up its attributes only by means of a threat, or even in the guise of a privation?

In his conclusion, we have a justification for this study:

Correlatively, one can glimpse the reason for a feature which has never been elucidated and which again gives a measure of the depth of Freud’s intuition: namely, why he advances the view that there is only one libido, his text clearly indicating that he conceives of it as masculine in nature. The function of the signifier here touched on its most profound relation: by way of which the Ancients embodied in it both the nous (“nous” sense) and the Logos (reason). (Lacan, p.129.)

Lacan’s point is that there is division at the very core of human identity - it is based on the fiction of loss and, in the case of the female, a loss of something never possessed. To consider the libido as singular and masculine is not a culturalist and therefore a political analysis in that it privileges the male over the female, but rather, it simply emphasises the arbitrariness of the sign and/or gender and makes explicit the distinction between male and masculine and female and feminine. He is discussing the operations of the sign in his observation that the unconscious is structured as a language:

It is a question of rediscovering in the laws governing that other scene which Freud designated in relation to dreams, as that of the unconscious, the effects discovered at the level of the materially unstable elements which constitute the chain of language: effects determined by the double play of combination and substitution in the signifier, along with the two axes of metaphor and metonymy which generate the signified; effects which are determinant in the substitution of the subject. (Lacan, p.124.)

Meaning, whether linguistic or psychological, is based on constructions of a “source” rather than the actual experience of one so that truth is always an experience of displacement/division. The literary texts discussed here present a “written silence” as their revelation, language is at the furthest possible remove from its function as a medium for information: it acquires an almost symbolic aspect in these works. This

³⁴ Julia Kristeva *Desire In Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez

sense of privacy, the article and experience of a single mind, is brought most powerfully to bear at the close of these works. The *Paradiso* ends with a disclaimer rather than revelation, and *Things Fall Apart* with the image of a hanged man observed by his peers who have been shocked into silence at the spectacle. The biographical elements palpable in these works add powerfully to this sense, although it is not my intention to psychoanalyse the authors. Rather, it is to juxtapose the contents and themes of theoretical and literary texts - and I make a distinction, if not by this juxtaposition an absolute one. Both the *Paradiso* and *Things Fall Apart* are texts which draw attention to their subjectivity. The *Commedia* is presented as a vision of divinity by the author/poet; the author of *Things Fall Apart* is also, clearly, an adept in the manipulation of narratorial perspectives and readerly expectation. The subjective in these narratives is characterised incommunicability: Okonkwo's fists in the place of words; the Dante-pilgrim's failures of understanding overcome by the vision of Beatrice and her non-verbal prompts.³⁵

I have observed that these works of diverse literary genre are related in their concern with loss: material loss as a starting point and the question of articulacy and its attendant problems of impotence as their end point. I have also observed that Lacan's text "The Meaning of the Phallus" follows, thematically, a similar structure, in beginning with a discussion of the castration complex - loss - and ending with an explanation of the nature of the logos, suggesting that in the maturation of the human psyche, language comes to substitute loss:

Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions which it calls for. It is demand for a presence or an absence. This is manifest in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant as it is with that Other to be situated some way short of any needs which it might gratify. That is, the power to deprive them of the one thing by which they are satisfied. This privilege of the Other thus sketches out the radical form of the gift of something which it does not have, namely, what is called its love. (Lacan, p.125)

This could be a model for the genesis of these works in that they deal in primary loss - the loss of something they never really had - and the attempt to articulate something which they never really can.

(New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

³⁵ See my Chapter 6.

Chapter Six

Dante and the Courtly Love Tradition

I have investigated the relationship between language and mimesis in these key postcolonial and medieval texts, and suggested that an understanding of the medieval scholastic position could illuminate the problems of reading presented in these postcolonial writings. A parallel between medieval and postcolonial writing could be drawn on the basis of a concern with "truth": man's relation to God and man's relation to other, different men, respectively. This, however, would be to return to the position of assuming that medieval and postcolonial writers consider it possible to access such truth. It seems more appropriate, in the evidence of these texts and the perspectival, rather than absolute, truths they present, to consider their presentation of the ultimate *indeterminacy* of truth.

The notion of "process" rather than "end" dominates the structure of Dante's *Commedia* and offers, ultimately, a vision of multiple truth rather than absolute truth. Dante's poem frequently draws on conflicting traditions. At a theological allegorical level, it gains authority and truth-value from the *imitatio Christi* of a three-day absence from the world. It gains authority at the poetic allegorical level from the references to Virgil's *Aeneid*, although this is modified by the poet's relegation to Limbo.¹ The pagan and the Christian references in the *Commedia* are not, however, discontinuous – both involve a descent into an "underworld". Both Achebe and Silko, in their deferral to "other" narratives, and their juxtaposition of conflicting voices, particularly at the close of their texts – the historian's closing narrative of *Things Fall Apart*; the Native American prayer-cycles of *Ceremony* – suggest a similar strategy and offer a similar sense. In this chapter, I will consider the nature of Dante's use of *auctoritas* in the form of allusion,

¹ "The actual moment of his disappearance from the poem as a character simultaneously foregrounds the continuing presence of the text of the Aeneid[...]Yet even as the altissimo poeta disappears as character, his text remains, functioning, indeed, as the very means of articulating the character's disappearance. At the same time, the Virgillian text - as correctively reread by the *Commedia* - continues to provide a model for the ongoing personal salvation history of Dante-protagonist." Kevin Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets" repr. In *The Cambridge Guide to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.100-19, pp.104-05.

particularly to the medieval troubadour tradition, in order to discuss, in the following chapter, the implications of the relation between postcolonial writing and medieval scholasticism.

In deferring authorship, Dante evades the contemporary charge of logocentrism as well as the classical charge of “liar”. He employs poetry not as a medium for truth but in order to investigate the nature of truth. Dante defers to other texts as well as to other authors, aligning himself with a theological definition of allegory:

Theological allegory looks at all reality as though it were so many signs written into a book, of which God is the author. This is what Augustine meant when he said that men use signs to point to things, but only God can use things to point to other things. It is as though there were no “thing-in-itself”, but only signs in the “book” of the universe.²

The sense of all reality as artifice is inherited from Plato, as discussed earlier. More importantly for the medieval theologians, this is explicitly confirmed in the opening of *Genesis*:

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; *and let them be for signs*, and for seasons, and for days, and years.³

In my discussion on the nature of paradise in Chapter Three, I observed that writing engenders the split between the actual and the ideal or, as in the case of *Genesis*, the temporal and the spiritual. For the medieval Schoolmen, creation and artifice were closely connected and analogies of “making” were also applied to poetry. Geoffrey of Vinsauf commented:

If a man has a house to build, his impetuous hand does not rush into action. The measuring line of his mind first lays out the work in a definite order. The mind’s hand shapes the entire house before the body’s hand builds it. Its mode of being is archetypal before it is actual [...]

When due order has arranged the material in the hidden chamber of the mind, let poetic art come forth to clothe the matter with words.⁴

² John Freccero, “Introduction to *Inferno*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp.172-191, p.181.

³ *Genesis* 1;14

⁴ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp.229-240, p.229.

Just as all reality was considered artificial, so all order was considered a sign. Both are kinds of “creation” and as such are “for signs”, as God initially, in the work of *Genesis*, ordained. Vinsauf’s sense is that order exists within the human mind rather than in the world, and requires such external signs (for example, words) in order to be “real”, or present in the external world. Reality (for man) is the matrix of signs perceptible to man, rather than something “in itself”. The circle is adopted as a model for psychological – human - reality, revealing that ineffability rather than fixity (in the temporal sense) is characteristic of medieval ontology.

In their articulations of loss and absence – the nature of human reality - medieval writers frequently depend on a feminine, circular strategy, relying on allusion rather than direct statement. This is consistent with the nature of a reality perceived only indirectly. The processes of allusion, in their alignment of the linear text with the potentially infinite indications of other texts, suggest the notion of the infinite distance between together with the interrelation of creator and subject. Ineffability is the final “goal” of this process and language is both the recognised barrier as well as the vehicle. Allusion commonly takes the form of analogy as a sign of the significant interrelationship as well as of the distance between God and man: their existences are simultaneous but categorically different, as analogy suggests both similarity and difference.

Both the postcolonial and the medieval writers investigated here are intensely aware of the limitations of language. Neither kind, due to the pressures of their respective world orders may dismiss the problem. It is ironic, then, that these writings with their necessary and explicit transcendence of linearity should be relegated to secondary status because of their respective temporal or geographical obscurity to the predominant Western paradigm - by a theoretical dominant predicated on the breakdown of logo/ethnocentrism. Derrida uses the circle as a metaphor for the logocentric view considering its centre a fixed locus and determinable point privileged over other points. His difficulty in naming this point reveals the real difficulty of the argument. He names it *eidōs*, *arche*, *ousia*, God, man. His continual renaming suggests that this locus cannot be known and is not properly fixed. This is precisely Dante’s argument in the *Commedia*. The circle offers infinite regress, It is spatially entrapping but temporally infinite, describing

mystery rather than determinacy. Dante, like the postcolonial writers discussed here, is at pains to demonstrate both the tradition from which he has come as well as an awareness of the tradition of which he will become a part. These writers appropriate other voices in a circular dynamic of allusion and analogy in order to sign their difference and distance from singularising authorities and “truths”. In this they suggest more accurately the nature of the truths from which, in the encircling nature of the sign, they cannot be separated.

The experience of divinity in the *Commedia* is expressed seemingly by default (although this is of course an effect of the poet’s very skill). Divinity – or ultimate reality – cannot be “stated” by the poet. It is never known, quantified or possessed in the poem. The image of a “pearl on a white brow”, which comes as the beginning of the *Paradiso*,⁵ describes the difficulty, for humans, of discriminating between the sign and this reality and suggests that “in truth” – in human proximity to God – there is hardly any perceptible difference, and yet this difference is crucial. In a similar gesture, in *Ceremony*, Tayo renders the subtle nemesis of his recovery “snow on snow”. Again, this is an almost imperceptible distinction but it remains one nonetheless. These images convey a subtlety where reason would begin to falter: they offer pause, appealing to the eye, and the ear of the reader. They appeal to the senses rather than to “sense” alone. The emphasis on the artificial nature of “reality” in these texts – in that it is a human construct, a work of literary art – does not deny the possibility of a further, though humanly imperceptible, reality. The difficult tension of difference is contained and sustained in the poetic image, where in “reality”/nature it would collapse.

Relating texts to other texts is a medieval phenomenon as well as a contemporary one. This chapter will be primarily concerned with the particular intertextualities of Dante’s *Commedia* which suggest his method, and its relevance to the postcolonial situation. It may be expected that the postcolonial analogues I suggest in the next chapter – Achebe to Yeats, Eliot and Conrad; Rhys to Bronte; Silko to Tennyson and Dante – would be ironic given the formative roles of these “precursors” in the development of a culture which destroyed native cultures. To some extent this is true. However, these writers, both traditionally canonical and

postcolonial, share a concern with the processes of writing, rather than simply its representational functions. This allows a relationship at the aesthetic level where they might otherwise conflict. The processes of allusion described in this chapter, in their acknowledgement of, without simplification of, difference, also offer a way of reading of postcolonial works.

The “truth” of the relation between these texts is complex. Achebe’s relation to Conrad and Yeats is difficult in that these writers are central to the Western tradition. Achebe is particularly critical of Conrad, considering *Heart of Darkness* a prime example of the simplifying Western narratives of Africa. Conrad, however, offers resistance to a totalising order from within in being a Pole for whom English was not even a second language. W. B. Yeats, also removed from the administrative/power centre of England, was the self-proclaimed poet of Irish nationalism – and ideologically in direct opposition to British Imperialism. These canonical writers may be understood to engender resistance and cultural multiplicity from within the European tradition. Eliot is of particular interest: as both a historical and a literary figure, he embodies some of the complexity of the postcolonial world. Eliot was the subject of a colonising world itself under colonial domination – initially colonisers themselves, the settlers in America were later forced to fight for independence from British rule. The case of America embodies the complexity and lack of clear boundaries in the processes and hierarchies of colonialism. The terms “coloniser” and “colonised” are shifting, as all other terms. Eliot came to England to write and yet ended his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, with the repeated Sanskrit word “Shantih”. This suggests something of the interrelation engendered despite the artificial divisions of colonialism: Indian tradition has become “a part of” the experience of the English language – as employed by an American. A tradition concerned with re-performance rather than naturalistic portrayal – one which the *auctoritas* trope offers – secures for these authors, both medieval and postcolonial, together with alignment with their precursors, a distinct voice of their own.

Dante’s most resonant series of allusions is to the medieval troubadour tradition. Reflective bodies – a mirror or clear water, and frequently a “fonte” – are common images in this genre, suggesting the inevitable subjectivity of human

⁵ “debili si, che perla in bianca fronte/non vien men tosto alle nostre pupille.” “so faint that a pearl on a white

experience as well as its ultimate figuring of God.⁶ These images are frequently drawn from the classical Ovidian tale, *Narcissus*.⁷ Narcissus's fate, it could be argued, was sealed by his isolation of the sense of vision from the other senses. In this he breaks the chain of being, ignoring the interrelation of experience cohered in the human being. Narcissus specifically ignores hearing: he does not respond to the advances of the nymph Echo. He becomes "deaf" to the dangers of subjectivity. The medieval poets who employ references to this myth do so in order to sign both their awareness of and their distance from such dangers. Reflections, in this tale, contrary to Plato's argument, are seen to have a power and a force all of their own, despite their apparent insubstantiality. Allusions to the tale confer autonomy and power both on the fallen human subject and on the twice-removed-from-reality artist.⁸ The use of Narcissus-imagery in this tradition has implications for postcolonial writing: it offers a model for the engagement with a canon that postcolonial works would seem to challenge, as well as offering significance to writings that come from some "distance" to the centres of power and authority.

Dante makes reference to Narcissus at several points in the *Commedia* but does so most explicitly in the *Paradiso*, as the pilgrim approaches the place where "la verace luce che li appage/da se non lascia lor torcer li piedi".⁹ Reference to deception – specifically, due to singularising views – is made in the context of unquestionable truth (the proximity to God described by the *Paradiso*). Dante's political concern in the *Paradiso* is the harmonisation of mutual social freedom with the gift of individual human freedom – the resolution of apparently irresolvable difference. His allusion to the misperception of Narcissus at this point suggests that the ultimate truth to which the pilgrim – and so the reader – is bound, is perspectival rather than objective. Dante makes conscious and extensive use of the hierarchy of the senses and specifically of sight and sound.

brow does not come less quickly to our eyes." *Paradiso* III; 14-15.

⁶Yolande De Pontfarcy illustrates the connection of Narcissus-allusions with human subjectivity. Particular themes repeat in these allusions, for example "admiration is sought in the eyes of the beloved", in other words, the lover's object of desire is fused with the lover's self-image. "The Myth of Narcissus in Courtly Literature", Yolande de Pontfarcy, in *Echoes of Narcissus*, ed. Lieve Spaas (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000) pp.25-35 p.25.

⁷Ovid "The Story of Echo and Narcissus" in *Metamorphoses* Book Three; ll.313-510 trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), pp.67-73.

⁸Plato argues that the world as only a reflection of Ideal forms finds further reflection in the work of the artist and concludes that such work is therefore of little value.

⁹"the true light that gives them peace does not let them turn their steps from itself."

The hierarchy of *sensoria* discussed in Chapter Two reflects the hierarchical, interlinked nature of the world as well as its relation to the human being. The Narcissus image, with its disturbance of this continuity, is contained within a larger frame of order and truth:

Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
 o ver per acque nitide e tranquile,
 non si profonde che i fondi sien persi,
 tornan di nostri visi le postille
 debili sì, che la perla in bianca fronte
 non vien men tosto alle nostre pupille;
 tali vid'io più facce a parlar pronte;
 per ch'io dentro all'error contrario corsi
 a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte.
 Subito si com'io di lor m'accorsi,
 quelle stimando specchiati sembianti,
 per veder di cui fosser, li occhi torsi;
 e nulla vidi, e ritorsili avanti
 dritti nel lume della dolce guida (*Paradiso* III; 32-3.)¹⁰

The description involves a double negative – “the opposite error” - which enacts the “turning back” identified in Aquinas’s description of the three-stage process of freewill. The protagonist turns from a reliance on the senses, reflecting and re-enacting the breaking of the symbolic bond – the turning back on a promise made - which characterises this sphere. The later act of the pilgrim (chronologically, though not in the narrative of the poem) makes the significance of the earlier act – Piccarda’s turning, though by force, from her vow - clear. She is, by association with the pilgrim’s prologue to her story “in error” and has misunderstood the nature of will. The second turning (Piccarda’s) “returns” to the first (the pilgrim’s) in order to drive the message home. It is well-served by the image of the doubling and clarifying mirror. The subject becomes clear in “the mirror” of the pilgrim’s misperception, which is made explicit in the questions he puts to Beatrice in *Paradiso* IV.

This clarification occurs, of course, in its doubling or re-enaction in the language of the poem. To simply state that the human being has freewill would be a

¹⁰ “As through smooth and transparent glass, or through limpid and still water not so deep that the bottom is lost, the outlines of our faces return so faint that a pearl on a white brow does not come less quickly to our eyes, many such faces I saw, eager to speak; at which I ran into the opposite error to that which kindled love between the man and the spring. The moment I was aware of them, taking them for reflected semblances, I turned my eyes to see whose they were, and saw nothing, and turned them forward again straight into the light of my sweet guide.” *Paradiso*, III; 10-23.

very different project to Dante's subtle rendering of tensions and the challenge freewill implies – not least in unravelling the implications of this difficult canto. Several interlinked levels of analogy, appropriately, sign the severally interlinked nature of the truths this canto would indicate. The apparent fictions of the literal letter – the poem of *Metamorphoses* for example – are employed to sign the higher truths – an image of Paradise - but this depends on the retroactive methods of poetry. The linguistic devices of repetition, rhyme and most significantly, of allusion, achieve a re-enactment of an earlier “event” which not only indicates the original but modifies it. This method reveals a truth which, because of its highly subjective nature - the subject here being subjectivity - could not be revealed directly in the generalising terms of language. This dynamic is both linear and circular: it describes progression as a result of a circular movement.

Achebe also reveals an engagement with the processes of literary construction and retrospective truths:

In a situation in which colonial rule had established its authority by inventing and insisting on the racial inferiority of the African, novels set in the past such as *Things Fall Apart* were retrospective attempts to understand the origins of the current crisis¹¹

Colonialism, as noted by Walcott¹², is predicated on the artificial constructions of hierarchy. Postcolonial writing involves the appropriation of fictionalising terms to political ends. Hierarchy in the postcolonial world is an imposed and artificial phenomenon, but no less real for that. Hierarchy in the medieval world was the very real consequence of sin rendering man's existence in a sense “fictive” - based upon deception and distance.

The postcolonial world may be understood to mirror some of the conditions of the medieval world with regard to the processes of the sign. The dynamic of reversal in *Paradiso III* can help clarify the reversed natures of hierarchy in postcolonial and medieval writing. The difference-simultaneous-with-similarity which this *canto* signs, suggests in its evocation of hierarchy, the possibilities of resistance in a violent world. The postcolonial writer, according to Achebe, cannot

¹¹ *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, p.44.

¹² Derek Walcott *What the Twilight Says*, p.40. See discussion in my Chapter 3.

avoid the task of re-enacting the coloniser's act of cultural construction if he is to be "true" either as a postcolonial subject or as a writer – the colonial experience has shaped the postcolonial. The model for agency revealed in Dante's sphere of "The Violence of Others" - a method of significant re-enaction – is investigated in this chapter as a model for agency in the brutalised world of the postcolonial writer. This model depends on the simultaneity of hierarchy and the circular. It manifests in the motifs of the ladder of love and the circle. These become fused in the poetic tradition the *Commedia* traces: the feminine inspiration of the ladder in the Courtly Love tradition incorporates the circular into the apparently linear. The *strada al dio* can be observed in contemporary (agnostic) theory in the phallic mother identified by Lacan - a fictionalising construction of the absent female as the starting point in the journey to wholeness, whether the destination is God or, as Hughes argues, the sublimation of God into the unconscious of the self, as argued previously.¹³

In *Paradiso* III, the pilgrim meets Piccarda Donati who promised herself, after the example of the Empress Constance, to a convent. This sphere is the lowest of the heavens and is characterised by the vow: "Faithfulness marred by inconstancy". The medieval insistence on the vow derived from the feudal relationship between lord and vassal: the vassal would be kissed by the lord and in return for protection would offer allegiance. The play between absolute power and the demonstration of a "free" act mirrored the relationship between divine and temporal wills. The position of woman in the later medieval period was dependent on her committal to either a temporal or divine "sposo"- marriage or holy orders – reflecting the feudal bond underpinning the society of the time. In effect, love, at least amongst the ruling classes, was at a remove from the political and economic factors surrounding marriage. Distance described the social sphere as well as the theological - desire and its satisfaction were often part of separate spheres, as the troubadour songs of this period demonstrate: these poets could only address the unattainable (usually because married) lady. The experience of sensual love was frequently, in this tradition, sublimated into divine love: "Earthly chivalry is beautiful and essential but eventually leads to the even more beautiful, essential

¹³ Ted Hughes "The Poetic Self" in *Winter Pollen*, p.270. See discussion in my Chapter 5.

militia Christi".¹⁴ The allusion to this tradition at the lowest level of Paradise, in Dante's scheme, is consistent with the description of an approach to God. It is a direct development of more sensual references in the *Inferno*. Progress, in Dante's scheme, involves a circling motion: the full significance of the Narcissus allusion in *Paradiso III* depends on its retrospective echoing of the courtly love allusions of *Inferno V*.

The *Commedia* is a poem consciously inspired by an absent beloved (or ideal type). In this, the poem is at a remove from its temporal as well as its divine source. It is also "reflecting" an already well-established literary tradition, as discussed above. The postcolonial use of the trope of the distant female figure follows Dante. Dante presents his work as a divine vision in a vernacular language – a doubly fallen medium – emphasising that he remains earthbound in his art and so at an ultimate remove from God. Tropologically, analogically and anagogically, the *Commedia* is consistent in its positing of absence as a central concern. In conjunction with the Narcissus references, two other myths, the story of Tristan and Isolde and the Holy Grail legend, are in evidence. These further analogies, in the diversion they present, and the complexity they engender, allow Dante to sign his particular vision of truth by a process of fine discrimination. This reflects the nature of the human world as a series of signs.

The Tristan and Isolde myth links *Paradiso III* with *Inferno V* in a manner which reveals the subtlety of Dante's method of signing. It is an important source for the medieval French prose *Lancelot*, which forms the conceit of the two pivotal cantos. In the Thomas *Tristan*,¹⁵ the protagonist is separated from his mistress Isolt of Ireland. He takes a wife (Isolt of Brittany) but finds that he cannot consummate the marriage on noticing the ring given to him by his former mistress. He is rendered both impotent and bitter, and, as Calin comments, turns instead to art:

As it is the lover addresses directly, with tenderness and passion, neither his wife nor his mistress, but his mistress's statue, built by himself in a grotto [...] Finally we find Tristan's only personal contribution to his universe, the Hall of Images. In the cave

¹⁴ *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*, William Calin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.140.

¹⁵ *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas* ed Felix Lecoy (Paris: Champion, 1991).

Tristan has carved sculptures of Isolt [...]He regresses to narcissism, living only in his dream world of fantasms, unable to cope with reality.¹⁶

Thrice removed from reality (and the “original” Isolt) Tristan may be compared to the figure in Plato’s allegory of the cave. This figure also turns inwards, concentrating on “all sorts of artefact, human statuettes[...] carved in stone and animals in wood and all kinds of materials”¹⁷ as if they were real. The objects of love in both Ovid’s *Narcissus* and this version of *Tristan*, as in Dante’s *Commedia*, are explicitly artificial beings. Whether reflection, statue or poem, all three are “manmade”, and are the projections of these men. Dante is not avoiding Plato’s charge, but is actively and severally engaged with it. His reference to this myth in these cantos concerned, as I shall demonstrate below, with the Courtly Love tradition, signs an essential continuity between the Platonic argument and the Christian world as a series of signs. Dante’s use of *auctoritas* is a model for the possible containment of difference within poetic language.

The story of Paolo and Francesca of *Inferno* V, in the “Circle of the Lustful”, concerns a pair of lovers who were moved to infidelity by the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. The Aristotelian circular end of “moving” an audience is doubly represented in the story of a poem told within the frame of another poem. These tellings take the linear form of writing. The effect is redoubled in the Dante protagonist as audience to Francesca’s retelling, which is reflected in the *Commedia*’s

¹⁶ *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*, pp.54-55.

¹⁷ “Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.

[...]

Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent.

[...]

in the first place prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of one another, except the shadows thrown by the fire-light on the wall of the Cave facing them,

[...]

Now, if they could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows which they saw?

[...]

And suppose their prison had an echo from the wall facing them? When one of the people crossing behind them spoke, they could only suppose that the sound came from the shadow passing before their eyes.

[...]

In every way, then, such prisoners would recognise as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.” Plato, *Republic* from Book VII,[515] trans. Cornford, pp.222-3.

presentation to the present reader. Tristan, to add another level of textual reflection, and of artifice, is named as one of the condemned of this circle:

Elena vedi, per cui tanto veo
 tempo si volse, e vedi il grande Achille,
 Che con amore al fine combatteo
 Vedi Paris, Tristano; e piu di mille
 ombre mostrommi e nominommi a ditto
 ch'amor di nostra vita dipartille. (*Inferno* V; 64-69)¹⁸

Lovers not only of history/myth but specifically of poetry are grouped together. In invoking the “ladder of love” – in referring to these two separate stories popular in the Courtly Love tradition - the canto uncovers a ladder of poetry. The sensual level (the first rung of the ladder) is represented in the references to the Troubadour tradition, the divine end (the highest rung) in the overall structure of the “sacra poema” which is the *Commedia*.

Elements of this canto may be traced to Bernard de Ventadorn’s poem “Can Vei La Lauzeta Mover”, compare

can vei la lauzeta mover
 de joi sas alas contra.l rai,
 que s'oblid'e.s laissa chaser
 per la doussor c'al cor li rai,
 ai! Tan grans enveyon m'en ve
 de cui qu'eu veyau jauzion
 meravilhas ai. car desse
 lo cor de dezirer no.m fon (1-8)¹⁹

with

Quali colombe, dal disio chiamate,
 con l'ali alzate e erme al dolce nido
 vegnon per l'aere dal voler portate;
 cotali uscir della schiera ov'e Dido
 a noi venendo per L'aere maligno
 si forte fu L'affettuoso grido (*Inferno* V; 82-7)²⁰

¹⁸ “...see Helen, for whose sake so many years of ill revolved; and see the great Achilles, who fought at the last with love; see Paris, Tristan...” and he showed me more than a thousand shades, naming them as he pointed, whom love parted from our life.”

¹⁹ “When I see the lark move
 Its wings against the rays of the sun
 So joyfully that it forgets itself and lets itself drop
 For the sweetness that touches my heart,
 Alas! So great is my jealousy
 For anybody whom I see having joy
 That I wonder that my heart
 Does not melt with desire.”

Both use the symbol of the bird and its wings to suggest the overwhelming intensity of the love experience identified as “joie” more generally in the Courtly Love tradition, rendered “enveyon”/“dezirer” in Ventadorn and “voler” in Dante - implying flight of imagination beyond reason necessary to the perception of the highest truths. It also lays the foundation, at least in terms of association, for later images of transcendent birds, such as the eagle of *Paradiso*. The allusions influence one another in a progressive but circular dynamic rather than either linearly or as an end in themselves. The later image of *Paradiso* III infuses the earlier one of *Inferno* V with the higher function of divine love. In doing so it marks even more emphatically the shortfall of these original lovers. The point is made in retrospect. Allusions allude to other allusions in the *Commedia*, effacing the sense of either origin or end and “fixing” meaning in an ongoing process of reading. This is consistent with the other imagery and structures signing indeterminacy observed in the poem. The poem offers a divine subject to the reader line by line but avoids reducing its impact to the linear.²¹

Dante’s allusion to the *Lancelot* text is illustrative: it occurs in the “Circle of the Lustful” in a deeply Christian vision. Plato argues that poetry is detrimental because it is a mere reflection, but Dante seems to suggest it is this very reflective

²⁰ “As doves, summoned by desire, come with wings poised and motionless to the sweet nest, borne by their will through the sir, so these left the troop where Dido is, coming to us through the malignant air; such force had my loving call.”

²¹ Dante’s allusions, at certain points in the *Commedia*, develop a complexity in which his methodology continues to create the effect even though some of the parallel texts could not have been originally intended by the poet. The original *Lancelot* poem, the medieval French *The Knight of the Cart* by Chretien de Troyes, although not available to Dante was known to the writer of the prose *Lancelot* with which Dante was familiar. In the prologue to his second romance, *Cliges*, Chretien gives a list of his works to date:

cil qui fist d’Erec et d’Enide,
 Et les comandemanz d’Ovide
 Et l’art d’amors en romanz mist,
 Et le mors de l’espaule fist,
 Del roi Marc et d’Iseut ls blonde,
 Et de la hupe et de l’aronde
 Et del rossignol la muance,
 Un novel conte recomance
 D’un vaslet qui an Grece fu
 Del lignage le roi Artu. (ll.1-10)

Chretien reveals that he translated Ovid, specifically parts of *Metamorphoses* - the Pelops story and that of Philomela - as well as writing about Isolde. There is no mention of the *Lancelot* story, suggesting that it was composed after *Cliges*. This implies that it will have, inevitably, drawn on the techniques developed in his earlier (Ovid-influenced) writings. Dante’s allusions to Narcissus and references to the prose *Lancelot* - unbeknown to him - bear the traces of a text that is, in turn, influenced by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

quality that lends it such power. Poetry may create effects which last for eternity though only the reflection of a reflection. If man has his most true being in his reflection of God, then poetry (at another level) may be seen to have the same in its reflection of man. The density of cross-references (not all of which Dante may control) implicate the reader in the action of the canto in that to read it at the most informed level one would have to be intimately acquainted with the type of as well as the exact text which precipitated Paolo and Francesca's fate. Dante develops a conceit in which life must imitate art. The artifice of poetry is in this sense "truer" than the truth it supposedly reflects.

Linda Paterson in her essay "Fin'amor and the Development of the Courtly Canso"²² acknowledges the questionable moral status of the troubadours and comments that it was strange that the Church didn't more openly oppose the *fin'amour* tradition. She reveals that her reaction is not unique:

Denomy pointed out in 1933 the heretical implications of setting up a form of profane love, which as Christians the troubadours knew to be sinful and immoral, as a source of good. His explanation was to see the troubadours as operating a form of "double truth" which had analogies in Christian attitudes to the new waves of Aristotelian science being assimilated in the West (a proposition could be held to be true according to philosophy yet false according to revelation), and which compartmentalised different aspects of intellectual and spiritual life²³

She also argues that articulations of love were often vague and ambiguous, "encouraged by the permeability of erotic and mystical language in the Middle Ages" (p.37). Dante's allusions to Ventadorn and cross-references to *Tristan* and *Narcissus* suggest duplicity thematically, linguistically and in the "doubling" of allusions which contain a secondary reference to another text.

Relations between Paolo and Francesca are suggested rather than described. Francesca does not speak the name of her lover:

Per piu fiate li occhi ci sospinse
 quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;
 ma solo un punto fu quell che ci vines.
 Quando leggemmo il disiato viso

²² in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed.s S. Gaunt and S. Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.28-46.

²³ p.35, see also A.J. Denomy, "Concerning the accessibility of Arabic influences to the earliest Provençal troubadours" in *Medieval Studies*, 15 (1953), pp.143-58.

esser baciato da cotanto amante,
 questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
 la bocca mi bacio tutto tremante.
 Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse:
 quel giorno piu non vi leggemmo avante. (*Inferno* V; 130-8)²⁴

The book is personified as “Galeotto”, a character in the prose *Lancelot* whose name became synonymous with the deceptions of the philanderer. The true lover is left nameless. Language is associated with duplicity figuratively as well as literally: Galeotto may be seen as the male protagonist’s double in the *Lancelot*. Nomenclature is associated with the false. The effect on the emotions of such literary restraint is not to be underestimated, however, as Dante testifies to in the Freudian “little death” of the pilgrim at the close of the canto:

Mentre che l’uno spirito questo disse,
 l’altro piangea, si che di pietade
 io caddi come uno morto cadde. (*Inferno* V; 139-42)²⁵

This text would appear to have a very active “unconscious” with very material effects: the unspoken story of a condemned soul (the very epitome of the “voiceless”) causes the still-living poet and pilgrim (the very opposite) to lose consciousness. It is, it seems, what language cannot say but still convey that “moves”. Poetry does not depend, in Dante, on its materiality for its material effects.

According to Denomy,

Courtly love is a type of sensual love and what distinguishes it from other forms of sexual love, from married love, is its purpose or motive, its formal object, namely the lover’s progress and growth in natural goodness, merit and worth.²⁶

A parallel sentiment, though in a very different context demonstrating the two analogical extremes of the love-allegiance of courtly romance, is revealed in St Bernard’s exposition in sensual terms of the longing of the soul for union with God

²⁴ “Many times that reading drew our eyes together and changed the colour in our faces, but one point alone it was that mastered us; when we read that the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, he who never shall be.” parted from me, all trembling, kissed my mouth. *A Galeotto* was the book and he that wrote it; that day we read in it no farther.”

²⁵ “While the one spirit said this the other wept so that for pity I swooned as if in death and dropped like a dead body.”

²⁶ A.J. Denomy “Courtly Love and Courtliness” *Speculum*, 28 (1953), pp.44-63, p.44.

(S. Bernardi *Opera*, I-II). In both of these, sensuality becomes associated with moral progress, though these two might seem, to a modern reader, to be incompatible. Courtly love becomes a means of transformation, following the Aristotelian end of poetry in persuasion.

The influence of the Cistercian, St Bernard, is in evidence in the prose *Lancelot*:

And when the knight was well nigh a half league or more distant, it chanced that Lancelot sat up where he was *like a man that has just wholly awakened*, and he bethought him *if what he had seen were a dream or the truth* for he knew not if what he had seen were a dream or the truth, for he knew not if he had seen the Holy Grail, or if had dreamt it. And then he turned him and he espied the candle stick before the altar, but he saw naught of that which it would have liked him best to see, to wit the Holy Grail, whereof an he might he would fain have had true tidings. [my italics]²⁷

The mystic dream-vision, in the medieval period, is in a tradition deeply influenced by the writings of St Bernard. Dante's subtle allusion to St. Bernard via the prose *Lancelot* locates another kind of *auctoritas* in the vision of the *Commedia*:

When Lancelot had looked long while within the grill, so that he might see aught of that whereof he had the greatest desire, anon he heard a voice that said to him, "Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more naked and barren than the fig-tree, how went thou so bold that thou durst enter into the place where to the Holy Grail repaired? Get thee gone from here, for the place is polluted by thy presence. (Prose *Lancelot*, p.357)

A biblical authority is invoked by the omniscient "voice", and the image of the fig-tree.²⁸

²⁷ Anonymous, *Prose Lancelot*, ed. C.G. Coulton and Eileen Power, trans. Lucy Allen Paton (London: Routledge, 1929).

²⁸ Weston argues in her book *From Ritual to Romance* that Holy Grail symbolism draws on earlier vegetation and fertility rites, the chalice symbolising female genitalia and the lance, male: "We may, I think, take it that we have established at least the possibility that in the Grail romances we possess, in literary form, an example of the *detritus* above referred to, the fragmentary record of the secret ritual of a Fertility cult." Jessie Weston *From Ritual to Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1920), p.66.

Lancelot is denied the vision of the grail because he is deemed impure as a result of his relations with Arthur's wife, Guinevere. Although Dante would not have known Chretien's earlier poem *The Knight of the Cart* - in which Lancelot commits adultery in Guinevere's prison room (he pulls apart the bars of the grill to enter) - this event is explicitly referred to in the prose scene above. From a certain perspective (Lancelot's at least), Guinevere may be said to be a kind of grail, her body a version of or a means to the relic of Christ's physical body. It is finally Lancelot's son, Galahad - born of woman though himself still "pure" - on whom is bestowed the honour of retrieving the Holy Grail. Although Dante would not have been aware of this original scene and the parallel "grail" of the woman's body

Dante's veiled references to St. Bernard of Clairvaux confirm his depiction of sensual love as merely the first (though necessary) step in the journey to Divine Love. The representation of this in a dream was common to poetry by this time. Later, the *strada al dio* motif explicitly rendered in a dream in the later medieval Scottish poem *The Kingis Quair*. This poem follows the Boethian pattern of analytical love (see also Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*). The dreamer passes from a conversation with Venus (who asks whether it is not merely lust he feels for his lady), then to Minerva (goddess of philosophy/wisdom) and then to Fortune - who leads the dreamer through a progression from philosophy to divinity and finally to a mystic vision.²⁹ The lady of the walled garden who precipitated the dream is meanwhile lost from view. The actual woman, once again, remains obscure. Coulton and Power, in their edition of the Prose *Lancelot* in English, identify the influence of St. Bernard on the prose *Lancelot*:

According to whom dreams are one of the inferior means by which Divine revelations are made to man. Lancelot by reason of his sin can receive only thus imperfectly the revelations of God's grace. (Prose *Lancelot*, p.409)

Dante argues that reason should not be subjected to desire. "Enno dannati I peccator carnali/Che la ragion sommettono al talento"(28-39). In alluding to the standards of knightly aspiration outlined by the fay of *Lancelot* and in his use of the term "cavalieri", Dante demonstrates a close textual attention to the *Lancelot* rather than a vague literary allusion. Dante makes specific mention of the ladies and knights of the courtly tradition. He uses the term "cavalier" which, with reference to *Lancelot*, opens up a very precise discourse:

(with all the duplicity such a reading could confer upon his already dense text), the emphatic reference to the Garden of Eden after the fall ("more naked and barren") in the prose *Lancelot* confirms a confluence of allusions.

²⁹ The symbolism at the end of the poem returns to the earlier themes:

"In hye unto the window gan I walk,
Moving within my spirit of this sight,
Quhare sodeynly a turtur, quhite as calk,
So evinly upon my hand gan light
And unto me sche turnyt hir full right
Off quham the chere in hir birdis apert
Gave me in hert kalendis of confort."

Kingis Quair 177; 1-7 in *Mercat Anthology*, p.52.

The editor comments of this passage: "The turtle dove was a sign of married fidelity. After the dream, the poet returns to the early romantic situation (cf.sts. 72-4) armed with knowledge, moral and divine."

And wit ye well that at the beginning, even as it is written, none was so hardy that he mounted on a horse if he were not already a knight. And for this reason were knights called horsemen or cheval-iers (*Lancelot*, p.97)

The definition of knighthood is, at least in part, the material realisation of one's inner qualities - the reflection in the mirror of the world of an inner state. One must be "already a knight". The fay has just explained the meaning of this hardness:

"I will set forth to you the duties of a knight" said the Lady, "So far as I know them, but not all, for I have not wit enough. And none the less hearken well when ye listen to them, and give your heart and reason thereto with loyalty, for since that ye have the desire to be a knight, ye should not so urge on your desire that ye first regard not reason. For reason and understanding were given to man that he might undertake to do aught [...] (*Lancelot*, p.96)

Clearly Dante has not referred to the prose *Lancelot* text merely as an example. His lovers were empathetically "moved" to enact what they had read. Their fault was to have not had enough "regard [for] reason". His message of *Inferno* V is "reflected" in an allusion within the frame of a direct reference. Dante demonstrates the continuity between the literal and the anagogical levels in referring both to poetry and to the writings of St. Bernard in a manner which implicates both within a single poetic form, albeit a complex and subtle one.

Beatrice identifies, in *Paradiso* IV, a phenomenon that returns to the necessity of using the correct means to appropriate ends, and in so doing, confirms the hierarchical pattern evidenced in the *Inferno* V/ *Paradiso* III relation. She returns to man's dependence on his five senses in explaining the pilgrim's confusion at the conflicting versions of the story he has received. She draws his attention to movement, vision and hearing in describing his difficulty:

Ma or ti s'attraversa *un altro passo*
 dinanzi *alli occhi*, tal, che per te stesso
 non usciresti, pria saresti lasso.
 Io t'ho per certo nella mente messo
 ch'alma beata non poria mentire,
 pero ch'e sempre al primo vero appresso;
 e poi potesti da Piccarda *udire*

che L'affezion del vel Costanza tenne;
 si ch'ella par qui meco contadire.³⁰

The particular emphasis on the visual, continuing the Narcissus theme of the previous canto, suggests the paradox relies on a perspectival resolution:

Voglia assoluta non consente al danno;
 ma condentevi in tanto in quanto teme,
 se si ritrae, cadere in piu affanno.
 Pero, quando Piccarda quello sprema,
 della voglia assoluta intende, e io
 dell'altra; si che ver diciamo insieme.³¹

The image of “si ritrae” echoes the pilgrim’s Narcissus-experience, of pulling back from trusting his senses. The appeal to aural/visual memory reiterates the immaterial nature of the truths this poem will ultimately sign.

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that Plato’s *Republic* betrays a suspicion of shadows and reflections. Frazer has this to say:

As some people believe a man’s soul to be in his shadow, so other (or the same) peoples believe it to be in his reflection in water or in a mirror [...]
 We can now understand why it was a maxim both in ancient India and ancient Greece not to look at one’s reflection in water, and why the Greeks regarded it as an omen of death if a man dreamed of seeing himself so reflected. They feared that the water-spirits would drag the person’s reflection or soul under water, leaving him soulless to perish. This was probably the origin of the classical story of the beautiful Narcissus, who languished and died through seeing his reflection in the water³²

Louise Vinge comments on the relationship between shadow and reflection in Ovid’s tale:

What Narcissus sees in the water and mistakes for another person is called both *imago* and *umbra* (it is important here [...] to point out that the words for shadow and reflection remain interchangeable for a long time and that they also stand for the “shadows” of the dead [...])³³

³⁰ “But now another hard place lies across the away before thine eyes, such that thou wouldest not get past it by thyself before being exhausted. I have set it surely in thy mind that a soul in bliss cannot lie, since it is always near the primal truth, and than thou couldest hear from Piccarda that Constance kept her love for the veil; so that here she seems to contradict me.” *Paradiso IV*; 91-99.

³¹ “The absolute will does not consent to the wrong, but the will consents in so far as it fears, by drawing back, to fall, into more trouble; Piccarda, therefore in what she says, means the absolute will, and I the other, so that we both speak truth.” *Paradiso IV*; 109-14.

³² James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), p.192.

³³ Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme* (Skanska Centraltryckeriet: Lund, 1967), p.12.

Dante's use of the term "ombre" to describe the figures of the underworld, may be seen, from the context of the evidence given above, to draw on both Ovid's double sense and on the argument from Plato, implying several removes. These shades signify the dead but in human form, thereby reflecting the perceiver rather than the perceived, and relative truths rather than ultimate (unknowable) truth. His allusions to the Ovidian story of Narcissus act as analogous means to the illustration of the hierarchical nature of the universe: materially, in the content of the story, morally in the interlinking senses, allegorically in the references the Ovidian tale makes, and analogically in the mystery that the imago/umbra signs in its suggestion of God. These analogous levels generate a discourse of their own, which extends far beyond the actual text of Dante's poem.

Dante's more literal allusions to troubadour poetry rely on reflective imagery, emphasising the distant and artificial – and therefore "true" – nature of the body of his own poem. Ventadorn's "Can Vei La Lauzeta Mover" opens with reference to Narcissus, although this only becomes clear later in the poem:

ai! tan grans enveya m'en ve
de cui qu'eu veyau jauzion
meravilhas ai, car desse
lo cor de dezirer no.m fon (ll.4-7)³⁴

This allusion is a veiled one, depending on a pun on the word "fon" which is both a verb and a noun. In this context it means "melt" but it can also mean "fountain". This second meaning is unmistakably indicated in the final stanza of the poem:

Miralhs, pus me mirei en te
m'an mort li sospir de preon
c'aissi.m perdei com perdet se
lo bels Narcisus en la fon (ll.20-23)³⁵

³⁴ "great envy of those whom I see filled with happiness comes to me. I marvel that my heart does not melt at once from desire." *The Songs Of Bernart de Ventadorn* ed trans. Stephen G. Nichols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), pp.166-8.

³⁵ "Mirror, since I saw myself reflected in you, deep sighs have been killing me. I have destroyed myself just as the beautiful Narcissus destroyed himself in the fountain."

The meaning of the word – the literal and so the linear – is determined ultimately by the poetic structure – fictive and circular. The production of meaning by means of repetition is indicated in the cantos in which Dante refers not only to Narcissus-imagery but specifically to Ventadorn's poem. His evocation of interrelation manifests both literally and allegorically. The image of the ladder of love is reinforced in every possible reading.

Yolande de Pontfarcy, in her essay "The Myth of Narcissus in Courtly Literature" observes:

throughout courtly literature the myth of Narcissus served as a mirror in which poets reflected their own creativity. Bernard de Ventador and the anonymous author of the *Lai de Narcise* exploited the narcissistic vision as an apotrophic means of exorcising the dangers of repetition and affirming their originality as authors.³⁶

The tension in Dante's writing between originality and tradition is focussed in this allusion to Ventadorn. Courtly Love poetry is frequently engaged, as noted, with the image of the mirror: admiration is sought in the eyes of the beloved; mirrors may be seen to erase the borders between life and death, self and reality and illusion, and also to facilitate the imaginative faculty of the poet.³⁷ Representations of Earthly Paradise – and sensual fulfilment - in these works often involve descriptions of a garden with a fountain under a tree at the centre.³⁸ Pontfarcy comments that this garden offers a "sacred space of primordial revelations" (Pontfarcy, p.30). Dante's allusions to this tradition in his salvation poem are highly specific.

Transformation is also the ultimate end-point of Aristotle's persuasive justification of poetics. *Tristan* contains elements of the *Pygmalion* story (which

³⁶ "The Myth of Narcissus in Courtly Literature", Yolande de Pontfarcy, in *Echoes of Narcissus*, ed. Lieve Spaas (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000) pp.25-35, p.32.

³⁷ Vinge cites: Vinge 1976:42-8; Goldin 1967:69-106; Frappier 1976:149-66, 181-98.

³⁸ See Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*: "Amonges othere of his honest thinges,/He made a gardin walled al with stoon;/ So fair a gardin woot I nowher noon/ For out of doute I verrailly suppose/ That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose/ Ne coude of it the beautee wel devyse;/ Ne Priapus ne mighte nat suffyse/Though he be god of gardins – for to telle/The beautee of the gardin, and the welle/That stood under a laurer alweay grene." Ll. 784-793.

C. Hugh Holman comments on the sustained though modified Courtly Love motifs in Chaucer's later works: "The breath of a wholesome reality blows across Chaucer's pilgrims when they gather at the Tabard. The world in which they move is not the isolated garden of love where the rose of romance is to be plucked according to the rules of a misread Ovid; in fact the garden may have become for Geoffrey the Pilgrim in some ways similar to that equally attractive garden which January maintains in order to distort some of the strength and joy of the world into weakness and lust."

"Courtly Love in the Merchant's and the Franklin's Tales" in *Chaucer; Modern Essays in Criticism* ed. Edward Wagenknecht (NY: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp.240-250, p.240.

follows *Narcissus* in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) as well as of *Narcissus*. In *Pygmalion* the protagonist appears to consider himself superior to *Narcissus*: he can take his statue in his arms whereas *Narcissus* cannot even touch his beloved. The story illustrates man's ultimate dependence on divine power for his artistic works - no matter how technically accomplished the artist may be. In this case, the protagonist needs the help of the goddess *Venus*:

the ultimate sources of life come from God, reiterating [Ovid's] distinction between the ideal artistic universe which remains human, and the sacred which belongs to the divine. (Pontfarcy, p.32)

In the *Roman de la Rose* this sense of ultimate division between the human (material) and godly (divine) realms is articulated in the Jean de Meun section:

In consequence, the story of *Pygmalion* and *Venus*, which precedes that of the brutal deflowering of the *Rose* which ends the romance, sets the artistic creation, the sexual act and the birth of the book all in the sphere of human creativity, while at the same time leaving to God alone the sacred mystery of origins (Pontfarcy, p.32)

Pygmalion reverses the "ladder of love" conceit so that divinity is a means to sensual love. At the same time, however, it reaffirms the connection between the material level and the divine: there is no life without God but nothing to animate without clay. The possibility of this reversal, or mirror image, implies the infinite connection between all things. The relationship between the higher and lower orders does not break down when the pattern is reversed. The necessity of all levels, even the basic, is signed in the multiplicity this doubling (the reflection) engenders.

Lancelot himself may be considered a *Narcissus*-figure, the *Lancelot* text offering a reflection within an allusion of another allusion, both of which occur within Dante's poems. This begins, analogously, to sign the infinite complexity of the world he would describe. Lancelot is represented in terms which echo those of Ovid's tale:

And he was, as the story saith, the fairest child in the world and the best fashioned in form and limb (p.74)³⁹

In an adventure in early youth, Lancelot is separated from his hunting companions in a forest. He meets with “a passing fair youth, with the first down on his cheek”. This figure may be considered a symbolic double to Lancelot’s adolescent self: the encounter is parallel to Narcissus’s meeting with Echo and his reflection in the pool.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Lancelot’s “mother” (the woman who brings him up) is “The Lady of the Lake”, who in her watery associations may be compared to the blue-water nymph, Liriope - the mother of Narcissus. Despite the connections between Dante’s *Inferno* V and *Narcissus*, the only explicit reference to the myth occurs at the opposite end of the poem’s trajectory, in *Paradiso* III as discussed above. Dante mentions the subject of *Paradiso* III, Piccarda, in the *Purgatorio* when the pilgrim meets her brother, Forese Donati, on the terrace of the gluttonous. He asks Forese where his sister is and learns “My sister, of whom I know not if she was more fair or good, already triumphs in high Olympus, blissful in her crown.” According to Sinclair:

These words suggest the glory of a Greek goddess and might seem intentionally paradoxical when applied to the gentle and gracious spirit we meet here⁴¹

I would argue, however, that they are more literal than this. The desire to dedicate oneself to a life of chastity and spirituality has a precedent in Greek pagan practice in the cult of Diana. The prose *Lancelot* makes reference to both traditions, the Christian and the pagan. In chapter II, the lake at which the Queen waits with the infant Lancelot and from which the fay appears, the reader discovers

[this place] had been named from the days of the pagans the lake of Diana. And there was no lady in the world that more loved woodland pleasures, and every day she went to the chase, and the foolish heathen folk called her the goddess of the woods[...]And it was called the Wood within the Vale (Prose *Lancelot*, p.64)

³⁹ “In time she bore a child, most beautiful/Even as a child, gave him the name Narcissus [...]” Ovid *Metamorphoses* “Echo and Narcissus”, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), II; 345-46.

⁴⁰ “He was out hunting one day [...] By chance Narcissus/ Lost track of his companions, started calling/ “Is anybody here?” and “Here!” said Echo.” Ibid., II;358-81.

⁴¹ *Paradiso*, p.57.

In chapter IV, we are given a summary of the story of the passing abbess with two nuns and hear of how the two widowed queens, sisters Eraine (Lancelot's mother) and Elaine (his aunt), are persuaded to join them. They remain together in a convent of the Royal Minster where they mourn their lost husbands and sons.

The cumulative effect of these paradoxically chaste and virginal mothers - the Queens; The Lady of the Lake (she has "never known man" but has a "son"); the Empress Constance "who bore to the second blast of Swabia the third and last Potentate" and yet "was a sister [who] never loosed from the veil on the heart"- is to evoke the image of the Virgin Mary. Julia Kristeva has this to say:

If in speaking of a woman, it is impossible to say what she is – for to do so would risk abolishing her difference – might matters not stand differently with respect to the mother, motherhood being the sole function of the "other sex" to which we may confidently attribute existence? Yet here, too, we are caught in a paradox. To begin with, we live in a civilisation in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealised primitive mother as an idealization of the – unlocalisable – relationship between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism."⁴²

Speaking of woman then, according to Kristeva, is to speak of a spatial model dependent on individual/subjective perspective and an original sense of loss. In this, and on the basis of the parallels drawn so far, it is also to suggest the connection between medieval scholasticism and the postcolonial project. She goes on to comment:

The highly complex relationship between Christ and his mother served as a matrix within which other relations – God to mankind, man to woman, son to man etc took shape; this relationship soon gave rise to questions involving not only causality but also time. If Mary is prior to Christ, and if he, or at any rate his humanity originates with her, then must she not too be immaculated? ("Stabat Mater", p.166).

This spatial model of the Virgin Mary, suggesting the figure of the circle, is in sympathy with Dante's chain of allusions, implying the hierarchical and the linear in

⁴² Julia Kristeva "Stabat Mater" in *Kristeva Reader* ed Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.160-186, p.161.

its multiple analogies. Dante draws attention to the “immaculation” process of these figures - Beatrice, Piccarda, Constance and by implication the Queens of *Lancelot* and the Lady of the Lake - completing the highest order of allegorical signification in their alignment with the mother of Christ. This fuses the material level with the spiritual level in line with the theological argument. Christ himself may be considered to originate in paradox as the product of both God and man – or, in fact, woman. The women identified above are both chaste and carnal, mothers and virginal at one and the same time. Dante’s allusions are of the type of paradox seen in Chaucer in the question of simultaneous allegiance to Lord and wife.⁴³ Truth lies at different levels and apparently conflicting elements may be contained within the allegorical whole. This is what Piccarda has not understood and why, ultimately, she must be confined to the lower reaches of Paradise: in the fullest exercise of her will she could have been wife of both God and Man simultaneously. It is intention, the final defence of the poet, which determines truth.

The multiplicity of the figure of the Virgin is discussed by Kristeva:

That entity compounded of woman and God and given the name Mary was made complete by the avoidance of death. The fate of the Virgin Mary is more radiant even than that of her son: not having been crucified, she has no tomb and does not die and therefore she has no need of resurrection. Mary does not die but rather – echoing Taoist and other oriental beliefs in which human bodies pass from one place to another in a never-ending cycle which is in itself an imitation of the process of childbirth – she passes over. (Kristeva, p.166)

The cyclical nature of this figure is reflected in Dante’s poem in the structure of his poem but also in the substitutions and repetitions of the poems to which he alludes. Kristeva identifies these processes in the polyvalent example of Mary. The archetypal female figure, and the one Dante seems to imply, is characterised by the continuity of her identities rather than a singular state:

⁴³ “Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord –
 Servant in love, and lord in mariage.
 Thanne was he bothe in lordeshippe and servage.
 Servage? Nay, but in lordship above,
 Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
 His lady, certes, and his wyf also,

The which that lawe of love acordeth to.” *The Franklin’s Tale*, 120-26, in *The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale from The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer* ed A.C. Spearing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

Not only is Mary her son's mother and his daughter, she is also his wife. Thus she passes through all three women's stages in the most restricted of all possible kinship systems. Adapting the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux in 1135 glorified Mary in the role of the beloved spouse. But long before that, Catherine of Alexandria (martyred in AD 307) imagined herself receiving the wedding ring from Christ aided by the Virgin; and later Catherine of Siena (d.1380) entered into a mystical marriage with Christ. Was it the impact of Mary's role as Christ's Beloved and spouse that was responsible for the rapid spread of Mariolatry in the West after Bernard and thanks to the Cistercians? "Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo Figlio" exclaimed Dante, who perhaps best captures the combination of the three feminine roles – daughter-wife-mother – within a whole, where they lose their specific corporeal identities while retaining their psychological functions. The nexus of these three functions is the basis of immutable and atemporal spirituality "the fixed term of an eternal design" as the *Divine Comedy* magisterially puts it."(Kristeva, p.169)

Mary, as Kristeva observes, is the very epicentre of the circular imagery of the *Commedia*.

In *Lancelot* the figure of The Lady of the Lake – associated with water and so fluidity and change in her archetypal femininity – also reveals a continuity between the roles of mother and lover as the covert seduction scene of Chapter X reveals :

he went after her, and he found her in her largest chamber lying prone on a great couch. In haste he went to her, and saw that she groaned and wept heavily. (Prose *Lancelot*, p.92)

The multiplicity suggested by the virgin mother figure meets with Narcissus imagery in a further observation:

And he was not wrong if he prized her highly for she was the lady of all ladies and the *fountain* of all beauty (Prose *Lancelot*, p.116)

The mother as the mirror cohering a sense of self (the Lacanian Mirror-Stage) would seem to have a literary precedent. The resolution of difference in the Christian West depends on the simultaneity and continuity manifest in the physical figure of woman and reflected in the forms of her representation.

Dante discovers gradually that the heavens he is experiencing are presented to him rather than given: the closer the approach to truth (God in heaven), the greater the distance from tangible "reality" and division/distinctions. This may explain the difference in style the reader encounters between the *Paradiso* and the *Inferno* - where descriptions are very clear and concrete. The more prosaic and more poetic

sections exist separately in *Paradiso*, rather than being fused and are largely visual; instead of being overwhelmed by smell, for example, the pilgrim is blinded by brightness. He discovers that the growing understanding for which he has been praised during his ascent has now evolved into an experience of “heavenliness”. This prefigures the individuality of experience so critical at the close of *Paradiso* as well as the specificity of his encounters. It may seem strange to the casual reader that so many of the inhabitants of the afterworld are fourteenth century Florentines. This is, however, a manifestation of the allegorical method in which truths exist at all levels. There are no coincidences - in the *Commedia* everything has its place. The spirits which appear, illuminate Dante’s understanding very specifically. Piccarda (who appears in *Paradiso* III), for example, is his wife’s, Gemma Donati’s, kinswoman. Her tale of weak will – “allowing” herself to be forced into a marriage despite her vows - is highly pertinent to Dante’s situation (of having married Gemma despite his love for Beatrice). The poet’s severity in confining Piccarda to the lower reaches of Paradise for a crime she could hardly help is more revealing of his self-condemnation than a comment on this woman’s soul.

The encounter with Piccarda Donati is particularly significant with respect to the phenomenon of the circular narrative. The *Commedia* is concerned with the principles of justice and mercy, or good order. The principle of the psychoanalytic method of inquiry - the dismembering process of identity construction - is emphasised in postcolonial writing because of the “dismembered” pasts of these countries, and their treatment as “other” by a supposedly more developed (i.e. reassembled) West.⁴⁴ The effective principle in Dante is that of like to like, as discussed: transgressions and virtues are made manifest. As postcolonial writing is marked by the knowledge of its nations’ histories, medieval writing is marked by its understanding of God. Both appear to consider themselves true to the extent to which they ultimately defer to their respective authorities and avoid a direct confrontation with the subjects which endlessly escape them: as both Fanon⁴⁵ and

⁴⁴ See Ato Quayson. “Looking Awry: Tropes of Disability in Post-colonial Writing” in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* ed. James Curry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.53-67.

⁴⁵ “We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements...” Franz Fanon, “On National Culture”, repr. in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* ed. Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, pp.153-157, p.154.

medieval scholastics admit, a return to prelapsarian pasts - the edens of primitive nations, or of the bible - is impossible from these genres' respective "presents". Circular devices draw attention to the ultimate frame of reference while maintaining the enigma - the metonymic gap at the centre.

The early cantos of *Paradiso* have a significant parallel in chapters 6-12 of Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*.⁴⁶ Both the Dante-pilgrim and the speaker of *Astonishing The Gods* are guided through mysterious and hierarchical landscapes. Both have the singular quality of materiality and visibility as opposed to the spirits they encounter. One thematic issue particularly binds the two texts: an experience of reality dependent on the perceiver. Chapter Six of *Astonishing The Gods* opens with the traveller's confrontation with a paradox:

The bridge, completely suspended in the air, held up by nothing that he could see, was a dazzling construct composed entirely of mist. He was bewildered by the insubstantiality of the bridge. It seemed to be made of light, of air, of feelings. (*Astonishing the Gods*, p.15)

There are a number of similar images to be found in the *Commedia*, the bridges of *Inferno* XIX-XXI offer just one example. Eliot's poem "Burbank With A Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar"⁴⁷ alludes to Dante's *Inferno*, in this case to the circle of the lustful, similarly by recourse to the image of the bridge which may be taken as a modification of the ladder of love:

Burbank crossed a little bridge,
Descending at a small hotel;
Princess Volupine arrived,
They were together, and he fell. (ll.1-4)

The clear allusion to a descent together with the suggestive - vulpine/voluptuous - name of the princess aligns the poem with this particular section of Dante's *Inferno*.⁴⁸ Another example, at the opposite end of the *Commedia*, is the ladder of *Paradiso* which, in a mirror image of the bridges of *Inferno*, leads upwards to

⁴⁶ Ben Okri, *Astonishing The Gods* (London: Phoenix, 1996).

⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp.42-43.

⁴⁸ Simon Cattle comments "We may also note the aptness of the name Burbank: a "burr bank" would be a seed repository, a source of vegetative growth." *Myth, Allusion and Gender in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot*

Dante's lover and guide, Beatrice, associated with the "angel lights" which travel up and down it. This ladder of *Paradiso* XXI, in its symmetry with the bridges of *Inferno* XXI, is continuous with Dante's meticulous scheme. These two - the bridges of *Inferno* and the ladder of *Paradiso* - are fused further on in Eliot's poem suggesting that Eliot is not merely alluding to Dante, but is offering a "reading" of the *Commedia* in his own poem:

Money in furs. The boatman smiles,
Princess Volupine extends
A meagre blue-veined, phthisic hand
To climb the water-stair. Lights, lights,
She entertains Sir Ferdinand (28-32)

In this section Volupine seems to mimic his other figure at the top of a stair, the figure in "La Figlia Che Piange". The Italian title as well as this imagery refers us unmistakably to the themes of the Italian vernacular poet.⁴⁹

Okri's traveller is distrustful:

"What holds up the bridge?" he asked his guide.
"Only the person crossing it," came the reply.
"You mean that if I am to cross the bridge I must at the same time hold it up, keep it suspended?" (*Astonishing the Gods*, p.16)

Such impossible requirements seem to echo the difficulties and crises of faith that Dante experiences on his journey, particularly on his crossing from one stage to another, although his failures grow less frequent the further he penetrates into the *Commedia* - reflecting his increasing proximity to God. Paradise, in Dante, is described as a material heaven although Dante is told that he sees it, when not blinded by it, (as in many other cantos of *Paradiso*) in a manner *reflecting* his level of development and understanding (canto IV). The paradox of *Paradiso* is drawn out in *Astonishing The Gods*:

(Edinburgh University Theses, 2000) p.119. This is in line with Dante's allusions to Aeneas and the myth of the pagan god descending to the underworld in his own vision of a harrowing of hell in the *Inferno*.

⁴⁹ Eliot's "water-stair" bears comparison also with Beatrice and the fountains of *Paradiso/Purgatorio*.

Things are what they are. That is their power. They are all the things we think they are, all the things we sense they are, and more...whatever you see is your personal wealth and paradise. You're lucky if you can see wonderful things, what you see is what you are, or what you will have become. (p.11)

Paradise is explained to the pilgrim in terms of a material body, but also as an experience which reflects his own state of enlightenment. Strictly speaking, it would seem that one or both of these statements must be untrue: something is either a physical entity or it is an imaginary one. It is Dante's multivalent, allegorical method which allows both of these "truths" to co-exist. Okri states: "Things are what they are" and "They are [...] the things we think they are". This would seem to echo the paradox of *Paradiso*. It suggests that there is a mutually creating link between the observer and the observed, a truth which resides between objectivity and subjectivity. Revelation, or truth, at the end of *Paradiso* is material in that it is felt, but immaterial in that it cannot be "given" to the reader: it is the whole experience which the *Commedia* evokes.

It is appropriate that it is the image of a bridge which connects Dante, Okri and Eliot, as it suggests passage rather than end. For Dante the bridge is a place of hesitation and distancing, proximity and protection, and the state of his mind as he traverses the three sections of the afterworld. It is also symbolic of transformation. Eliot's bridges, closely derivative of Dante, are made explicitly allusive in his description of London bridge in the *Waste Land*.⁵⁰ As an American writing in England of England, but with a new style inflected with the rhythms of imperial cross-fertilisation, Afro-American jazz and blues, the image offers a sense of multi-way influence suggesting, again, the image of the circle rather than linear, chronological progression.⁵¹ Similarly, Burbank is an American crossing a cultural bridge to Europe, which is why he has taken his Baedeker - a guide book to European culture for tourists - with him.⁵²

⁵⁰ "I had not thought death had undone so many [...] / You! Hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frere! (*The Burial of the Dead*, 63-76.) Compare with *Inferno* XV and the meeting with Brunetto Latini.

⁵¹ See Michael North, "The Dialect in/of Modernism: Pound and Eliot's Racial Masquerade" in *T.S. Eliot*, ed. Harriet Davidson (Longman: London, 1999), pp136-158.

⁵² See Cattle, pp.119-24.

The continual oscillation identified in psychoanalytic theory poses the question: which of wholeness or dismemberment is the “original” state?⁵³ If there is no clear origin (if the basis of identity is a fiction or an illusion) on what grounds may there be considered to be a reality which is being misrepresented, or totalised? I opened this discussion with the observation that genres which may be considered to be at the opposite end of the spectrum, both chronologically and in terms of concern, share a relentless circularity in narrative structure, language, motif and reference. This seemed to imply that meaning in these texts is relative, dependent on perspective rather than absolutes. Where theorists seem to have felt compelled to proclaim the impossibility of speech, these writers, especially these writers who write under the conditions of Empire, whether extant or passing, are more appropriately silent. The references they do make are to other texts, authorities, and voices. This is why Dante merely finds himself lost in the valley of *Inferno* rather than already condemned. Although not *realistic* to send a voice from beyond the grave, who can deny the appeal of personal experience especially when the precedent has been set as one so great as Virgil? Virgil as a poet appearing in a poem has doubly a fictive status. Virgil, of course, even within the poem, is not available for comment – he is not only a poet (and so of questionable authority) and a pagan but also fictionalised and already dead. His speech, by rights, should be unheard. The presentation of an individual’s growth and life – the example of the postcolonial - in a distant land in an unknown language is also beyond contestation. Both literatures effectively use the “poetry and lies” debate to their own ends. They are not concerned with objective reality itself but with the human sphere of experience.

The texts investigated here may be “defended” on the grounds that they are concerned with significant re-enaction rather than portrayal. Postcolonial writers are not particularly, it seems, concerned with presenting Western eyes with its colonial subject or with “the truth”, but rather with presenting it with its own effects. Dante too, resists (though not through a lack of talent or skill) presenting the reader with an image of God. Again, he presents personal, subjective experience. The method of

⁵³ See Ato Quayson, “Looking Awry”: “these primal scenes may be useful for grasping traumatic post-colonial histories, especially when these are “littered with disembodied pasts” as is the case in some African countries riven by present and past wars.” (p.54).

truth is demonstrated by these texts to be one of circularity rather than “fixation” and this, ironically, is what will guarantee their place in the western canon:

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing) by refusing to assign a “secret”, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as a text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law.⁵⁴

Medieval writers, although concerned with man’s relation to God, cannot be considered to endorse what Barthes defines here as “theological”. They admit a “secret”, “an ultimate meaning”, but theological activity is essentially beyond their remit for the very fact that it is a “secret”: it cannot be known in linguistic terms. Postcolonial writers, although frequently clearly “anti-theological” in their express rejection of imposed western cultural tradition retain secrets and ultimate meanings of their own - those of native identity – although, again, they tend to codify these rather than reveal them in their writings. These “secrets” or truths are not represented in their texts because they cannot be known to outsiders/ their very destroyers.⁵⁵ Language, in these texts, is demonstrated to be deeply involved in the process of allegorical-other truths. It should not seem surprising that these postcolonial texts share, to some extent, the concerns and methods of Dante’s *Commedia* and the traditions which inform this multifaceted text.

⁵⁴Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” repr. In *Modern Literary Theory*, pp.118-122, p.121-2.

⁵⁵ See Paul Beekman Taylor, “Silko’s Reappropriation of Secrecy” repr. in *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed.s Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

Chapter Seven

Auctoritas, Circe and the Signing of Difference

There is an implicit connection in Dante's poem between the female figure and *auctoritas*. In the first section of this chapter, I will establish the feminine nature of Dante's use of the *auctoritas* trope; in the second part, I will demonstrate how a model of significant re-enactment, developed in T. S. Eliot's response to the *Commedia*, offers a reading of the interrelation of Dante with Achebe and Silko. These two themes fuse in the Circe figure, who will be seen to characterise this feminine trope, and play a central role in the relationship between these postcolonial writers and the Western literary canon.

Part One: The feminised trope of auctoritas.

The sense of an absence at the core of Dante's poem is reflected not only in the type of literature to which his poem alludes (for example, the Courtly Love tradition with its emphasis on unattainability) but also in his method. His allusions are multiple and layered: they allude to other allusions. This method, for writers from in the medieval period, signs that no writer is the ultimate author of his own meaning. Authority comes from other writers but originates, mysteriously, in God. The scholastic tradition also insists, in its sense of the world as allegory, that communication is several as a function of the Fall and that a text must sign in several different ways if it is to be a "true" reflection of this.

Postcolonial writers, for the linguistic and political reasons elucidated earlier, benefit from being read within a tradition which in its indications of "otherness" is explicitly multiple. Achebe's concern with the Western canon is well documented.¹ He is explicit about his engagement with the Western literary canon (which has,

¹ "At University College Ibadan, Achebe was introduced to famous European writers who had set their novels in Africa, such as Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, and Graham Greene. But by now, instead of identifying with the European adventurers against their African counterparts, Achebe felt impelled to represent the historical encounter between Europe and Africa from an African perspective. The connection between Achebe's reading of the colonial novel and his decision to become a writer is fundamental to our understanding of the cultural function of *Things Fall Apart*." Simon Gikandi, "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature" p.xvi in *Things Fall Apart*.

ultimately, evolved from the scholastic tradition). He consciously "writes back" to Western traditions of representation. His professed concern is with the constructions of Africa in this canon:

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as the "other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.²

His allusions to *Heart of Darkness* would rewrite this original vision of Africa and Africans. Achebe attempts an alternative vision in the typically circular maneuver associated with questions of truth and origin in both medieval and in postcolonial writing. Not only does he "return" to the canon he would displace in alluding to definitive canonical texts but he also sets his novel in the past. His novel "repeats" other times as well as other texts. Achebe's particular use of echoes of Conrad's novel, and allusions to the poetry of Yeats, modifies as well as repeats these more "original" articulations. In this, Achebe avoids suggesting that these Western texts are a source of which his writing is merely derivative. Instead, they become part of the dialectical matrix by which he signs his difficult communication. Achebe comments on his motivation for writing:

I suddenly saw that these books had to be read in a different light. Reading *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, [...] I realized that I was one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach. Once that kind of enlightenment comes upon you, you realize that someone has to write a different story.³

Fiction, for Achebe, has the power to communicate to those who cannot materially know the truth, whether that is because they are divided from it temporally, geographically or culturally. Achebe is acutely aware of the political implications of fictive forms and is unapologetically didactic in his literary outlook. These concerns certainly mirror those of medieval writers. Achebe's explicit goal is to indicate to his readers "that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans."⁴

² Chinua Achebe "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (First published 1977; *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87*), pp.1-13 (p.20).

³ Chinua Achebe *A World of Ideas*, p.343 quoted by Simon Gikandi in Preface to *Things Fall Apart*, p.xvi.

⁴ Chinua Achebe *African Writers Talking: a collection of interviews* ed Dennis Duerde and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann Educational, 1972), p.7.

Achebe resists this notion in the employment of other voices. Just as Dante refers to other writers in order to sign the fact that neither he nor they created meaning, Achebe refers to another culture in order to sign that neither invented the experience. In both, these other voices are frequently connected with the construction of archetypal female figures. Achebe's allusions to Dante, discussed earlier, are bound up with reference to Beatrice and his allusions to Conrad, at least textually, with the woman of the jungle. His most overt address in *Things Fall Apart* is the title of his novel, which is drawn from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming". I will suggest later in this chapter that the reference directs the reader to a second poem "A Prayer for My Daughter" which documents a gender construction only very loosely veiled as a benediction. Achebe's novel is highly gendered: the main protagonist is portrayed in stereotypically masculine ways and in opposition to the feminine nature of his surroundings. Its alignment of the female figures of nature, the saint and the daughter with the Western canon suggest that for Achebe, the feminine is at the heart of otherness. The literal level of Achebe's text, if we may admit the scholastic method – and we have already seen his employment of it in *Morning Yet On Creation Day*⁵ – indicates that he is at least as concerned with the absences and displacements implied by gender construction as with political manifesto. His allusions to Dante – and the interlinked nature of the universe thus indicated – suggest that the former (gender) may be intended to sign, analogously, the latter (the political). Okonkwo's end is the consequence of a trajectory beginning with the accidental murder of a kinsman. The "feminine" nature of a crime committed inadvertently – prefigured in (a covert) preference for a daughter over a son – results in banishment to his mother's village. The protagonist may be understood to have assumed the characteristics of the female gender as well as those of the male through this experience of loss.

Achebe employs the feminine trope in resisting the simplifications of African experience by the Western canon. In doing so he engages more closely with earlier traditions (those of medieval scholasticism and of Courtly Love) than his explicit references would suggest. The effect of this is to destabilise the singularity of the Western canon from which postcolonial writing is usually, or at least traditionally, excluded. In indicating this tradition – albeit indirectly – Achebe's text indicates an

⁵ See my Chapter Three.

alternative canon of other times, places and languages. The Western canon is revealed to have sublimated the otherness of its sources, projecting them onto a world the culture from which it emerges claims to have discovered – the “new world”. In indicating a Western tradition divided within itself, Achebe suggests the “continuity” of difference. The constructions of gender offer a useful analogue to the constructions of Empire.

The analogical reach of gender, and specifically the feminine, in literature is indicated in Dante’s allusions to the manifestly fictionalised forms of the Courtly Love tradition. In the *Commedia*, there is an association, by means of his allusive methodology, of this feminine aspect with the processes of communication. In Dante’s poem, the figure of Beatrice undergoes several kinds of reconstruction. She appears to Dante after a series of substitutions which both emphasise and concede other aspects to her gender than the idealised lover. Initially, in the *Inferno*, her will is carried out by Virgil, who is better suited, as a pagan poet (an unbeliever as well as a “deceiver”), to such an environment. We are informed that Virgil was sent by Beatrice, prompted by St. Lucy. In this sense, he is her substitute.⁶ Dante’s earlier *Vita Nuova* reveals Beatrice to be the poet’s inspiration, and in alignment with the tradition of Courtly Love, the poet’s means to God. The ladder of love upon which this relies, as I have explained above, emphasises the necessity of sensual experience in the knowledge of divinity. It also depends on the absence or distance of the beloved lady so that the supplicator’s progress is not halted by worldly fulfilment. The feminine basis of the pilgrim’s salvation – Beatrice – is sublimated into the masculine – Virgil – by necessity: the sensuality associated with the feminine is limited at the first level of progress but is restored in the *Paradiso*, where pleasure is the experience of Divinity rather than being of a material nature. It is the very distance of Beatrice in the *Commedia* which enables the experience of otherness, of hell and paradise: at the literal level, she would not have inspired the poem had she not been “lost” (dead) to the poet; anagogically, she would not have access to Paradise. This is also the condition that allows the pilgrim’s return from the afterworld in order to write the poem. As an inhabitant of paradise, she has no knowledge of hell and must be substituted by one, Virgil, who does. The classical

⁶ *Inferno* II.

poetry he represents places all of the action in the realm of the fictive (signing the original poetry/lies debate), relieving the reader of questions of credulity. The constructions of gender – exemplified by Beatrice’s explicitly fictive status - access an otherwise impossible experience as well as the means of its communication. This distinction between biology and role suggests the questions of origin and end with which this study began and the question of the sign with which it will end. The constructions of gender mirror the relationship between God and man; native and coloniser; artifice and the sign.

As hell is a conical protrusion inwards into the earth, so purgatory is an outward one on the other side. It is at the summit of this cone that Virgil is substituted.⁷ He claims that he has here completed his mission as Dante’s guide – that Dante is now his own master. The master-poet, Virgil, becomes defunct at the point in the narrative where the outer landscape becomes synonymous with the pilgrim’s inner state. Within a Lacanian interpretative framework, the absence represented by hell is associated with the need for language and the need for a poet-guide (Virgil). The promise of fulfilment which purgatory offers renders both language and the poet-guide gradually redundant. Virgil is substituted both literally in Statius and figuratively in the phallic hill-top of mount purgatory. As the pilgrim moves closer to his source, Beatrice (and divinity), his need for language diminishes. At the beginning of the *Commedia*, in his state of abject loss and division, the pilgrim’s mind is clouded and Virgil demands that he explain himself verbally. Later on, closer to the highest reaches of paradise, Beatrice “understands” the pilgrim’s questions silently. This could be described as a reversal of the Lacanian infant’s process of individualisation on division from the mother.

These extra-lingual and extra-historical states, represented by the two different poles of paradise, earthly (Eve) and heavenly (Beatrice), are unmistakably feminised. The pilgrim is also confronted with the figure of the woman, Leah, at the site of earthly paradise (in which the original one – Adam – was made two, in Eve). Statius substitutes Virgil but the dream of Leah, who informs the pilgrim of his location, intervenes. Male guides lead the pilgrim through the majority of the

⁷*Purgatorio* XXVII; ll.139-42.

Commedia but female figures sign the physical stages of progress. The pilgrim is originally “found” by a woman:

Donna e gentil nel ciel che si compiangi
 di questo impedimento ov'io ti mando,
 si che duro giudicio la su frange.
 Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando
 e disse: “Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele
 di te, ed io lo raccomando.”
 Lucia, nimica di ciascun crudele,
 si mosse, e venne al loco dov' i' era
 che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele.
 Disse: “Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,
 che non soccorri quei che t'amo tanto
 ch'usci per te della volgare schiera?
 non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto?
 non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
 su la fiumana ove 'l mar ha vanto?” (*Inferno* II; ll. 94-109.)⁸

Three women are indicated in this section, St Lucy representing light, Rachel, who represents contemplation and Beatrice who, in the poem, synthesises the two, representing access to the final vision of the *Commedia*. The poem may be considered to associate the female figure with divine enlightenment. The dream doubles Leah with her sister Rachel.⁹ These two are allegorical figures for, respectively, the active and contemplative lives. Rachel is represented with a mirror in which the world is reflected. The doubling of Leah with her contemplative, and “reflective”, counterpart offers a new refraction of the ladder of love in which different experiences are contained. The Leah/Rachel figures traditionally suggest the analogy of Martha and Mary. The state of man (and the reader in which the poem has its “life”) is reflected not only in the mirror of the pilgrim's mind, and so in the narrative, but is developed in this analogy which implies not just the multiple and simultaneous nature of God, but the very embodiment of him in Christ. It also implies, therefore, Christ's origin in the body of the female. The *strada al dio* with its feminine basis is made manifest in

⁸ “There is a gentle lady in Heaven who is so moved with pity of that hindrance for which I send thee that she breaks the stern judgement there on high; she is called Lucy and gave me her behest: “Thy faithful one is now in need of thee and I commend him to thee.” Lucy, enemy of all cruelty, rose and came to the place where I was seated beside the ancient Rachel and said: “Beatrice, true praise of God, why dost thou not succour him who so loved thee that for thy sake he left the vulgar herd? Hearst thou not his pitiful weeping? Seest thou not the death which combats him on the flood that is not less terrible than the sea?”.

⁹ Rachel appears in an allegory of the contemplative versus the active life in the pilgrim's dream.

this allegorical representation. In this case the entire ladder, rather than just the first rung is constituted by the feminine. The pilgrim's road to God may be characterised as being "feminine" in nature. The circular narrative structure of the poem is just one reflection of this.

The gryphon that appears, drawing the chariot, represents the Church pulled by Christ. This is a hybrid figure – half eagle and half lion:

Lo spazio dentro a lor Quattro contenne
un carro, in su due rote, triunfale,
ch'al collo d'un grifon tirato venne (*Purgatorio* XXXIX; ll. 106-8)¹⁰

This figure, together with the half man/half God it represents (Christ), consolidates these earlier substitutions. It presents duplicity - another aspect of feminine imagery - as the human face of God, as well as being the condition of human language. In these senses, poetry may be considered to be "true". Achebe's sense of cultural hybridity can be understood in similar terms. A language which signs division, English in Africa, is appropriate not only politically and historically but also ultimately in that it dramatises the nature of language itself. Finally, towards the end of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice is replaced by St. Bernard:

Uno intendea, e altro mi rispose:
credea veder Beatrice, e vidi un sene
vistito con le gente gloriose (*Paradiso* XXXI; ll. 58-60)¹¹

The continuity between the figures is highlighted in their similar dress and in the non-explicit gender implied by "le gente gloriose". Gender is demonstrated to be fluid, operating as a response to context: it is a role rather than fixed biological imperative. At several levels, the processes of poetry are revealed to be a true reflection of man's state (which is a reflection of God). The paradoxical sense of both distance and continuity in this figure is parallel to Achebe's articulation of dispossession.

¹⁰"The space between these four contained a triumphal car on two wheels, which came drawn at the neck of a griffin."

¹¹"One thing I intended, and another encountered me; I thought to see Beatrice, and I saw an old man, clothed like that glorious company."

Achebe is as concerned with the loss of colonial cultural as with the recovery of native culture. Simon Gikandi explains:

Although *Things Fall Apart* may appear to be exclusively concerned with the imposition of colonial rule and the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe, it is also a work that seeks to address the crisis of culture generated by the collapse of colonial rule. Indeed, Achebe has constantly argued that the theme of colonial domination in Africa – its rise and influence – was made imperative in his works by his concern that the culture of colonialism had had such a strong hold on African peoples, especially on a psychological level, that its consequences could continue to haunt African society long after European colonizers had left the continent.¹²

Continuity as well as division is at issue in Achebe's writing. Simon Gikandi in his essay develops a literary line of intention, reflecting the scholastic concern with the fictive, as opposed to the political more usually ascribed to the postcolonial writer. He suggests that Achebe is concerned with the relation of African culture to European culture. He implies that Achebe's writings in a certain sense depend on earlier European writings. The loss of European culture, in this analysis, redoubles the original experience of cultural decimation in colonisation. Gikandi offers a reading of Achebe's work that belies the simple terms of cultural redress limiting postcolonial writing to political document. Achebe's alignment with the Western canon cannot be reduced either to an act of cultural appropriation nor to its rejection. In alluding to the tradition it would supersede, it signs an experience of irreconcilable difference. The medieval tradition of *auctoritas* and the distance and division it implies offers a useful interpretative frame. Gikandi hints at a complex discourse reflecting the nature of the postcolonial project in which a past must be posited before a future can be projected. It moves back in time in order to move forwards in a similar manner to the Lacanian child who "creates" a primal scene in order to be able to experience the present. The implicit constructions of the question of gender offer the ultimate trope to the containment of differences within both the medieval and the postcolonial traditions.

Achebe claims to "write back" to what he considers the typically colonialist view of Africa given in such works as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad admits that his concern is with perspective. He claims that his aims are: "By the power of

the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel[...]before all to make you see".¹³ An emphasis on the visual in his novel suggests a co-dependence of perceiver and perceived.¹⁴ Conrad seems to concede to the perspectival nature of a reality to which Achebe would ascribe (in the pattern and choice of his own allusions), rather than to an absolutist and reductive singular "view". This phenomenon has been discussed with relation to Dante's *Commedia*, in particular in *Paradiso* III-IV. It can be seen also in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Tayo's emotional connection to the landscapes that surround and reflect him at different stages of his recovery is an important theme in the novel. At a critical point in the narrative, the landscape is described in terms explicit of the speaker's mind:

He lay in the shallow depression and heaped piles of dry leaves over himself until he felt warm again. He looked up through the branches and the leaves, which were yellow and soft, ready to fall; the sky was heavy and dark, and purple veins striated the gray swollen clouds dragging their bellies full of snow over the mountaintop. The smell of snow had a cold damp edge, and a clarity that summer rain never had. The scent touched him deep behind his belly [...] (*Ceremony*, p.203)

The ambiguous "depression" is a psychological state as well as a physical indentation. Tayo uses his physical environment to ensure his physical comfort: he covers himself with leaves, suggesting a continuity with this environment. His descriptions of this landscape are given in highly subjectifying terms: he looks from below as the leaves are about to fall; the clouds take on the characteristics of human physiology in their movements - veins, bellies, etc. The interdependence of inner and outer worlds is the subject of these texts and underlies their relation to one another. Dante's *Commedia* must acknowledge the texts and traditions which have informed the world the poet would overcome. Achebe must name the fictions he would

¹² Simon Gikandi "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature" in *Things Fall Apart*, ed. Simon Gikandi, p.xi

¹³ Joseph Conrad Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* ed Cedric Watts, (London: Penguin, 1988), p.xlix.

¹⁴ This emphasis is repeated in the "all-seeing narrative" of the blind Whalley in Conrad's *The End of the Tether* as suggested by John Lyon in his Introduction to Joseph Conrad *Youth/Heart of Darkness/The End of the Tether*, (London: Penguin, 1995), p.xiv. It is also present in *Heart of Darkness* in the moments when Marlow's narrative falters and the reader is returned to an awareness of the context of The Nellie, and the narrators more immediate audience: "[...] Do you see him [Kurtz]? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams..."p.79.

explode. *Auctoritas* is particularly useful to these texts because the otherness with which they are concerned are not strictly delineated but are interdependent. The paradise described by Dante depends on the human failure of which hell is not only symbolic but is made up. The postcolonial world would not “be” without the experience of colonialism.

The relation between the interconnectedness of being and the processes of writing is made manifest in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. The narrator describes the medicine-man’s mode of speech in English:

He spoke softly, using the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat. (*Ceremony*, p.34)

The narrator’s repetition of this scene (indicated by the use of the past tense) in the telling of it, makes English continuous with this native-language experience by association. The experience the novel traces is posed as “the intricacies of a continuing process”. Later on we learn: “It is carried on in all languages now, so you have to know English too.” (*Ceremony*, p.122) English becomes the very sign of “a continuing process” rather than its demise. Language becomes the subject in this novel rather than simply being its means. The protagonist’s sanity is cohered in the (English-language) narrative, which is explicit of the fictive basis of human experience:

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together [...] to become the story that was still being told[...]He was not crazy. He had only seen the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and times. (*Ceremony*, p.246)

The revelation of “stories fit[ing] together [...] to become the story that was still being told” strengthens the echoes of other texts within this one. The image of a protagonist’s enlightenment at “seeing the pattern” has its most obvious precedent in the *Paradiso* and the final vision of cohesion:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna
legato con amore in un volume,
cio che per l’universo si squaderna:

sustanze e accidenti e lor costume,
 quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
 che cio ch' i' dico e un semplice lume.
 La forma universal di questo nodo
 credo ch' i' vidi, perche piu di largo,
 dicendo questo, mi sento ch' i' godo. (*Paradiso* XXXIII; ll.86-94)¹⁵

The universality of this vision “per l’universo si squaderna”, is parallel to Silko’s project of articulating an experience which unites the Western world with the Native American world.

Shortly after his personal vision, Tayo experiences it made manifest in the natural world:

He had arrived at a convergence of patterns; he could see them clearly now. The stars had always been with them, existing beyond memory, and they were all held together there”. (*Ceremony*, p.254)

Enlightenment is described as an experience of primarily visual cohesion in both Dante’s and Silko’s texts. Neither, however, as communications in linear media, can purport to really offer this vision to the reader, they can only sign it in the circular device of the feminine trope. Dante directs his reader to the beginning of the poem in a circular motion, Silko to the faint echo of another text, Dante’s poem, and the infinite circle it describes.

The difficulty of a “destination” or source of knowledge is indicated in the council of Elders presented at the close of Silko’s novel:

The old men nodded at a folding steel chair with ST. JOSEPH MISSION stencilled in white paint on the back. He sat down, wondering how far the chair had gone from the parish hall before it came to the kiva. He looked at them sitting on the wooden benches that went all the way around the long kiva. They nodded at him, and when Ku’oosh was satisfied with the fire he joined them. In the south-west corner there were boxes and trunks with tarps pulled over them to protect them from uninitiated eyes. (*Ceremony*, p.256)

The incongruity of this chair, symbolising as well as stating (“stencilled in white”) the culture which caused such damage to theirs, suggests a spatial emphasis. As a

¹⁵ “In its depth I saw that it contained, bound by love in one volume, that which is scattered in leaves through the universe, substances and accidents and their relations as it were fused together in such a

“folding steel chair” it is temporary, offering Tayo, a “half-breed” and one who remains uninitiated into the Native rites, a transitory position. The kiva needs both the extraneous Tayo and a chair to place him in order to perform its present business. The incongruity of the Christian element of the mission chair introduced into this “pagan” meeting is recognised by Tayo, but absorbed into a greater purpose. The visual effect of its position in the room ultimately overrides the lettering. It may be considered a reverse gesture to Dante who absorbs many pagan elements, not least the figures of Virgil and then Jason, as well as astrological symbolism into his professed Christian vision. Symbolism and meaning follow “use” in both of these texts. Traditions are subverted from within.

Dante’s pilgrim appreciates God visually but disclaims the ability to represent this verbally: “Da quince innanzi il mio veder fu maggio/ che ‘l parlar nostro, ch’a tal vista cede” (Paradiso XXXIII; ll. 55-6).¹⁶ The elders “nod” to Tayo in acknowledgement rather than greet him. The emphasis is on eyes rather than on ears:

It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and the time of day; they asked about the direction she had come from and the colour of her eyes. It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that he noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the sun. (*Ceremony*, p.257)

These “elders”, representing the source of continuing tradition, insist on the material counterparts to the narrative, “the location and the time of day”. They place the woman Tayo meets within a similar context, making her credentials her “direction” and “the colour of her eyes”. The narrative asked of Tayo, rather than the one he would give, depends on material effects, and as it progresses, on the female figure of Ts’eh. As in Dante’s poem, the elders locate salvation in the “seen”. Silko’s narrative breaks into a poetic interlude at this point, again emphasising the visual in the words’ significant arrangement on the page:

“ They started crying
the old men started crying

way that what I tell of is a simple light. I think I saw the universal form of this complex, because in telling of it I feel my joy expand.”

¹⁶ “From that moment my vision was greater than our speech, which fails at such a sight.”

“A’ moo’ ooh! A’ moo’ ooh!”
 You have seen her
 We will be blessed
 again.” (*Ceremony*, p.257)

Sight and blessedness are synonymous in Silko’s text as in Dante’s. No relationship between these texts is stated but one may be “seen”.

The physical means of redemption in both Silko’s and in Dante’s text is a woman. The connections discussed earlier between Silko and Dante may be argued to establish *Ceremony* as a literary precursor to another canonical Western text, Tennyson’s *Maud*, in the sense proposed by Bloom in his description of *apophrades*. The pivotal moment in Tayo’s experience, given above, is comparable to the visceral engagement of the protagonist in *Maud*, whose very title proclaims the central influence of a female character. This postcolonial writer in her concern with the constructions as well as the reality of history, has an interest in the sources of a language (if the canon may be considered this) by which she may sign her difference. Both Tayo and the male protagonist of *Maud* experience insanity as their boundaries with the outer world begin to blur. Again, Silko does not make explicit reference to Tennyson but this is continuous with her project: an understated style and method of “weaving” worlds together rather than their direct statement. Silko appears to follow in the tradition of narcissus-imagery established in the previous chapter, in this context suggesting continuity between pre and postcolonial worlds. Such an allusion would also confer the claims of originality – a clear anxiety in a work written in a colonising language - enjoyed by the Troubadour poets. Tayo’s experience in the forest is presented in comparable terms to these from Tennyson’s poem:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
 Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
 The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
 And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her answers “Death”.¹⁷

The language used to describe the woods (in which both protagonists experience nature most directly) sets up strong echoes between the two texts. The “shallow depression” in which Tayo lies down echoes the “dreadful hollow” of *Maud*. In *Maud* this place is located in “a little wood”, in *Ceremony*, it is “at the edge of the

thicket". *Maud* identifies "red-ribb'd ledges" and "blood", Ceremony offers "purple veins striated". Tennyson introduces this passage and indeed the poem with "I hate the dreadful hollow", Silko follows her parallel passage with "he lay there and hated them". The narrative development of the novel is a mirror image of that of the poem: Tayo begins as a soldier and becomes identified with nature as a result of a love-experience; the hero of *Maud* turns to war from nature, as a result of romantic frustration.

A mirroring of the internal by the external is made explicit in Tennyson's Narcissus-allusion of "Echo".¹⁸ *Ceremony's* mirror-image of the *Maud* narrative develops this theme inherent to the poem: apparent progress in the *Maud* narrative is belied by a reverse subtext, and righted again in its mirror-image in Silko's novel. Tennyson's protagonist dedicates himself in the closing lines to war and the defence of his nation, but only after having demonstrated himself to be insane. The language of the penultimate verse echoes that of the opening verse:

Horrible, hateful, monstrous, not to be told
[...]
And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire (IV; 4, ll.15-16)

The descriptive terms are very similar to those of the opening verse: hatred and horror are followed by red imagery, which is fused with nature imagery and a nexus of "death". The terms of the literal level belie the apparent progress of the narrative. These repetitions align war and violence with insanity - which is precisely the theme of *Ceremony*. *Ceremony* offers, or at least reinforces, an intra-textual reading of the poem. The actual figure of Echo who appears in Tennyson's first stanza signs mortality: the subjectivity of a reflection of a reflection spells death for the artist who does not realise this danger and insists on wilful ignorance of the "chain of being"/*strada al dio* interconnecting not only the senses but God and man - and by extension one "auctor" to another.

This reading returns to the Scholastic model in implying that the writer both is and is not the author of his own meaning. All language is "borrowed" because all

¹⁷ Alfred Lord Tennyson *Maud* I; 1-4 in *In Memoriam, Maud and Other Poems*, ed. John D. Jump (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1974).

is, ultimately, reflection - whether of God (for the Scholastic), or of its usage in the past/in a different context (for the contemporary theorist). This suggests a general basis for the circuit of allusions between these texts and could argue for a relationship between any texts. The relationship here can be traced more specifically than this, in a manner which also explicates the nature of an interrelationship between them. The apparent meaning of *Maud* is challenged in the allusions made to it in *Ceremony*. The “original” (and canonical) poet depends on an apparently “derivative” (and culturally peripheral) one for a particular nuance in a circular movement undermining the chronological line of generational influence.¹⁹ This is interesting with regard to the postcolonial writer who not only transgresses linear history but also the one-way traffic of centre over periphery in her “retrospective” act of cultural appropriation. The “Violence to Others” motif, described in the previous chapter, links these two writers. It underpins the despair of Maud’s protagonist as we see in the closing passages on “the blood-red blossom of war”, and Tayo’s horror described in the opening jungle scenes. This motif, which in Dante’s poem depends on the vow, centrally invokes the medieval ladder of love and the feminine dynamic of progress which is never simply linear.

Achebe’s novel opens with an epigraph which announces the novel’s concern with the dynamics of circular strategies:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
W.B. Yeats "The Second Coming"

In prefacing his novel with this quotation, Achebe both gives the source of the title of his novel and suggests the novel’s relationship to the poem from which it is drawn. This is a typical medieval trope: explicit reference to a previous, particularly an influential and long-deceased, writer, lends both authority to the new text and absolves the new writer from any moral authority - as well as indicating the immortality of the written word. The morally neutral tone of Achebe’s narrator

¹⁸ See discussion of *Narcissus* in my Chapter 6.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1973). see Apophrades: “the return of the dead”.

supports this view. The third and fourth lines of Yeats's opening verse would be adequate, given his status, to indicate the above. Achebe's inclusion of the image of the "gyre" and the "falcon", therefore, bears some investigation. The gyre is derived from the medieval sign of a dualistic cosmology discussed earlier. Yeats employed it to describe history as a spiral turn which repeats, at intervals through time, similar events in new form. Yeats is known to have been deeply influenced by Theosophy and later by the "Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn" which drew at least some of its symbolism from the medieval tradition.²⁰ The gyre may be considered a dynamic model of medieval cosmology: the finite line representing man intersecting the infinite circle describing God. Achebe indicates a reinvention of the medieval sign, suggesting not only that terms are available for reuse but that they remain significant in very different contexts, both temporal and geographical. This offers an obvious parallel to the language in which the novel is written. In this example, Achebe may be considered to be appropriating the medieval model as a justification for the use of English in a postcolonial context.

There are two aspects to the falconer and falcon image. It may be understood to represent the relation between God and his creation and the freedom this creation has – the first exercise of which instigated the History with which this poem is concerned. It also suggests the relationship between the author and his text. This signs the possible relationships that this text may have with other texts, all of them being beyond the reach and control of their various authors. The use of bird imagery follows the pattern of the gyre with later texts returning with new significances, to the imagery of earlier texts. In this, these two motifs – the bird and the gyre – are interrelated. Achebe, in indicating these lines as the source of his title, is indicating a pattern of literary borrowings. He is also indicating a text which refers to another by the same author. Bird imagery in the medieval tradition symbolises a flight beyond reason, the highest level of the ladder of love by which divinity may be known. The main protagonists of the texts discussed above, Tayo, the Dante-pilgrim, Maud's

²⁰ Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984): "The symbolism, imagery and linguistic resources of the Golden Dawn were drawn from Western Sources - Cabalistic and Roscrucian mainly, with a mass of lesser borrowings from European magical treatises from various periods [...] There is plenty of exoticism in the activity of the Golden Dawn, but its catchment area does not extend much beyond the boundaries of the late classical world. There are respectful references to the Christian Cabala, and some of the disciples of the Golden Dawn professed their adherence to Esoteric Christianity [...]" p.42-43.

protagonist, Okonwko and to an extent Marlow, have all “taken leave” of their senses. The crises in these works are precipitated by a breakdown in perspective culminating in the indistinction of inner and outer worlds, in other words, a state of primary narcissism. The sense of a linear, progressive narrative is denied.

The next two lines of the poem, not quoted by Achebe, read:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The combination of terms, “ceremony” and “innocence” is repeated in a later poem “A Prayer for My Daughter”:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree. (ll.73-80)²¹

The concern with Western canonical texts, with “custom” and “ceremony”, in the new and what might be termed “innocent” articulations of these postcolonial texts finds a parallel in this description. The female subject of this poem is a particularly “constructable” figure, and in this she is useful to the postcolonial project. Her infancy as well as the social position dictated by her gender at the time of the poem's composition, render her a metaphor for the otherness experienced by the postcolonial. She is both the creature of her father and other to him, as the postcolonial is both subject to his colonial past and other to it.

The two Yeats poems are connected at another level. “The Second Coming” contains not only ceremony-imagery from the later “A Prayer” but also the image of an infant in a cradle. The earlier poem ends:

[...] twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, (“The Second Coming”; ll. 19-20)²²

²¹ *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* ed Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992).

²² *Ibid.*

The later poem begins:

Once more the storm is howling, and half-hid
 Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
 My child sleeps on ("A Prayer For My Daughter"; ll. 1-3)

By quoting more of the poem than is strictly necessary to establish a connection with Yeats, Achebe indicates this second poem. An allusion to a second poem within a reference to the first would, if this may be considered to be an allusion on Achebe's part, demonstrate his erudition as a black scholar - and we have seen he is keen to demonstrate his extensive knowledge of Western canonical literature. It also suggests an alignment between the worlds of nature and of artifice. We have seen that Achebe is keen to demonstrate that Africa is a world of culture as well as of custom. The first poem portrays an infant who is a "maker" of history, the infant Christ. The second poem offers the infant as a canvas for the composition of a history, albeit in a poem. In both, the function of poet frames the effects of history. Both also imply the female at the root of these histories: "The Second Coming" echoes the fall and Eve's sin, as well as God born of woman; "A Prayer For My Daughter", inspired by the poet's infant daughter, is a proposed history of womanhood.

"A Prayer For My Daughter" is explicitly concerned with the art/reality divide. The relation of the feminine to the processes of creation is continuous with this discussion so far. The first stanza is concerned with nature's effect on man in the form of a gale. This is rendered in the artificial constraints of the poem as well as presented as having inspired it. Fiction is seen to follow life in that it concerns the future of the poet's infant daughter. Later in the poem, however, the order is reversed and an oblique reference to Maud Gonne suggests life following fiction. Yeats likens her to Helen of Troy with a similarly tragic fate due to her great beauty. This reversal both promotes and delimits the power of the artist. The poem's allusions to "The Second Coming" accrete here: the image of the infant daughter evokes the infant Christ of the previous poem. The poet is "father" of both; Yeats himself is the "creator" of neither. The second image of the female infant suggests the *strada* of the poet: his linguistic powers are rooted in his (fallen) humanity. Artifice is rooted in

nature but nature depends upon artifice for its existence in the poem. The interdependence suggested in the formal structure of this poem echoes the interconnection of the ladder of love. The poet physically “creates” his maker (the Christ-figure) and “makes” the creator of his physical self (woman). Achebe bases his novel on a canonical Western poem concerned with interrelation. In this, he suggests the continuity of Igbo life with the Western experience – both Achebe and Yeats are concerned with the workings of history. That Yeats was also an important figure in the articulation of Irish national identity is not incidental. Achebe’s references to Yeats cannot be confined simply to the ironic. They return us to the figure of woman as a metaphor for the processes of figurative language.

Part Two: T. S. Eliot and the revisionary means of auctoritas.

In the previous chapter, we saw that T. S. Eliot makes explicit allusions not only to Dante, but specifically, to the perspectival notions suggested in Dante’s motifs of the ladder and the bridge. In this chapter, I will suggest that T. S. Eliot’s collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations*,²³ constitutes a cycle in response to Dante’s circular poem. I will argue that Eliot, in these poems, offers a crucial reading of the *Commedia*, which offers a justification and defence of the allusions to Western canonical works in the postcolonial writings discussed here. In functioning as an “answer” to the overwhelming question of Lacan’s theory of privation it signs the relationship between Achebe, Silko and Dante, concerned as these texts are with the signing of absences. The relationship between Dante and T.S. Eliot is testified to in the established tradition of criticism on the subject.²⁴ Eliot’s particular use of allusion and the feminine trope make him an important analogue in this discussion of the validity of the medieval model for reading postcolonial writing.

²³ Repr. in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp.11-36.

²⁴ See T. S. Eliot *Dante* (London: Faber, 1929); Steven Ellis *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Patricia Sloane *T.S. Eliot’s Bleistein Poems: Uses of Literary Allusion in “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar” and “Dirge.”* (Lanham, Maryland: International Scholars Press, 2000).

The epitaph of the last poem in the collection, “La Figlia Che Piange”, is highly literary. I mean this in several senses. It alludes to rather than quotes - it is, quite significantly, a misquote – Aeneas in his address to Venus “Maiden, by what name shall I know you?” (*Aeneid*; ll.327). The piece is taken from epic poetry and immediately brings to mind Classical tropes. That it is a direct address to Venus would seem to fuse Hughes’s views on poetic inspiration - namely that of a female muse and of a poetry of Eros:

that other voice which in the earliest times came to the poet as a god, took possession of him, then left him. Or it came as the Muse, after the poet’s prayers for her favour.²⁵

Eliot, however, rewrites the address. In this form and in its placement at the beginning of the poem it may be compared to the *strada al dio* by which truth is accessed by human love, namely, that of a woman. This, of course, is the constant theme and dedication of Dante’s *Commedia*.

Simon Cattle, in his thesis, *Myth, Allusion, Gender*,²⁶ quotes Edgell Richardson on this uncharacteristic piece of Eliot. He describes it as “the most easily appreciated of Mr. Eliot’s poems.”²⁷ Cattle notes critics’ effusions of “genuine”, “sincere”, “heartfelt”. He identifies the singularity of such reactions to Eliot’s poetry but confesses that these connect with real and significant issues in the poem. Richardson describes a poem which is highly self-conscious: both the speaker and the poem appear preoccupied with sincerity and authenticity - apparently simple language belies a difficult and indeterminate narrative. This is evident in the epigraph at the very beginning of the poem. Cattle makes significant point of the fact that Eliot denudes the original Aeneadian phrase “O – quam te memorem virgo?” of its punctuation, rendering it: “”O quam te memorem virgo...” He claims that this gives three possible readings, which is significant in that the poem itself, as I shall go on to discuss, would seem to turn indeterminacy into a “fine art”. The first is “What shall I call you, Maiden” raising the question of the identity of the female protagonist.

²⁵ *Winter Pollen*, p268.

²⁶ Simon Cattle *Myth, Allusion, Gender in the Early Poetry Of T.S. Eliot* (Edinburgh University Theses, 2000).

²⁷ “The Modern Poet” in *T.S. Eliot: “Prufrock”, “Gerontion”, “Ash-Wednesday” and Other Shorter Poems: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp.61-70, p.62.

The second is “How might I call you to mind, Maiden” touching upon the commemorative or reconstructive aspects of poetry. The third is “how much I might remember you, Maiden” which is a question of the accuracy/ sufficiency of the act of commemoration. Cattle sums up thus:

The altered epigraph gives a clue, in form and meaning, to the poem’s subsequent problems with linguistic ambiguity and the question of what is real or imaginary. (Cattle, p.95)

In other words, in this destabilised and destabilising epigraph, the poem comes to mean something about the nature of representation. It is this aspect of Eliot’s poetry that bears upon the representation of paradise/native identity in Dante and in these postcolonial writings.

Cattle quotes Elisabeth Gitter’s elucidation of hair-imagery:

when the powerful woman of the Victorian imagination was an angel, her shining hair was an aureole or bower; when she was demonic, it was a web, or noose.²⁸

He claims that the “figlia” is a deliberately dated employment of this Victorian female character – that it is in fact a “fantasy” – further drawing attention to the artifice of the figure of the poem and the conceit of its writing. He suggests that she may be related to Tennyson’s *Maud*:

What if with her sunny hair
And smile as sunny as cold
She meant to weave me a snare
Of some coquettish deceit,
Cleopatra-like of old
To entangle me when we met,
To have her lion roll in a silken net
And fawn at a victor’s feet.²⁹

Comparatively, Eliot’s narrator urges his character to “Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair [...]”.

Cattle claims that both of these female protagonists may be considered Arachne figures “Victim and predator, trapped and trapper, Penelope and Circe, angel

²⁸ “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination” *PMLA*, 99:5 (1984), pp.936-53, p.936.

and mermaid.”(Gitter, p.938) Arachne was an expert weaver in Greek mythology whose boasting on this matter prompted Juno to turn her into a spider. She was also the “weaver” of tales told to distract Juno from her husband’s infidelity. In this the figure is associated both with deceit and with fabrication. She may be considered to concentrate the very nexus of the poetry and lies debate as well as being associated with creation. We have seen Silko’s employment of a similar figure: “Thought-woman, the spider/ named things and/ as she named them/ they appeared.” (*Ceremony*, p.1) We have also already seen Silko’s reworking of Tennyson’s narrative and imagery. In *Ceremony*, the narrative is presented as a web which reknits Tayo’s consciousness and self-identity. In *Things Fall Apart*, the feminising narrative, undermining Okonkwo’s masculine will, culminates in the image of a noose ending the main protagonist’s consciousness, and the story. The feminine in these texts has both the power of life (in the former example) and of death (in the latter). Both protagonists are operating “beyond reason” as a result of becoming subject to feminine influence.

As double and *accessus*, the female figure embodies the contradictions which plague the writing of a postcolonial experience and are intrinsic to medieval writing. The goddess Circe, believed to have magical powers over life and death, appears, though obliquely, in all the above texts. A figure associated with the powers of creation and destruction, she was originally a bird-god derived from those of Egypt and Western Asia. Circe means “hawk”, and she was known as the daughter of Helios, the Greek God of the sun. The bird motif in medieval poetry frequently symbolises the transcendence of reason inspired by the love of an absent or unreachable lady. Both the irrational and the circular are traditionally associated with the feminine. This is seen in the troubadour tradition exemplified in Ventadorn’s “Can Vei La Lauzeta Mover” as well as in *Inferno* V in which the lovers are represented as birds moved by the winds of passion. Both of these works have been demonstrated to be centrally concerned with truths accessed via the experience of sensual love. In his writings, Yeats expresses a fear of what he perceived to be the machinations of History: “what if the irrational returns[...] what if the circle begin

²⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Maud* VI; 23-26

again”.³⁰ In several examples of his poetry, the cycles of history are bound with representations of the feminine. The protagonists of these works as well as Okonkwo, Tayo, Marlow and the protagonist of *Maud* have gone beyond “sense” or reason in the narratives which present them. The “truths” they present are not of a linear nature.

The feminine figures – characteristics as well as characters - in these texts are demonstrably connected to the visual, and ultimately to the salvatory “visions” of these works. The sun imagery associated with both Tennyson’s *Maud* and Eliot’s “figlia” is prefigured in the brightness of Dante’s Beatrice who is repeatedly described as being blinding in aspect. The presence of the goddess Circe the daughter of Helios, the sun, in all of these texts underlines this aspect. Circe, associated both with the processes of creation and with elemental light, fuses the symbolism of these female figures. She is perhaps best known for her appearance in Homer’s *Odyssey* and, therefore, is not only associated with classical myth but also with classical poetry. Circe inhabits an enchanted isle off the coast of Italy onto which Ulysses’s men are shipwrecked and then turned into swine by her magic. Ulysses is invulnerable and soon becomes, instead, the enchantress’s lover. Eventually she sets him on the path home although via the underworld, in order to first consult the blind seer, Tiresias. In being representative of both a type of literature, and of a type of woman, Circe may be considered to symbolise the relation of the explicitly fictionalising forms of poetry with the subjectifying nature of human experience. Homer’s *Odyssey* is perhaps the most important example, both to Dante and to contemporary writers, of a circular narrative, which fuses its beginning “in media res” with its end. The goddess of life and death is represented in this poem, essentially, as a guide. Dante’s Beatrice, who both explicates the artificial nature of human experience (*Paradiso* IV) and exemplifies the role of female guide and saviour, overtly follows Homer’s pattern.

Dante offers an alternative *imitatio Cristi* in the figure of a feminised god. Dante’s references to Circe indicate the *Odyssey* as an analogous precedent to pilgrimage and the harrowing of hell and these as symbolic preconditions to writing. His first reference to her, in *Inferno* XXVI, is in the context of the fate of Ulysses.

³⁰ Yeats in *A Vision*, quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, seventh edition, Vol.2, ed.

Dante is clearly interested in Circe's literary associations. Both the opening and the close of this canto are dominated by bird imagery. This is the aspect that confers upon her the powers of life and death. She is derived from the bird goddess Semele known as the mother of the Greek vegetation God, Dionysius. Bird imagery, as we have seen, is important in a literary context in its indications of the flight of the imagination - justifying the fictive/ non-rational project of poetry. The canto opens:

Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se si grande,
che per mare e per terra batti l'ali
e per lo inferno tuo nome si spande (*Inferno* XXVI; ll.1-3)³¹

And closes:

e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
dei remi facemmo ali al folle volo (*Inferno* XXVI; ll.124-25)³²

Both make significant reference to the imagery of flight and wings. In both cases these are presented in terms associated with medieval poetics. In the first they are indicated with reference to expansion: "si spandi"; in the second, with physical means: "dei remi facemmo". These reflect, respectively, the justification of poetry derived from the development of *allegoresis* - the expanding (Italian: "spandare") from the literal to the figurative - and to the placement of poetry at the lowest branch of philosophy, as a mere craft, or "making" (Italian: "fare") rather than a system of knowledge.

Ulysses introduces himself in terms of his departure from Circe: "Quando/mi diparti'da Circe".³³ This departure also introduces his ruin and condemnation – in this context it has led to his confinement in hell. Circe reappears in *Purgatorio* XIV, which also opens with reference to bird-imagery:

Chi e costui che 'l nostro monte cerchia
prima che morte li abbia dato il volo

M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 2000). p.2107.

³¹ "Rejoice, Florence, since thou art so great that over land and sea thou beatest thy wings and through hell thy name is spread abroad"

³² "and with our poop turned to the morning we made of the oars wings for the flight"

³³ "Quando/ mi diparti da Circe[...]" *Inferno* XXVI; ll. 90-91.

e apre li occhi a sua voglia e coverchia (*Purgatorio* XIV; ll. 1-3)³⁴

Again the reference to Circe is concerned with her powers of transformation (of men into beasts) “che par che Circe li avesse in pastura”.³⁵ These powers are represented in a doubly literary context (Homer’s poem as referenced in Dante’s poem). In this, both transformatory effects and poetry are specifically fused in the feminine. The final reference to this figure, in the *Paradiso*, fuses transformatory powers with bird imagery so that Circe comes to represent, appropriately for this location, the nature of truth:

E tal nella sembianza sua divenne
qual diverrebbe Giove, s’elli e Marte
fossero angelli e cambiassersi penne. (*Paradiso* XXVII; ll.13-15)³⁶

These two planets are also Greek gods, and represent highly masculine “energies”. The “penne” of the above quote is a pun on the male member, referring to the quill for writing as well as birds’ feathers. Their presentation in this canto, in such close proximity to the pilgrim’s destination of God and therefore truth, is contained within the very “feminine” context of this culmination of allusions to Circe (and proximity to the revelation of the circular narrative). The linear or literal, represented by the pun on “penne”, is contained within the circular and figurative - represented by the form of the narrative and the allusions it makes. The series of Circe allusions in the *Commedia* culminates in the model of the circle simultaneous with the line.

J.S Carroll comments of this pivotal canto “Time is infinitely more than a mere succession of corporeal movements. It is the procession of the Light and the Love of Eternity into the temporal life of man”.³⁷ This sense of process rather than progression returns, inevitably, to the representation of the pilgrim’s object of love:

La mente innamorata, che donnea
con la mia donna sempre, di ridure
ad essa li occhi piu che mai ardea:
e se natura o arte fe pasture
da pigliare occhi, per aver la mente,

³⁴ “Who is this that makes the circuit of our mountain before death has given him flight, and opens and shuts his eyes at his pleasure”

³⁵ *Purgatorio* XIV, ll; 42.

³⁶ “and its aspect became as would Jupiter’s if it and Mars were birds and exchanged plumage”.

³⁷ Carroll quoted by Sinclair in commentary to *Paradiso* XXVII, p.399.

in carne umana o nelle sue pitture,
 tutte adunate, parrebber niente
 ver lo piacer divin che ni refulse
 quando mi volsi al suo viso ridente
 E la virtu che lo sguardo m'indulse,
 del bel nido di Leda mi divelse,
 e nel ciel velocissimo m'impulse (*Paradiso* XXVII; ll. 88-99)³⁸

This temporal phenomenon is reflected also figuratively and philosophically. Beatrice is suggested to be both a natural object (“natura”, “carne umana”) as well as an artificial one (“arte”, “sue pitture”) suggesting both her material basis and her imaginative function. The effect she has on the pilgrim is physically transformatory and although her character, in the poem, is the very opposite of that of Circe, her effect on the pilgrim seems to be offered in comparison with Circe’s on Ulysses (she sets him on the path “home”). The pilgrim claims “[Beatrice] thrust me into the swiftest of heavens.” Her smile, described as shining, is responsible for the transformatory effect. Beatrice, in this Circe-like manifestation, is closely related to both Eliot’s “figlia” and to Tennyson’s “Maud”. In alluding to *Maud*, Silko indicates a feminine line of inquiry indivisible from the poetics Dante describes in the *Commedia*. The centrality of this figure to Dante’s cosmology is made evident later in the canto:

“La natura del mondo, che quieta
 il mezzo e tutto L’altro intorno move,
 quince comincia come da sua meta;
 e questo cielo non ha altro dove
 che la mente divina, in che s’accende
 l’amor che il volge e la virtu ch’ei piove
 Luce ed amor d’un cerchio lui comprende,
 si come questo li altri son misurati da questo,
 colui che ‘l cinge solamente intende.” (*Paradiso* XXVII; ll. 106-114)³⁹

³⁸ “The enamoured mind that woos my Lady continually burned more than ever to bring back my eyes to her; and if nature or art have made baits to take the eyes so as to possess the mind, in human flesh or in its portraiture, all these together would seem nothing beside the divine delight that shone on me when I turned to her smiling face. And the virtue that granted me drew me forth from the fair nest of Leda and thrust me into the swiftest of the heavens...”

³⁹ “The nature of the universe, which holds the centre still and moves all else round it, begins here as from its starting point, and this heaven has no other where but the Divine Mind, in which is kindled the love that turns it and the virtue which it rains down. Light and Love enclose it in a circle, as does the others, and of that girding He that girds it is the sole intelligence”

The circular imagery is redoubled in Beatrice's representation as the persuasive object of the pilgrim's mind. The pilgrim's mind, as a mirror of the "Divine Mind" described here, is moved by his love for a woman who is eternal.

This reflects a universe with no first cause but God himself. In juxtaposing the personal with the universal, Dante argues for the essential subjectivity of reality, and so the artifice of nature: it is "remade" in the human mind as it is perceived. The re-enactment of the primary act of creation in poetry is thus logically justified. This passage presents the sign of the circle as the nature of the universe. For Silko, allusion to this tradition not only strengthens her conviction of a process continuous across time, language, culture and geography, it also lends weight to the sense of continuity evoked in her novel between the processes of fiction and those of "reality": "As I tell the story, it will begin to happen." (*Ceremony*, p.135)

This final Circe passage from the *Paradiso* echoes the Circe canto of *Purgatorio* indicated earlier:

Chiamavi 'l cielo e 'ntorno vi si gira,
mostrandovi le sue bellezze etterne,
e l'occhio vostro pur a terra mira;
onde vi batte chi tutto discerne. (*Purgatorio* XIV; ll. 147-151)⁴⁰

Virgil is speaking to the pilgrim and inciting him, in his capacity as guide, to progress. The pilgrim is criticised by the poet of antiquity for seeing everything and nothing. The pilgrim has been observing the objective "realities" in telling of the degeneracy of the Florentines and in giving a history and geography of their decline. In *Purgatorio*, however, the pilgrim is still some (physical as well as spiritual) way from the truth. There is a self-consciousness in these Circe-passages: the lineage of degeneracy in Tuscany ends with the pilgrim making reference to his "other" role of poet. He seems to be indicating that in order to give a history, one also reveals one's own story. This point is dramatised in the double pilgrim-poet persona of the protagonist:

Di sov'resso rech'io questa persona:
dirvi ch'I sia, saria parlare indarno,

⁴⁰ "The heavens call you and wheel about you, showing you their eternal beauties and your eyes gaze only on the earth; therefore he smites you who sees all."

che 'l nome mio ancor non sona. (*Purgatorio* XIV; ll.19-21)⁴¹

In telling this tale of the (unnamed) Arno, he is both telling his own story of exile and making his name as a poet. The modesty topos of the poet is fused with a sense of history as narrative, and poetry as document.

The circularity this implies returns us to the figure of Circe. The Circe cantos are particularly concerned with the medieval poetry and lies debate. In *Inferno* XXVI, Virgil is explicit of the need to speak to the spirits in their own language. This implies the multiple significations of poetry. It should “speak” to the reader at his own level. Circe is introduced as the enchantress who charms men into beasts. In this she reveals the sensuous basis of human nature - she becomes Ulysses’s lover as well as turning his men into swine. The final result of both of these events is that Ulysses and his men return home. She has “shown the way” both to their origin and end – the end of their journey is the same as their departure point. The sensual experience has led, in the example of Circe and the enchanted isle, to a kind of salvation.

In *Purgatorio* XIV, with its lament for high romance and courtly love, Circe reappears. She thus becomes associated with the ladder of love on which much courtly literature was based. The example of Circe is fused with distinct references not only to courtly love but to its reflection in a literary tradition. The examples of envy here echo Ventadorn.⁴² Circe, therefore, is associated not only with feminine inspiration but with the processes of literary invention. The feminine trope as sign of the relationship between medieval and postcolonial writing, as well as of their respective contradictions is most fully represented in the figure of Circe. The pervasive undermining of the legitimacy of medieval poetry is comparable with the fundamental problem of language in postcolonial writing, as discussed at the beginning of this thesis. In offering a containment if not ultimate resolution to the medieval problem, Circe offers a means of discussion for the postcolonial situation.

The female figure of Eliot’s “La Figlia Che Piange” is, as these other figures, couched in terms of artifice:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair –

⁴¹ “To tell you who I am would be to speak in vain, for my name as yet makes little sound.”

⁴² “ai, tan grans enveya me’en ve/ de cui qu’eu veyau jauzion” (“great envy of those whom I see filled with happiness comes to me”) ll.5-6.

Lean on a garden urn –
 Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair –
 Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise –
 Fling them to the ground and turn
 With a fugitive resentment in your eyes: (ll.1-6)

The speaker of the poem appears to be the creator of this figure. The speaker addresses a statue-like figure of a girl - which has led to associations with *Pygmalion*. Eliot's version of *Pygmalion*, if this may be considered one, deviates significantly: a female figure is brought to life in order to be betrayed/deserted rather than loved. The repeated use of the dash – four times in this stanza – draws attention to the multiple meanings of the unpunctuated Latin epigram of the poem as well as to the multiple levels of allusion Eliot's figure evokes.

A sense of multiplicity is further effected by the references – clear to a Dante reader – to Beatrice. Beatrice also turns from her lover in a movement described by her “creator” who is also the speaker of the poem. She turns from him at the eternal fountain in Heaven: “and she, so far as it seemed, smiled and looked at me, then turned again to the eternal fount”.⁴³

Pygmalion and Beatrice both exist at the threshold of the reality/art divide. Pygmalion is a sculpture brought to life by the goddess closely linked to the muse of poetry as identified by Hughes – Eros - and possibly another manifestation of it, considering the love poetry genre of this collection. Beatrice, as I have commented, is the fictive representative of a person who really existed but who was never “known” by Dante. A similar figure is implied in the first poem of Eliot's cycle, “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. In this poem the subject is the incomprehensibility of the love-object, who is venerated to divine, or at least aestheticised, proportions:

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
 Should say: “That is not what I meant at all
 That is not it, at all.” (ll.91-100)

⁴³ *Paradiso* XXXI; ll.91-3.

Eliot frames the impenetrability of the loved one in picturing the scene so minutely and then echoing it a few lines later with the very literal frame of the pictured/depicted window setting:

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant at all. (ll.113-15)

These figures, both “real” and not, are closely bound to the poet’s act of creation. Eliot’s “figlie” develop the relationship between Maud and Beatrice (and the Circe-figure which binds them) in introducing Pygmalion into the mix of this feminine trope. Eliot sets this trope more materially, in this figure of the statue brought to life by divine intervention of the artist’s craft, into the realm of creation. The feminine figure is so useful, as emphasised in Eliot’s retrospective reading of Dante, because it is so eminently “constructable”. The very significance of the female trope depends on the circularity - precedent lends authority which furthers repetition – on which both significance and tropes depend. The nature of *auctoritas* is the basis of the relationship between Dante, Achebe and Silko. The feminine figure in its associations with the circle is the ultimate sign of this process – interconnection with an absence at its centre.

Further ambiguity – and it is an emphasis on incompleteness which unites these texts – is present in what Cattle identifies as the “retrospective regendering” in the repetition of the first scene in the second of “La Figlia Che Piange” - the shift in subject from “she” to “he”:

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised
As the mind deserts the body it has used (ll.8-12)

This raises the question of the relation of the speaker to these subjects. The “figlia” of the title may give some clue – meaning strictly “daughter” rather than just young girl – so specifying the narrator as the mother/father of at least the she-figure, and as her creator. This dynamic allows the possibility of a male subject in the first stanza –

maybe even the “figlia” as the position of the narrator. This sense of “siring” is appropriate to Eliot’s conscious influence by and allusion to Dante. The successive re-gendering so that each reading reads differently suggests Eliot’s allusive method generally in that it will not “shut down” to a single meaning.⁴⁴ This is closely related to the medieval scholastic approach of identifying several analogical levels in a single communication. It also suggests that the objects of the imagination make up the artist’s mind rather than the other way around. This echoes Dante’s concern with the true subjectivity of the poet’s mind rather than the failure of poetry to mimic the truth of external realities. The pause of meaning offered in this indeterminacy denigrates the idea of an origin, or at least a single, positable one and offers up the sense of Derrida’s spectre existing beyond time: “the true subject” is neither in this stanza nor in the previous one but in-between.⁴⁵

The very title, also name of the protagonist, “Prufrock”, implies contradictory elements. The “pru” suggests the journey of the narrator through a rather “prudish” love-experience. The “frock” fuses two words – frock and rock. It could refer to the frock-coat of the young man of fashionable/genteel classes or to a lady’s dress – certainly the poem seems concerned with boundaries, the public/private divide as well as gender. The cross-dressing allusions of the title are bound up with the layers of linguistic indeterminacy introduced in the epigraph. Another reading gives “proof” and “rock”, the sense of fixity of which clashes with the fluidity of gender-indeterminacy. It also allows for the fusion of opposites characterising the dynamic of the poem and its explorations. The “and other observations” align with Lacan’s analysis of the phallic mother complex and his emphasis on the *perception* of loss/castration rather than an actual experience.⁴⁶ It is in a literary “re-enaction” of the castration-complex that these writers, and the writers who allude to them, become a part of a tradition. This tradition is based on illusion, or fabrication. A central concern with the experience of loss within these works is the foundation of new

⁴⁴ The gender does reverse again in the poem. The third stanza begins: “She turned away, but with the autumn weather/ Compelled my imagination many days”

This could suggest a fusion of Beatrice, Circe and Dido. In the *Aeneid*, Dido meets Aeneas in the underworld but “turns away” from him, as he originally did, metaphorically, in leaving her to travel to Italy. This is an obvious parallel to Odysseus’s leaving of Circe to return to Ithaca.

⁴⁵ the fantastic/phantasmic figure of the very Victorian “figlia”, as opposed to her more worldly “cugina”/mirror image, Nancy Ellicott.

⁴⁶ The existence of the phallic mother is also an inference rather than fact.

articulations. Literature does not depend on a notion of unmitigated origin but on the recognition of elemental division - the essential indeterminacy of language. The postcolonial writers discussed here have recognised the parallel between writing more generally and their subject. This justifies their paradoxical project.

The observations of *Prufrock* are made to “Jean Verdenal, 1889-1915/ Mort aux Dardanelles”. They are made to a dead man - adding another dimension to the sense of alienation pervading the poem. In the narrator, we are presented with a fictional character, a fugitive from categorisations of sex/social role, committing his indecisions to someone – Mort aux Dardanelles - who cannot respond. We are also presented with a verse from Dante’s *Purgatorio*:

Or puoi la quantitate
comprender dell’amor ch’a te mi scalda,
quando dismento nostra vanitate,
trattando l’ombra come cosa calda (*Purgatorio* XXI; ll.133-6)⁴⁷

Purgatory is a place of atonement and waiting, and suggests the state of being undefined and uncategorized. This is an appropriate setting for a poem some read as a meditation on indecision. That these epigraphs precede a poem entitled “The Love Song...” beg some question as to Eliot’s secret meaning, especially considering such lines as:

I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves... (ll.70-72)

This must be read in conjunction with the general sense of indifference deployed towards the female character. The poem seems to have a homoerotic subtext. It could well be, given the dedication that opens the collection, a public-private confession of love for this “friend” mort aux Dardanelles.⁴⁸ Eliot certainly undermines the assumption that the object of desire in this poem is a woman. The issue of gender and the delineations and collapse of boundaries performed in Eliot’s poems may be read

⁴⁷ “Now you can understand how much love turns in me for you when I forget our insubstantiality treating the shades as one treats solid sense.”

⁴⁸ See James E. Miller, *T. S. Eliot’s Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (London and Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

as a treatise on artifice: artifice as the core of human experience and poetry as the purest means of its articulation. The displacement of the female from the core of Eliot's reading of Dante, if this poem may be interpreted as such, further implies the feminine trope of *auctoritas* rather than its opposite. In reconstructing the source of Dante's poem in this way, in offering the question of gender and the distance between role and biology it marks, it offers ultimate indeterminacy as the core of poetics. The homoerotic subtext of Eliot's poem is a logical progression of the absent or unreachable "Lady" of courtly love.

The connection with Dante is made explicit in the epigraph of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". We are directed to the *Inferno*:

S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse
 a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
 questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
 Ma per cio che giammai di questo fondo
 non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
 senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.⁴⁹ (*Inferno* XXVII; ll.61-6)

Strict attention is paid to the fact that this is a dead person "speaking" and so that this is reported speech. That it is clearly also reported by another "dead person", a poetic "ancestor" – Dante – is significant considering Eliot's original dedication to the above friend. The quoted speaker is not only dead but in hell: a place from which "Non torno vivo alcun..." – a fairly absolute boundary, although, of course, our very reading of these lines defies them. It raises, however, the question of why the speaker should be thus condemned. The canto follows on from the one in which Circe is introduced and Virgil speaks to the Greek spirits. The speaker in the next canto is Guido da Montefeltro, condemned to the realm of the evil counsellors. He was a soldier known for his cunning. He repented and became a monk but was then corrupted by the pope (Boniface VIII) who absolved him of sin in advance. On his death, a demon claimed that Guido had fallen into sin but had not repented. He was sent by Minos to the realm of the evil counsellors along with Ulysses and Diomedes. His narrative is transgressive – of the bounds of hell – and as a narrator he must also

⁴⁹ "If I thought my answer were to one who would ever return to the world, this flame should stay without another movement; but since none ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer thee without fear of infamy."

be understood to be unreliable. He is presented as a speaker of some skill but one without moral or worldly authority. He is portrayed with some poetic flourish as a clever but “false” character. An example of the possible abuses of language is offered in this canto. Eliot’s reading alerts the reader to the dangers of rhetoric as well as the easy assumptions of tradition. His example is the commonplace reading of Dante’s *Commedia* as being about a girl – in one sense it is, but in several highly significant senses, as we have seen, it is not limited to this.

Eliot’s epigraph is given not only in Italian but he has chosen to quote medieval rather than contemporary Italian, making it inaccessible to the majority of readers, even in Eliot’s time. Or rather, comparing the quote with Sinclair’s transcription, it seems to be partially modernised Italian – substituting indentation with capital letters and employing “correct” or contemporary grammatical endings to verbs in the imperfect conjunctive (as well as altering the spelling of “sanza” to the modern – intelligible “senza”). Line 64 of the verse has been changed from

ma pero che gia mai di questo fondo (Sinclair’s standard translation) to
Ma per cio che giammai di questo fondo (Eliot)

Although this does not significantly change the sense, it is both visually and aurally different – underlining a preoccupation with language as a representational rather than revelatory object. It could be that Eliot is signing the nature of the speaker of these lines. In emphasising surface over content, as well as challenging the reader of his poetry to read this epigraph closely he suggests his subject at several levels. This epigraph is out of context here and comes to “mean” differently juxtaposed with Eliot’s dedication. In this context it suggests the impossibility of articulation: the impenetrable boundary is not the love object’s mind but the protagonist’s heart.

The language issue is heightened in the previous canto – the subjects of which, Ulysses and Diomedes, share the false counsellor status with Guido. It is significant that a “Latian” is speaking with a “Latian”: “Parla tu; questi e latino” (line 33). Much is made of this in that Dante gives a detailed account of “modern” Italy to his kinsman while because these other two figures only speak Greek, they must speak through Virgil. More frames are erected here: the use of a poet of another poet’s account - of a false counsellor - across cultures, three languages and the boundaries

within as well as well as without hell. The self-consciousness of the writing also brings to attention the fact that poetry is a highly artificing form especially in the example of the *terza rima*. Furthermore, all of this has been very subtly modified by this last poet, Eliot, who renders suspect any notion of origins, the natural or the simple. He “borrows” these lines from Dante, but makes them his own. That he fits these lines in particular, concerned as they are with the potentially misleading nature of oration, of sound over content, to his own purpose, demonstrates the integrity of Eliot’s method: his “reading” of Dante is as concerned with uncaredful readings of poetry as with the poetry itself.

Eliot presents us with a third “boundary” even before we have begun to read the poem. This is its self-presentation as a love-song. There is a conscious division here of private and public. This love “song” is a curious artefact: it is a private voice, private even to the narrator – he seems baffled by it - in public form: it exists as a published poem. In line with the expectations set up by the epigraph, it seems to have no object, no audience. It is not even, it seems, sung to anyone within the narrative of the poem. The only other “live” character is the “one” who is constructed within the terms of the poem itself. The idea of the private spoken publicly and the limitations this incurs is something I have already commented on with regard to Dante and to postcolonial writers in their experience of native identity spoken in a world language. The *Commedia* is also a love-song in that it is a private experience written to be read by a wider audience. Neither Eliot nor Dante are concerned with the physical consummation of love but rather keep their objects of desire at an infinite distance – they exist only in the art object.

Eliot’s strange and repeated refrain in the poem bears some relation to this:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo. (ll.13-14)

There seems, at first reading, to be little continuity between this and the rest of the poem. If we consider, though, the borrowings from Dante already mentioned and particularly the artifice suggested by their content, an important connection emerges. In the pilgrim-like opening of Eliot’s poem:

Let us go then, you and I, [...]
 Let us go and make our visit (l. 12)

and particularly in the “streets that follow like a tedious argument”, he echoes Dante’s epic. There is a strong link between Michelangelo, the Renaissance artist and Florence, which is, as I have observed, both Dante’s birth-place and the source of much of the material of his *Commedia*. Michelangelo’s most significant and most popular link with Florence is his David – the over-size sculpture of a male youth. The figure is out of proportion: in particular, the hands are too large for the body. It is, however, a statue of an ideal youth rather than an actual person - a symbolic work of art rather than an imitation of life. At the centre of this poem – the chorus – the symbolic takes precedence over the actual; consistent with Eliot’s themes of the representative and artificialising nature of poetry. The women of Eliot’s chorus might be understood to be observing the heroic male nude. Rather than being fixed as figures themselves - in Classical literature, as well as in the medieval traditions, they are frequently the objects rather than the makers of art - these women are the perceivers. They are the perceivers, specifically, of self-conscious artifice: the exaggerated male nude. In this, both perceiver and perceived break with convention and become aspects of the Lacanian logos. Dante’s original comment on Florence is that origin is not synonymous with identity: he claims himself to be “a Florentine by birth but not by disposition”. Similarly, these women “come and go” in a grotesque reversal of expectation in a love-song. It is not the female figure that is being objectified – the traditional form - but artifice itself. The phallus, here represented in stone, is explicitly not synonymous with the physical member.

This is borne out by a figure in *The Waste Land* – perhaps the most symbolically obscure poem in the English language - “Belladonna, the lady of the Rocks” (l:49). The source of this figure remains a mystery to Eliot scholars. Given Eliot’s fascination with Dante, both his poetry and as literary “ancestor”, this figure may be an allusion to a cult surrounding the Florentine. Local Fiesolean legend claims that Beatrice and Dante would meet at a church called “La Madonna del Sasso” (Our Lady of the Rock) after a miracle that occurred there. Peasant children claimed to have had a vision of the Madonna and child enthroned upon a great rock. They reported that she commanded them to build a church on that spot. Legend is by

nature inaccurate and records show that the vision occurred over one hundred years after Dante's death.⁵⁰ The story may have been interesting to Eliot who is known to have travelled to Italy searching out similar monuments and points of interest. "La Figlia Che Piange" was inspired by a legendary tomb-stone which Eliot sought out but never found.⁵¹ The image of femininity (Madonna/Belladonna/Figlia) fused with masculinity (the rock/s/(tomb)stone) concentrates the themes treated here. These figures seem to depend on a "spectacle" recounted by another rather than experienced directly. The primarily imaginary phallic mother is symbolic of these texts and their concern with origin.

Eliot's allusions to Dante are not only a good example of how allusion can generate a discussion in between the limited bodies of ideologically and materially distinct texts, but a central one to this discussion. Eliot's particular method highlights the concern of Dante's poem: the ultimate impossibility of articulation - which is also central to Dante's relation to the postcolonial writings examined in this study. In the Dante-Eliot relation, the most intimate experience is artificial once it finds form. In both Eliot's and in Dante's poems, the "love-song" seems only to have been written because it could not have been sung. It could not be expressed directly from lover to loved one because this figure is absent - la figlia has left, and Beatrice is dead (both, of course, are fictional). In the act of being written, it has become a dead thing, the "empty letter".⁵² Eliot's poem-cycle suggests that a sublimation of life into art is a relinquishing of both origin and destination. This is enacted in the reversals of the final poem of his cycle: "La Figlia Che Piange." Here the girl/woman is represented, as I have observed, in classical terms (the garden urn, the hair), but this is undercut in the exaggerated terms of description ("fling", "fugitive"). The sense is that the poem could only be written because the girl is abandoned; as Dante could only be inspired by a lover who was dead. If the couple had not been divided, Eliot's narrator claims, "I should have lost a gesture and a pose". In this, Eliot imitates and re-enacts Dante's poem at another level: loss and artifice are the very matters of life

⁵⁰ Pier Maria Cassi, *Madonna del Sasso* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1842).

⁵¹ "While Eliot was travelling in Europe in 1911 he visited a stele [commemorative stone tablet] designated, according to a friend who suggested that he look at it, "La Figlia Che Piange" (young girl weeping)." Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p.27.

⁵² See Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida" in *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. Sue Vice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 84-100.

rather than a hollow or even false imitation of reality. This articulation of absence occurs, however, most vividly in the relation between these literary texts: the process in which the author becomes “auctor”. Similarly, Achebe and Silko have been seen, here, to realise a sense of loss most fully in their revisionary alignments with the western canon. Loss cannot, finally, be fixed.

Conclusion

The relationship between Dante, Achebe and Silko established in this study demands a revisionary approach to the reading of both medieval and of postcolonial writing which is, nevertheless, beyond the scope of this thesis. Achebe, Silko and Dante are writers to whom the material, political implications are too significant for their indications of other texts to be incidental, however subtle or even unconscious they may be. The intention here has been to explore the context of this relationship and provide a basis for its further investigation.

These writers imply cyclical structures in their works: their endings demand a re-reading. At a simple level, the *Inferno* cannot be fully appreciated without *Paradiso*; the story of Okonkwo is significantly altered by that of the District Controller; Tayo's narrative must be revised in the light of Grandma's concluding comments. Each of these texts comprises, in some way, an invitation to read again, from another perspective. The nature of the relationship between these works echoes this: their allusions to one another demand re-readings of these other texts as well as of themselves. *Ceremony* and *Maud*, for example, read together, offer a very different reading to either alone although one which is consistent with the concerns of both of these very different writers; the same may be said of the *Commedia* and the *Prufrock* cycle. The writers discussed here operate at several kinds of remove from the means they employ in their art. Their texts are always gesturing beyond themselves. The postcolonial writers have "travelled", geographically and politically, in their use of the English language. Dante is a self-confessed exile, writing in a synthetic vernacular. For the other canonical western writers, whom I claim provide a "bridge" between Dante and these postcolonial texts, language is no more "natural" or "originary". Eliot went beyond his physical origins in being an American who became a distinctly British poet. Yeats and Conrad write in languages not native, or indigenous to them. Allusiveness for these writers is a means to other worlds: these writers take on another identity with other texts, traditions and ways of meaning.

I have suggested that multiplicity, unreality and instability are associated in these texts with the central question of gender. The feminine figure is deeply involved, as we have seen, with issues of artifice and truth in the sense that

representations of women are problematic, complex and imbued with significance seemingly beyond their apparent roles: lover, guide, prophet. It is the doubleness which they, as female bodies, represent that allows them to be carriers of the problem of language, or more generally, of art and life – an essential division between origin and destination.

Eliot's reworking of Dante's *Commedia* provides a key to the role of these feminine figures in the interrelationship between Dante and the postcolonial texts discussed. The phantasmic girl of "La Figlia Che Piange" parodies but also goes some way towards explicating the Beatrice-figure of the *Commedia* and the unfixity reflected in the gender transformations we have seen in her figure throughout the *Commedia*. Dante learns in the *Paradiso* that his vision does not access truth but only his limited ability to see. The notion of any kind of origin is consistently revealed to be hallucinatory and deceptive in these texts. This feature signs the openness of these texts to being "rewritten" and to engaging beyond their apparently limited means: temporal, geographical, political.

The basis for the relation between Dante, Achebe and Silko is at the literary level, which, for all three of these writers, transcends material boundaries. It is their female figures which most clearly characterise this. Chielo, Ts'eh - Tayo's lover - are repeatedly associated with unfixity, with phantasms. They represent a literally "unspeakable" mystery of which they are the suspension – the means to transformation into form. They are symbolically rather than really female. They are not actual lovers, priestesses, guides; they are literary representations at the very threshold of enunciation.

These writers self-consciously attend to problems of inadequacy in their writings. This inadequacy is borne out in the problematic structuring of their texts. I have argued that Eliot's explicit references to Dante, particularly those that refer to the ladder of love, reveal a *Commedia* gesturing towards very contemporary concerns. The interrelation – Eliot's reading of Dante is not only central to a reading of Eliot's poems but could be considered central to a revised reading of Dante's poem¹ – offers

¹ Ezra Pound comments: "Mr. Eliot and I are in agreement, or "belong to the same school of critics," in so far as we both believe that existing works form a complete order which is changed by the introduction of the "really new" work." From "Prefatio Aut Cimicium Tumulus" reprinted in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed.s Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp.496-497, p.496.

a way of reading the allusions made by the postcolonial writers, Achebe and Silko, to western texts. The “significant re-enaction” in the circular dynamic of these allusions, more subtly, gestures towards the possibility of an alternative canon, rather than a simple alignment with the existing and (for post-colonial writers, in particular) problematic one. Dante’s *Commedia* is cyclical structurally, thematically and linguistically. Achebe’s novel personifies its subject in the closing scene of an act of history-writing. Silko’s closes with Old Grandma’s comment “It seems like I already heard these stories before[...]only thing is, the names sound different.”² The postcolonial writers, Achebe and Silko share with the late medieval poet Dante, under the constraints of their respective Empires, not the inability to say anything “really new” with their limited means but the awareness that no articulation ever was. The pressures to which they are subject have dramatised for them the nature of language as it always has been. The feminine motif, originating in medieval scholasticism and most fully developed in Dante’s *Commedia*, describes the sense of “remove” to which postcolonial and medieval writers are more consciously, rather than exclusively, subject.

² *Ceremony*, p.260.

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