

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

After Abjection: Life Writing, Art,
and Psychoanalytic Thought

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This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a postgraduate research degree of the
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ABSTRACT

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Framed by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as detailed within *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, this thesis will explore three case studies of subjects who have encountered the abject as described within their biographical and literary writing. To develop Kristeva's theory further, this thesis will shift the focus for analysis forward in its chronology to introduce the concept of 'after abjection', through combining Kristeva's theory of abjection with Sigmund Freud's theories of 'repetition compulsion' and 'working through'. The first text explored is *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, an autobiographical memoir in which Michael Peppiatt details his experiences of Francis Bacon as both an artist and friend. The thesis then turns to consider Annie Ernaux's memoir *Happening*, which is dedicated to her traumatic experiences of undergoing an illegal abortion. Following these autobiographical case studies, the thesis will thereafter turn to two fictional texts by Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, alongside her biography *Private Demons*, written by Judy Oppenheimer. Building on the textual analysis, the thesis will then consider the role of communication in after abjection. It will posit the communicative level on which these texts function as being key to the subject both repeating the experience and working through it. Finally, the thesis will conclude with asserting that the compulsion to repeat after abjection is fuelled by the jouissance of the abject, which renders the subject unable to escape the pull towards repeating the experience through their writing and actions in order to continue working through it and attempt to satiate the appetite for abject jouissance.

Keywords: Abjection, Repetition Compulsion, Psychoanalysis, Autobiography, Biography, Life Writing

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'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'

- William Wordsworth

Introduction

Jeremy Biles describes the story of abjection as a story of rats.¹ He suggests that '[a]bjection has no cohesive narrative, no plot, no clear beginning, no destiny or destination, no sense of an ending.'² In his article he explores the development of abjection as a phrase used within contemporary discourse from its source in Georges Bataille's work and through Kristeva's later theorising of the term. He describes abjection to be 'irreducibly anamorphic and heterogeneous... vermicular, polymorphous, fragmentary, slippery – and biting.'³ For Biles, abjection is continuous and will always remain a feature of the subject's existence. It is not sourced within an object per se, nor contained within an event, but it is an experience that starts at the necessary abjection of the mother in order to create the separate subjectivity and continues perpetually throughout existence with the induction into the symbolic order. Biles asserts, '[abjection] is known only by its traces, its droppings, marks of its absence... Abjection produces itself in its leaving, in its leavings.'⁴ This thesis will develop an understanding of the experience of abjection, which also expands on Julia Kristeva's theory, to introduce the concept of 'after abjection'. It will not suggest there is a destiny, destination or ending to the story of abjection, but it will explore the droppings and marks of absence left from the bite of abjection.

To examine the bite of abjection, this thesis will use textual analysis to apply the theoretical lens provided in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* to a reading of the selected primary sources, namely, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, by Michael Peppiatt, *Happening*, by Annie Ernaux, and Shirley Jackson's fictional texts *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, guided by Judy Oppenheimer's biography of Jackson, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. Placing the abject and abjection in a temporal context, the thesis will use Peppiatt, Ernaux, and Jackson's narratives as case studies to explore an experience of abjection and what happens to them after this experience. Superficially, the texts studied within this thesis may appear disconnected in their mode of delivery, narrative journey, and their subject of focus. The experiences described by the subjects of this thesis might at first appear to be too dissimilar for a unified approach to analysis, but through closer inspection of the wounds left from the bite of abjection and through the application of the theoretical lens, the thesis will highlight how the experiences of the subjects are connected. Through framing the texts in the psychoanalytic discourse of abjection, repetition

¹ Jeremy Biles, "A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille's simulacrum of abjection," *Performance Research* 19 (2014): 111.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 112.

⁴ Ibid., 116.

compulsion and working through, the connections between the texts are illuminated and the patterns of behaviour after abjection can be better understood. The variety of experiences discussed within this thesis permits a greater understanding of after abjection, as the subjects and their texts have limited comparison beyond their encounter with the abject. It is important to this thesis that the texts appear on first reflection to be disconnected, as this strengthens the application of the methodological approach devised within this thesis to more than one genre or one experience of abjection.

For both Peppiatt and Ernaux's autobiographies, the chapters begin by first exploring the theory of abjection in relation to the context for their texts, in order to frame the later analysis of the primary sources. For Michael Peppiatt's *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, the paintings around which the study of the primary text revolve are provided to offer an opportunity to highlight the ways in which theory and text coincide. The selection of Bacon's works are provided at the start of the chapter to both introduce Kristeva's theory of abjection and its multiple means of expression, and equally to provide the opportunity to highlight how Peppiatt's experience can be understood to be one of abjection through first exploring how the paintings of Francis Bacon might induce such an experience. The same approach is taken with Annie Ernaux's *Happening*, insofar as the chapter first explores how abortion is viewed within many cultures as being an abject phenomenon. This aids the later reading of Ernaux's autobiography as it emphasises the nature of the relationship between the abject and the socio-political and ideological issues surrounding abortion. This enables a more informed approach to the reading of the autobiographies in relation to why and how the authors can be understood as having an experience of abjection. However, this thesis recognises that the reading of the primary texts could also have been positioned prior to the theoretical framing, which would have had a different but equally valuable effect on the later analysis, insofar as the experience of the primary text could have been foregrounded to inform the later theoretical expansion. The methodological approach selected for this thesis, the theoretical framing prior to the textual analysis, has been purposefully selected to enable the textual analysis of the primary sources to be informed by the critical framework so as to guide a more theoretically rich discussion of the text.

Furthermore, this thesis also recognises the methodological tension that is the act of writing about experiences, which is an issue present for both the authors of the primary texts and the writing of the thesis itself and understands that the rawness of experience can only ever be at a remove. Given these constraints, this thesis seeks to explore the presentation of experience in the texts whilst understanding that language cannot accurately represent experience, instead it will position their considered linguistic choices as an act of processing the event. This will be discussed

later in the thesis, as it will be proposed that key to the methodological approach of understanding the subject after abjection is the resultant communication that follows the experience. On this note, the language of the texts that have been translated presents a potential methodological constraint for close textual analysis and this thesis is grateful for the translations that have made these texts possible to read in the English language. However, the focus and argument for this thesis is such that it posits the writing of the text itself as forming both part of the process and the product after abjection. The thesis will undertake close readings of all primary sources, but the underpinning claim for understanding the subject after abjection is centred primarily on the communicative level on which the texts are functioning as they are positioned as being part of the repetition compulsion and an attempt to work through the experience. The close textual analysis will provide a greater understanding of the texts as forming part of the communication after abjection. This is central to the assertions of this thesis, rather than positioning its claims entirely on revealing any hitherto undiscovered linguistic comparisons between the texts, which would be a greater methodological constraint for the translated texts.⁵

This thesis will work within the confines of the abject as Julia Kristeva has described it within her essay. This does not mean that the concerns of the critics, such as Martin Jay, who have noted the theory's presumed universal subjectivity have gone unheeded, as will be later discussed when this thesis turns to critical responses to the theory of abjection. This is not to say that Peppiatt, Ernaux and Jackson's experiences are universal, as all perception is subjectively bound, but rather to use their perceptions to explore the traces left behind from this experience; to explore the wound left from the bite of abjection. To expose this wound of abject trauma, this thesis will conduct its literary analysis through a psychoanalytic theoretical framing of experience, through combining Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Sigmund Freud's writings on 'repetition compulsion' and 'working through'.⁶ Alongside these two key theories, this thesis will also consider psychoanalyst Otto

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Lawrence Venuti offer useful insights into the problems associated with translation and the difficulty with deciding whether the exact translation is the most "relevant" for the spirit of the text or passage. They asserts that 'any given translation, where the best or the worst, actually stands between the two, between absolute relevance, the most appropriate, adequate, univocal transparency, and the most aberrant and opaque irrelevance' (1) and 'A relevant translation would therefore be, quite simply, a "good" translation, a translation that does what one expects of it, in short, a version that performs its mission, honors its debt and does its job or its duty while inscribing the receiving language the most *relevant* equivalent for an original, the language that is *the most* right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on.' (2) In this respect, the translations of the texts here discussed will always fall fault of being both relevant and irrelevant. They could be exact in their translation of the words into English but lose the spirit of the text. With this in mind, this thesis understands the translations to capture the spirit of the meaning and in so doing, they offer a comparative level through which to explore the linguistic elements that convey the meaning, the spirit, of the translated texts. (1) Jacques Derrida and Lawrence Venuti, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 179. (2) *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

Fenichel's later expansion on Freud's work, to enable a greater understanding of the types of repetition compulsion and what Fenichel positions as being the driving force behind them.

Reading through Julia Kristeva

Before this thesis turns to explore Julia Kristeva's later theorising of the term 'abjection', which gave rise to its increased popularity as a term within critical discourse, one must first acknowledge its origins in the works of the French philosopher Georges Bataille. Bataille conceptualised the term to explore his concerns for rising political discourse in Europe and what he saw as being the dehumanising experience of the labouring class. Through this lens, Bataille describes the outcasts, 'the impure human mass',⁷ of society as being 'represented from the outside with disgust as the dregs of people, populace and gutter'.⁸ However, paradoxically, whilst this positions the abject 'outcasts' of society as figures to be excluded, they can never be fully 'cast out', as the prevailing social order and cultural dominance is built on the foundation of having those social groupings as being beneath, less than, and in the 'gutter'. Such people, therefore, remain at once in the centre of the public body and at the same time at the periphery, rejected from the centre, as Bataille writes, they are 'disinherited [from] the possibility of being human'.⁹ Through this dominant culture and discourse they are perceived as a threat to the public body, which perpetuates their positioning as objects of disgust and sources of excess. These paradoxical and dichotomous descriptions of the abject provide the basis for Kristeva's later theorising of the term. Kristeva's expansion on Bataille's work roots the experience of abjection more firmly within psychoanalytic discourse, rather than within the socio-political framing and application. Furthermore, where Bataille positions this experience as a destruction of the subjectivity, Kristeva views the process of abjection as being a perpetual experience of the destruction of the self which is thereafter reconstituted through abjection. It is through this process that the subject (re)establishes themselves. Much of the more recent work on abjection, which will be discussed later, employs the psychoanalytic framing that Kristeva builds for the concept but applies this to the socio-political contexts to understand particular experiences of subjects and groups of people within contemporary society, which harkens back to Bataille's original writings. This socio-political implication for abjection will feature in almost all texts within the thesis, as will be later explored, however, it is through Kristeva's psychoanalytic understanding of abjection as being rooted in the return of the repressed that enables a greater and more fruitful exploration of the experiences detailed by the authors within their texts.

⁷ Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," in More and Less, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Yvonne Shafir (1934; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 6.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

Julia Kristeva published *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1980 and following its publication the theory of abjection has gained significant traction in scholarship, discourse, and the arts. For Kristeva, abjection can be experienced many times throughout one's life and is characterised by evoking a sense of horror, disgust and a breaking of the psychological boundaries between self and 'Other'. Born in Bulgaria on 24th June 1941, Kristeva has been an influential figure amongst philosophers, linguists, feminists, and psychoanalysts. She left Bulgaria at the age of twenty-three to live in France, where she has resided ever since. Prior to emigrating, she obtained her degree in linguistics at the University of Sofia, and she is now a Professor Emeritus at University of Paris VII Diderot. Her interest in language has driven her theoretical pursuits and shaped her studies of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical methods. She completed her training as a psychoanalyst in 1979 and has contributed both as an academic in the theoretical field and as a practising psychoanalyst. Her earlier work focuses on, and is highly influenced by, her passion for semiotics and structuralist writings and her later work explores these threads and draws out the prominence of them in the field of feminist and psychoanalytical theories. One of Julia Kristeva's key contributions to linguistics is the distinction she draws between the semiotic and the symbolic, the former referring to the maternal body, rhythm and tone, the latter the syntax and rules of grammar in language. This led to her presenting her concept of semianalysis, which combines these two areas of study: semiotics and the psychoanalytical methods of Sigmund Freud. Kristeva's combination of Freud and Jacques Lacan's theories with her own poststructuralist frameworks, meant that she rejected the idea of an essentialised self, and favoured the notion of a self that is in a permanent state of reconstruction and process.

Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic drove much of her thinking and was the focus of her doctoral thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In her later works, *The Powers of Horror*, *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun*, Kristeva moves away from this focus, which, as Sara Beardsworth notes, 'has led some to view that Kristeva has betrayed the need of social transformation in favor of an allegiance to individual suffering.'¹⁰ However, as Beardsworth asserts, 'these positions miss the deep significance of the new relationship between the semiotic and symbolic in the trilogy, where Kristeva is [...] more interested in investigating the fate of semiotic elements in the social and symbolic life. For this is what allows her a much deeper reach into the problem she addresses: the crises of meaning, value, and authority in modern Western societies.'¹¹ These elements of Kristeva's focus in the later works are pertinent in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva presents the experience of abjection as being the point at which the infant is

¹⁰ Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 55.

¹¹ Ibid.

suddenly inducted into the symbolic realm following the rejection of the mother and the semiotic world that she embodies. It is the developmental stage where the child becomes its own 'I' and detaches from the notion that it and the mother are of one substance.¹² This moment is perpetually confronted throughout life in any experience that can be considered to be breaching the borders of what one considers to be the clean and contained self.

It is at the aforementioned point of rupture in the borders of self that the primary sources for this thesis offer traumatic, but vastly different, experiences. Michael Peppiatt opens his 2015 autobiographical memoir *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* as a young man studying at the University of Cambridge. The memoir begins with his meeting the influential artist, Francis Bacon. Prior to his becoming friends with Bacon, Peppiatt had limited experiences with modern art and only ventured to meet him as he was asked to write about him for the University newspaper. Peppiatt made notes of every meeting he had with Bacon, taking particular care to write down the striking things that he said, which was a habit initially cultivated due to his role as interviewer, but became a practice maintained for the duration of their friendship. Documenting his experiences with Bacon was important to Peppiatt, as they were often fuelled by alcohol, and he recognised how precious time with Bacon would be. Throughout the autobiography Peppiatt notes several occasions where he experiences overwhelming reactions to Bacon's artwork. These experiences, as detailed in the autobiography, are the phenomena that are of particular interest to this thesis because they are described as being intense and often shattering, insofar as they draw attention to the always-already shattered being and expose the illusion of wholeness, in a manner which reflects the experience of abjection. Whilst these experiences are not described as being pleasant, Peppiatt thereafter seeks out opportunities to relive these moments, so it can be understood that there is something of a level of pleasurable pain in the experience and a need to encounter the experience again. It is this sense of the inescapable pull Peppiatt feels towards Bacon's works, as much as the experience itself, that Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a distinct illumination. This experience is felt deeply by Peppiatt and his inability to walk away and avoid confronting that which disturbs him is what this thesis will later explore and position as the effects of after abjection.

Also situated in an abject space, albeit one more defined by socially imposed determination, is Annie Ernaux in her short autobiographical account *Happening*. This deeply discomforting story follows the life of Ernaux at age twenty-three during her experience of becoming pregnant and having an illegal abortion in 1960s France. The snapshot of her life during this time is agonising to read, as she deliberately takes her reader through her experience and thoughts during this time with

¹² Kristeva asserts that this moment in the development of the 'I' as separate from the mother comes after the semiotic *chora* and before the 'mirror stage' described by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the 'mirror stage' the infant identifies itself with its own image in what Lacan terms the 'Ideal-I' or 'ideal ego'.

precise and uncompromising detail. In reading this text one is exposed, as she was, to each awkward and despondent conversation as she tries to seek help. She attempts to self-administer an abortion with knitting needles, but to no avail. She is continually let down and treated with cruelty by the people from whom she asks for help. Ernaux eventually discovers a nurse who performs illegal abortions on her bed in her small apartment. She inserts a probe into Ernaux, who has to go back to have another probe inserted after the first was unsuccessful. The final probe induces a miscarriage, and she aborts the baby before flushing it down the toilet. The procedure leaves Ernaux uncontrollably bleeding and admitted to hospital to save her life. There is much to be discussed within this short text, which has hitherto been little studied. Seen through the theoretical lens of Kristeva's abjection, the text is illuminated with abject significance. There are moments where Ernaux is abjected by others, moments where she abjects herself and the growing foetus inside her, and moments that are abject in their descriptive gory and bloody nature. Frequently in the text the experiences of Ernaux shock and appal, which can lead to an abjection of the text itself through the desire to jettison the text from your reading eye and figuring mind. The multiple levels on which this text operates makes it a powerful example of an abject experience and one that deserves further scholarly attention.

The third case study shifts the focus from that of autobiographical writing to fictional writing. However, the biography of Shirley Jackson, as detailed in Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*, will provide the underpinning context to the literary analysis, as her life is presented as being tinged with abject experiences. This case study marks a transition in the thesis, as it moves away from autobiographical writing to fictional writing supported by biography, which will emphasise the broader application of the methodological approach being proposed in this thesis. Shirley Jackson experienced the abject in multiple ways throughout her life, but for the purposes of this thesis these will be grouped thematically, in line with two of her fictional texts, into experiences concerning her mother and those relating to societal abjection. The former text, *The Haunting of Hill House*, engages with the broad themes of her mother's disapproval and cruel rejection of Jackson even before she was born, the latter text, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, will be explored with respect to Jackson's crippling agoraphobia that led to the eventual self-imprisonment within her own home. These life experiences will be described in relation to Kristeva's theorisations to understand better how these can be seen to be manifesting in her fictional writing. This reading and the theoretical connections being made will offer new insight into the life and writing of Shirley Jackson.

This thesis is concerned not only with these experiences as described in the moment but also those of 'after abjection'. Following the connections made with Kristeva's writing in the primary

sources, the thesis will consider the drive to repeat these experiences through the act of writing. In doing so, this thesis will introduce the concept of 'after abjection' to provide an understanding of the aftermath and resultant behaviours following an encounter with the abject. Whilst this thesis describes the experience following an encounter with the abject as being 'after abjection' this phrasing is not employed to suggest that the subject has moved beyond abjection per se, as the abject and the resultant experience of abjection is a perpetual, durational experience that remains ever-present at the borders of the subject. Rather, this phrasing is referring to the subject's processing and responses to a particularly intense encounter with the abject and abjection, as described within their writing. This thesis therefore focuses attention on a specific event in the subject's life and how the effects of this experience manifests in their actions as a process and product of the experience of abjection. The threat of the abject remains despite the author's processing of the particular experience through their writing. This is notably evidenced through the chapter on Shirley Jackson, whose experience of abjection is reflected in two fictional texts which concern different focuses and experiences of the abject in her early and later life. For Jackson, one height of an experience of the abject is in the relationship with her mother, the other, later, concerns her fear of the 'outside' world. This exemplifies that the nature of the abject is a continuous and unresolvable tension between outside and inside, 'I' and 'Other', clean and contaminated, and is confronted in multiple ways and degrees of intensity throughout one's existence. As such, the subjects on which this thesis focuses do not resolve abjection and are never beyond the abject, nor do they recover from its effects, as will be concluded and explored more fully in the final chapter. What this thesis seeks to understand is the way in which a subject processes an experience of abjection through exploring their writing about a particularly significant experience of abjection.

In both autobiographies the author returns to the spaces that have been known to induce the experience of abjection and in Jackson there is a sense that the fictional narratives are a manifestation of her fears in extreme forms. It is this connection between the texts that this thesis will use to explore 'after abjection', as the repetition of seeking the abject trauma is distinctly present in all three subjects. This discussion will be framed within psychoanalytic discourse and the work of Sigmund Freud; specifically, his theory of 'repetition compulsion' and 'working through'.¹³ Finally, this thesis will highlight the common features between the experiences of after abjection as being one that necessitates a form of communication. Communication of these events is shown to be paramount in at once an act of repetition compulsion and an attempt at working through these

¹³ Sigmund Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

experiences. The thesis will conclude by situating the unrelenting pull the subjects have towards repeating the abject experience as being centred on the desire for the jouissance of the abject, which perpetuates the repetition and continuation of working through. Using these links between the texts, this thesis proposes a view of after abjection that explores a previously undiscussed area of Kristeva's theory. This will be used to frame the analysis of two autobiographical texts, which have hitherto not been focused on in scholarship, and a highly revered author to form new understandings of these texts. *The Powers of Horror* will be referred to in each of the textual analysis chapters, and the quotations featured will be turned, upturned, and returned to throughout the thesis and recontextualised in relation to the specific text of focus. In doing so, this thesis provides new knowledge through its expansion upon the theory of abjection, its potential to provide a new methodological approach to understanding the after-abjection experience and its contribution to new readings of two autobiographical texts and Shirley Jackson's fiction.

Thesis overview

To set the foundations on which this thesis has built its assertions, it will begin by engaging with the critical responses to the theory of abjection, before turning in Chapter One to the arguments that may arise as to the usefulness of life writing as a case study for experiential and psychoanalytic theoretical analysis. This discussion will explore the complexities associated with attempts to determine the extent to which autobiographical writing can be considered to be true. Through this discussion it will thereafter consider the levels to which this form of writing can be useful for exploring psychoanalytic interpretations of experience.

Chapter Two will present an approach to understanding Michael Peppiatt's experience of Francis Bacon's artwork through first focusing on a select number of paintings framed by Kristeva's theory. This section will conclude that this approach to understanding the artwork promotes further enquiry, as there is something more to Peppiatt's experience of these paintings that is deeply affected by his intentionality towards them, which cannot be easily reduced to the elements where theory and text coincide. To unpick this notion further, the final section of this chapter will explore Peppiatt's experience through close textual analysis and psychoanalytic framing, which will be shown to be the more effective approach to understanding his experience.

Chapter Three will provide a secondary reflection on the reading of Peppiatt's experience, through Kristeva. It will begin the discussion around the 'after abjection' effect and suggest there is a current gap in knowledge about the post-abjection experience. Taking this forward, the thesis will argue that to understand better the 'after abjection' experience, there needs to be a re-reading of Freud's theories of 'repetition compulsion' and 'working through' alongside Kristeva's theory of

abjection. This combination of psychoanalytic theories will enhance the scope and depth of both theories as well as enable a clearer and more substantive understanding of 'after abjection'. Finally, this chapter will revisit *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* to further its understanding of the text and the 'after abjection' experience through positioning the link between Kristeva and Freud.

Chapter Four will look at the second primary text for this thesis, Annie Ernaux's *Happening*. This chapter will begin by exploring some of the key themes of the text and the topical debates surrounding issues of abortion. It is a text that is highly relevant to the broader picture of contemporary Western society, as issues around abortion continue to be hotly debated, so this discussion must first be framed ethnographically due to the nature of this text. Kristeva's theories of abjection will illuminate this initial discussion, to explore the effects of an abjection of the self and wider societal abjection in relation to abortion. This section will be followed by a close reading of the text, using the combination of Kristeva and Freud to explore Ernaux's *Happening* more specifically and her experience during and after abjection.

Following the two autobiographical case studies, this thesis will turn to its third case study Shirley Jackson and her fictional texts *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The literary analysis of these texts will be framed by the theory of abjection and guided by Jackson's biography as detailed in Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. This thesis seeks not to position these fictional texts as autobiographical, but instead make connections with the literary portrayals of abjection, through the characters and narrative, with Jackson's own experiences of the abject throughout her life. The literary analysis and the biographical account will be considered separately, so as not to over laden the text with biographical links, but it will provide a means through which the thesis can explore Jackson's experience of abjection, her compulsion to repeat the experience through her fictional writing and what this means for the subject after abjection.

The final chapter of this thesis will conclude with a reflection on 'after abjection' for the three case studies and how their experiences link together. Building on the analysis and evidence therein, it will conclude that after abjection there is a compulsion to repeat the experience as part of the process of working through. The process of working through will be considered in greater depth alongside Jean François Lyotard's discussion of working through, as this provides a more detailed expansion on Freud's original, quite limited, description. The thesis will highlight that the subject's repetitions are stimulated by the experience of abjection, but further driven to continue working through them due to the connection the abject has with the phenomena of the painful pleasure associated with jouissance. The final section of this thesis will conclude that the compulsion to repeat and encounter the abject is continually reignited by a need to seek the jouissance of the

abject. Jouissance will therefore be positioned as the dominating feature after abjection, one that draws the subject back to communicating the experience of abjection in repetitive behaviours or in distilled, disguised, forms.

Critical Responses to Abjection

Before employing Kristeva's theory of abjection to better understand the experiences of the three case studies, it is important to note that the theory is not without its controversies. This literature review will therefore engage with these criticisms to position the thesis clearly in relation to these critics and address the issues that might befall the use of this theory as a means through which one can understand experience. To benefit the following critical readings, this literature review will initially summarise Kristeva's theory before engaging with Martin Jay's critical response to the theory, which highlights key areas of debate around it. It will then explore a selection of feminist readings of Kristeva's theory and engage with its ambivalent status amongst feminist critics, as it can be viewed as either emancipatory or condemnatory for women. The critical responses from the literature will guide this thesis and will be used to navigate and expand on Kristeva's theory, to understand better the effect on the subject during and after the experience of abjection.

Julia Kristeva outlines the primary experience of abjection as being the traumatic point at which the infant abjects the mother in order to create its own separate subjectivity. This experience is the site of primary repression and in subsequent experiences of abjection, this primary and traumatic abject moment is relived. John Lechte, a scholar who wrote his doctoral thesis under Kristeva's supervision, summarises and exemplifies moments at which the experience of abjection can be induced. He describes abjection as moments in which the subject experiences revulsion and horror when confronted with certain objects, situations, or people; though it is important to note that it is not necessarily the object per se but what the object signifies to the subject. Such moments include: revulsion at food, bodily waste, and sacred transgressions; corruption and hypocrisy; secrecy and trust betrayal; sexual taboos being broken.¹⁴ Lechte argues that the corruption of morals is the aspect of abjection most prevalent in the present age, as such examples include 'a friend who stabs you in the back, science (which is supposed to save a life) producing weapons of mass destruction, a politician on the take'.¹⁵ Lechte's sociological positioning of Kristeva's theory is a useful starting point for this thesis, as it reflects the political nature of the abject texts on which this thesis focuses. Ernaux in particular uses her abject content as a political weapon to emphasise the

¹⁴ John Lechte, *Key Contemporary Concepts* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 10.

¹⁵ John Lechte, *Key Contemporary Concepts* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 11.

crucial rights women should have to their reproductive bodies. However, Lechte determines there are two implications that can be derived from Kristeva's work, one is that we must strengthen the symbolic order, so that the moral and political framework society operates within is unambiguous, the other is to 'bring about a revived order of ritual, in order that ambiguity in social life might be reduced.'¹⁶ Lechte suggests the former of which could lead to a more active state, one that classifies more explicitly the abject qualities that are outside of the welcomed moral and political framework, such as the hypocrisy that lies within the political sphere. The latter suggestion argues for a ritualised purification process to be established, so that areas of ambiguity could be better understood and avoided. Unlike Lechte's assertion for the two potential outcomes of Kristeva's theory, the texts in this thesis can be understood as asserting a need to break from the rigid culturally constructed notion of the moral and political framework and challenge its perceived self-evident justification. The critics discussed in this thesis explore the implications of Kristeva's theory and further the reading of Kristeva's essay through exemplifying the theory in both art and life, locating moments of inconsistency, and challenging its application to society and texts. Building on this, they also argue that if Kristeva's theory is reinforcing abject associations in the symbolic order and working to concretise more explicitly any ambiguities, as Lechte suggests, then this is problematic for the groups of people to whom abject associations are attributed.

Highlighting further issues with the theory, Martin Jay, in his essay 'Abjection Overruled', critiques multiple aspects of Kristeva's postulations. He firstly calls into question the subject as assumed by abjection. He argues that the discomfort felt at an assumed collective understanding of subjectivity is due to 'the realization that those who claim to speak for it are often, in fact, far less representative than they pretend to be'¹⁷ and 'it is only male chauvinist piggies who cry "we, we, we" all the way home"¹⁸. He goes further in his critique of the theory, arguing that it assumes the universal experience of humankind, evidenced by his engagement with what he contends to be the all-encompassing, universally applicable, nature of abjection. This highlights the issue of the examples provided by Kristeva in the text, noted above by Lechte, as being conclusive in their abject nature, rather than being connected with the individual's subjective reaction, framed relatively. Such cultural breaks in the supposed universal subjectivity were exposed in Mary Douglas's work in 1966 *Purity and Danger*, she states, '[i]n some, menstrual pollution is feared as a lethal danger; in others not at all. In some, death pollution is a daily preoccupation; in others not at all. In some excreta is

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Martin Jay, "Abjection Overruled," *Salmagundi* 103 (1994): 236.

¹⁸ Ibid.

dangerous, in others it is only a joke.’¹⁹ Douglas’ sociological research evidences the key role the subject and their cultural and ideological framing has in their relation to the abject. The assumed universality to the detailed examples of the abject in Kristeva’s text suggest all subjects would experience abjection when confronting the same phenomena. Further to this, Jay quotes Michael Andre Bernstein to emphasise that ‘an analysis of abjection that can move without hesitation from Oedipus at Colonus to taboos associated with menstruation, and then to the Holocaust, seems to me to abandon, by overextension, the explanatory force of the term.’²⁰ For Jay, the term can be considered to be too easily applicable to all situations where the feeling of horror is induced, to the extent that it loses its impact as a theory. Finally, he problematises the assertion of many of Kristeva’s readers, in particular feminist critics such as Caitríona Ní Chléirchin, who will be later discussed, that we should recapture the abject, reframe it and celebrate it. Jay undermines the pursuit of this end by providing biological examples of where the connotations of impurity are correctly associated and justified in causing revulsion. Jay separates here the culturally abject from the biologically abject to argue that there is still a need for some material or acts to remain firmly abject and not to be assimilated. He extends the application of the proposed celebration of the abject to the ‘polluted’²¹ bodily fluids of AIDS sufferers. He asks, ‘[s]hould we eschew safe sex, move to the Love Canal, and gulp in second-hand cigarette smoke because overcoming the phobia of abjection of whatever kind is somehow intrinsically emancipatory?’²² This question takes the celebration of the abject to its potentially extreme conclusion in its focus on the biologically hazardous material. Through using these examples in his question Jay compels a resounding answer in the negative but evades a fuller discussion of any of the positive results that celebrating and confronting some biologically abject material might provide for those people who are associated with it. Rather, Jay cautions against the assumption that undermining all abject associations with biologically hazardous material will have positive results for culturally stigmatized groups of people. However, Jay’s focus on the above listed biologically abject material does not fully consider the potentially emancipatory outcomes of removing the disgust felt at certain biologically abject material which is associated with some people. Examples of such people include some women, for whom their biological processes, such as menstruation, are considered abject in a patriarchal society.²³ Challenging the abject associations of certain biological substances that are considered to

¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark, 1966), 121.

²⁰ Martin Jay, “Abjection Overruled,” *Salmagundi* 103 (1994): 242.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ The author of this thesis has explored the relationship between abjection and menstruation in their article ‘The Abject in Education’. Cassie Lowe, “The Abject in Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 54 (2020): 17-30.

be abject and confronting these pejorative aspects of cultural demarcation can work towards undermining their premise, which holds the potential to be liberating for those people. However, Jay's overarching argument remains a valid consideration insofar as 'it is necessary to make some sort of hierarchal distinction in order to avoid the untenable conclusion that no pollution whatsoever is to be resisted.'²⁴ There is a greater discussion to be had about the biological aspects of abjection and where distinction could be made between dangerous and hazardous material and that which is associated with people and dangerous in an ideological sense.

The culturally conceived associations of people with the abject has led to vast discourse within scholarship around its effects and what can be done to lessen the impact on the lives of the people for whom the abject is associative. In particular, there is significant emphasis within the critical application of the theory of abjection in feminist readings exploring patriarchal ideological depictions of the female body as abject. The initial association of the female with the abject starts with the primary source of abjection in infant development. Critics, such as Rina Arya in her book *Abjection and Representation* and Anne-Marie Smith in her book *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable*, highlight the theory's suggestion for the importance of the initial maternal rejection, in order for the infant to create its own boundaries of subjectivity. The implications of which has had both positive and negative consequences. Arya suggests that through highlighting the role of the mother, 'Kristeva shifts the focus to the maternal and its significance in the development of the social, where identity is constructed by the exclusion of the maternal body',²⁵ and away from the previously male dominated child development stages of patriarchal models of psychoanalysis. Kristeva brings the importance of the female body into the narrative of infant development, which both Freud and Lacan had previously diminished. However, the position Kristeva gives to women in the infant's development is problematic, as in order for the child to exist as a subject it must find the mother abject. Seen in this way, Arya suggests, Kristeva can be seen to reinforce patriarchal ideology through pejoratively situating the maternal as a site of disgust and suggesting matricide is integral to becoming a subject, rather than providing women with a role that could otherwise be seen as liberating in a discourse that often previously disregarded them.²⁶ Arya highlights that Kristeva's theory further reinforces patriarchal ideology as it suggests the father represents the empowering symbolic world, a world in which the child acquires the necessary language to further become a subject and express the loss of the mother. She argues that this dichotomy Kristeva establishes

²⁴ Jay *op. cit.*, 246.

²⁵ Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 23.

²⁶ Both Melanie Klein (1882-1960) and Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) also bring the mother to the centre of child development in object-relations theory. Both Kleinian and post-Kleinian psychoanalysis stress that the child's sense of vulnerability, create ambivalent feelings towards the mother.

between mother and father positions them in roles that naturally have binary hierarchies within gender coded language. She states, 'by likening the semiotic to the maternal, and thereby the feminine and the symbolic to the post-maternal, Kristeva is essentially pairing up the semiotic with nature and the symbolic with culture'²⁷, which Arya suggests, 'involves biological essentialism and reinforces stereotypes about the maternal.'²⁸ It therefore sets up a false dichotomy between men and women, where one is the privileged and liberating figure and the other is weak and regressing. This is further complicated when one considers the socially constructed nature of gender and does not take into consideration the fluidity of the previously perceived dichotomous roles. Through Kristeva bringing women into the narrative of psychoanalysis and infant development in this way, it can be seen to be reproducing, rather than undermining, the culturally conceived pejorative stereotypes about women and reinforces the notion that there are only two genders. Whilst this thesis is not using a feminist theoretical paradigm to engage with the selected texts, it is important to be mindful of these issues so as to avoid, where possible, positioning the arguments within this false, socially constructed, dichotomy.

The operation and consequence of the feminine associations with the abject is explored in Caitríona Ní Chléirchin's essay on the experience of abjection induced through the Irish-language poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson. She asserts that both poets, 'attempt to deconstruct patriarchal power structures in their work. Transgressing borders and speaking about the taboo, the forbidden, the unnameable is central to [their] poetry.'²⁹ She exemplifies this through quoting their poetry, highlighting parts that particularly induce an experience of abjection, such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem "Boldha na Fola/ The Smell of Blood". Chléirchin furthers her argument by asserting, '[a]bjection is often used to describe the state of marginalized groups, such as women, minorities, prostitutes, poor people.'³⁰ To overcome this, Chléirchin argues that through poets like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson using *écriture féminine*, the limits placed on women in the male-dominated canon can be transcended. For Chléirchin, embracing, celebrating and writing about the abject aspects of human existence, in particular those associated with the female body, is imperative in order to diminish the patriarchal associations of the female with the abject. She sees this as a 'powerful weapon'³¹ against the false image of women and the ease at which women can be considered an object of horror or disgust if they do not contend with the unobtainable

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Caitríona Ní Chléirchin, "Abjection and Disorderly Elements of Corporeal Existence in the Irish-Language Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 30 (2010): 160.

³⁰ Ibid., 167.

³¹ Ibid., 173.

expectations of patriarchy. This powerful weapon is met in extremes in *Happening*, in which the abject associations with women culminate in a text that is rich with the transgression of borders and speaking of forbidden taboos that would otherwise be ostracized from society and discourse.

In opposition to Chléirchin, Imogen Tyler, in her article 'Against Abjection', suggests that employing and associating abjection with women, regardless of its emancipatory intent, is reproducing histories of violence and disgust towards maternal bodies. She suggests that feminism should resist the 'compulsion to the abject'³² and instead 'imagine ways of theorizing maternal subjectivity that vigorously contest the dehumanizing effects of abjection.'³³ Tyler evidences the dehumanizing effects of abjection through case studies of women who have suffered abuse during pregnancy as a result of their cultural association of being abject. She firstly critiques the use of abjection by feminist theorists as they appear ignorant to the fundamental premise of the theory, as one that is based upon a foundation of matricide and maternal rejection. She asserts that Kristeva is 'neither French in origin nor a feminist'³⁴ and finds it perplexing that feminist associations are attributed to Kristeva, who only identifies female bodies as a sight of cultural disgust. She recognises that feminists use abject associations with the female body in order to undermine it, but she asserts that this only works to reproduce this association and strengthen its attachment. Furthermore, Tyler echoes the criticism from Martin Jay, also finding the universal subjectivity of the theory questionable, particularly in relation to the figure of the mother. Finally, Tyler highlights that, '[a]bjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanizing effects of law are integral to processes of abjection.'³⁵ She evidences the social experience of abjection through the experiences of pregnant women who have suffered physical and mental abuse due to their maternal body being associated with that of the abject. She suggests, 'the deeply engrained psychosocial association between the maternal and the abject is an historical condition and not an unchangeable fact.'³⁶ It is not an irrevocable association, but one that can and should be addressed, because '[a]bjection has real effects on real bodies; abjection hurts.'³⁷ Whilst Chléirchin argues the celebration of the abject associations of female bodies is key to progression in patriarchy, Tyler advocates for feminism to move away from 'observational reiteration'³⁸ and challenge the forms and processes of abjection that are the key driving force behind female experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. Whilst this thesis

³² Imogen Tyler, "Against Abjection," *Feminist Theory* 10 (2009): 78.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

seeks to explore the effects of abortion on the 'real body' of Annie Ernaux through an application of the theory, it moves away from the observational reiteration described by Tyler to enable a deeper appreciation of the experience of unwanted pregnancy. This shifts the focus away from the female body as abject, from an observational and disconnected discussion to a subject-centred analysis, to be able to provide a better understanding of the psychological impact that an unwanted pregnancy can have on a person's sense of self.

However, a feminist critic who applies abjection in the manner Imogen Tyler refers to as 'observational reiteration' is Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Creed exemplifies how the female body and functions associated with it, such as pregnancy and menstruation, have become features in horror films due to their abject associations. She emphasises that it is not the female body that is abject per se, but the signifying system in which the female body exists. She refers to *Carrie*, *Alien*, *Psycho*, *The Exorcist* and many more to exemplify how this materialises in horror films. Whilst Creed is re-establishing the link between the experience of abjection and the female body as a source of horror in her book, as Imogen Tyler strongly advises feminists against, she does also critique Kristeva. She questions, in a manner that echoes the sentiments of both Martin Jay and Imogen Tyler, the assumed universal subjectivity of the theory. Creed suggests the theory also lacks consideration for the child's gender at the point of rejection of the mother, as she argues that 'the mother might relate to a male child with a more acute sense of pride and pleasure.'³⁹ She also finds this to be a fault when considering the cultural differences in relation to the preconceived Eurocentric notions of what Kristeva considers to be taboo aspects of human existence. Creed concludes that, if the theory of abjection is read as a descriptive explanation of patriarchal culture, it provides 'an extremely useful hypothesis for an investigation of the representation of women in the horror film.'⁴⁰ However, this conclusion does not engage with the problem Imogen Tyler has raised with Kristeva's theory that abjection has deeply negative consequences on real people. Whilst abjection could be seen to provide a useful frame for understanding why women are so frequently represented as abject in horror films, and other cultural artistic production, it does nothing more than reinforce these pejorative associations at the cost of the 'real bodies'⁴¹ that experience their gender coded associations with abjection, such as the pregnant women in Tyler's case studies. This thesis positions itself against the observational reiteration Tyler describes, as she determines this to be a contributing factor to the reproduction of cultural references to the abject female. It will do this through not taking an explicitly gendered reading of after abjection, but rather position it as an aspect of human experience. However, given

³⁹ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27 (1986): 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ Tyler *op. cit.*, 90.

the nature of one of the texts in this thesis, aspects of abortion will engage with critics that do use the pejorative associations of the female body specifically to understand cultural references to abortion. It will also unavoidably encounter the descriptions of the female as abject in Kristeva's essay and will use these to better understand Ernaux's experience of abjection and Jackson's experience of maternal rejection. However, these will be used in the manner Creed describes, as being an extremely useful hypothesis for exploring this experience, as one of many potential experiences of abjection, to better understand the subject after this experience.

In line with considering cultural representations and associations of the abject, it is important to link this also with artistic movements in contemporary cultures more broadly. As evidenced by Creed's book on the abject female in the film industry, the theory has gained significant traction in the discourse of cultural and art studies. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the critical understandings of and implications for this movement. As a theory aligned to visual and conceptual (re)presentations of horror and disgust, a genre of art based on this experience has flourished in contemporary culture.⁴² Hal Foster's article 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic' explores the development of contemporary artwork through the experiences of horror induced by both abjection and the 'gaze' as described by Lacan.⁴³ Foster starts by stating that art prior to contemporary movements, such as expressionism, were intended to pacify the maleficent and violent gaze. Foster states;

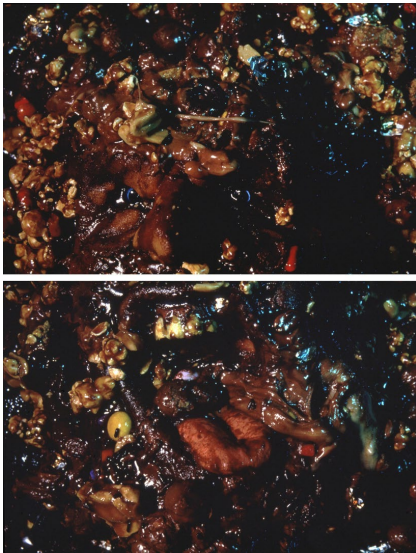
I want to suggest that much contemporary art refuses this age-old mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. *It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition.*⁴⁴

⁴² The Tate describes abject art, 'Abject art is used to describe artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions.' Tate, 'Art Term: Abject Art,' available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abject-art> (accessed: 1 Nov 2019). Helen Chadwick's is an example of artist who has created artwork out of abject concepts, connections and images. Her *Viral Landscapes* provide one such example of this connection between artists and the abject.

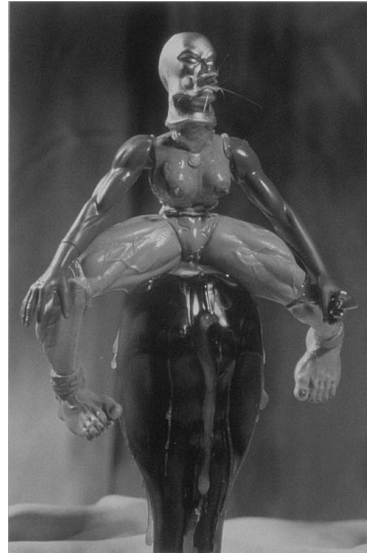
⁴³ The gaze as described by Lacanian theory is the moment at which one glimpses into the materiality of existence, the Real, undercutting the meaning-making structures of the symbolic order on which we understand our existence and ourselves. Lacan provides the example of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. In this image the subject looks and understands the symbols of power and desire in the painting. However, this experience of the symbolic order is undercut by the blot at the bottom corner of the image, which, when viewed from the side, shows the figure of a skull. This highlights the that the symbolic order is separated by a fragile border from the Real that the skull represents – materiality and death – or, as Lacan describes, it 'reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head' Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977), 92.

⁴⁴ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (1996): 110.

Foster argues contemporary art seeks to remove the screen that protects the subject and directly engage with and evoke the horrifying glory of the real.⁴⁵ He exemplifies this through the art of Cindy Sherman, whose work is summarised as being that which ‘evokes these extreme conditions [of the abject] in some disaster scenes suffused with signifiers of menstrual blood and sexual discharge, vomit and shit, decay and death.’⁴⁶ Example images from Cindy Sherman can be seen below.



(fig. 1) Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #190* (1989)



(fig. 2) Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #339* (1999)

However, Foster does problematize artworks that operate under the guise of producing the abject. He queries whether the abject can ever really be represented in art, as it is situated outside of the realm of the symbolic, which would suggest it is both ineffable and unable to be represented. Despite his uncertainty as to whether abject art can be represented, he continues to ask whether the use of the abject in art highlights a crisis in the social and subjective order, or, whether it merely strengthens and further confirms its existence. If the latter describes the use of abject art, Foster suggests it is used in order to ensure the social and subjective order exists, through provoking the paternal law in what he describes to be ‘at best a neurotic plea for punishment, at worst in a paranoid demand for order.’⁴⁷ The neurotic plea for punishment from the paternal law draws acute parallels with both the biography of Francis Bacon and his artwork and the biography of Michael

⁴⁵ This notion echoes thoughts Michael Peppiatt quotes Francis Bacon to have been pronouncing about his own artwork. At a dinner in the Grand Véfour in Paris, Michel Leris is discussing the concept of reality with Bacon, who states, ‘people live behind screens, they live screened off from reality, and perhaps, every now and then, my paintings record life, and the way things are when some of those screens have been cleared away. That’s probably why so many people find my work horrific.’ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 118.

⁴⁶ Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* 78 (1996): 112.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

Peppiatt, both of whom will form the initial exploratory foundation from which this thesis will develop. Foster further suggests art uses the abject to operate in two ways, one is to 'probe the wound of trauma'⁴⁸ in order to confront the object-gaze of the real. The other is to 'represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation',⁴⁹ to undermine, to make reflective and 'repellent in its own right'.⁵⁰ These considerations also draw acute links with the works of Ernaux and Jackson, whose quest to provoke their readership probes the wounds of trauma and in many senses also seek not to pacify the gaze but reveal the horrifying glory of the real, whilst also functioning as working through the experience for the authors.

It is crucial to be mindful of these criticisms when approaching the analysis for this thesis, so that it remains attentive to the issues of representing and discussing the abject in artistic production more broadly in its approach. This thesis seeks to explore experiences of abjection to understand better the psychical effects on the subjects and take a subject-centred approach; one that seeks to avoid the observational reiteration of deeming certain subjects to be abject and instead be subjects who have experienced abjection, in order to explore the previously unexplored notion of 'after abjection'. On a similar note, the genre of texts on which this thesis will focus equally require critical reflection, guided by literature, so as to expose any potential criticisms of using the biographical genre to widen the theoretical discussion of psychoanalysis. The following chapter will turn to the genre of life writing, to discuss the methodological approach in greater detail and ground the proceeding analysis and discussion in critical debates.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chapter One

This thesis' primary sources are biographical, and it is through these selected texts that this thesis seeks to understand the experience of abjection and the following compulsion to repeat. As such, it is important to spend some time considering the methodological constraints of using autobiography and biographies as case studies for advancing the psychoanalytic theories of abjection and repetition compulsion. To do this, this chapter will engage with the critical debates of life writing with regards to the notion of 'truth' in these texts so as to situate them as useful means through which to understand the subject's relationship with the trauma of abjection. It will explore what 'truth' means to this thesis and position its primary literary sources in this discussion to reflect on their viability as case studies. Such a discussion is pertinent for this thesis, as the primary experiences detailed within the literary sources are the foundation on which the thesis has been built.

(Auto)biographies as Case Studies

The term autobiography, as it shall be used within this thesis, will refer to the definition provided by Norman K. Denzin in his book *Interpretive Biography*. Denzin asserts, autobiography is '[a] person's life written by oneself. Inscribing and creating a life.'⁵¹ His definition will be used for the purposes of this thesis, as it provides more fruitful ambiguity in answer to some of the uncertainties with the form, which will be returned to later in this section. The second sentence Denzin attaches to his definition; that of 'inscribing' life, but more importantly, '*creating a life*', alludes to a key debate for the genre of autobiography, and life writing more broadly, and a vital issue for consideration in this thesis. It is with the aspect of *creating* life that the potentially troublesome elements of autobiography culminate, for the verb alludes to the fictitious construction, perhaps even invention, of *a* life, rather than the objective accurate documentation of *the* life. To what extent should an autobiography be creating a life? Questions of this nature are often debated within scholarship under the guise of whether there is any truth to be found in the biographical account of life. Whilst 'truth' as a conceptual and metaphysical notion is of course itself disputed, this section will explore conceptions of truth in relation to life writing, in order to both expose and overcome the issues with using autobiography and biography as a form for experiential and psychoanalytic literary analysis. This line of questioning is vital for this thesis to engage with in depth, as it is using autobiographies as a starting point to further develop the methodological approach proposed in this thesis before furthering its application to biography and fictional texts. It is important, therefore, to consider the

⁵¹ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 7.

possible issues surrounding life writing as this thesis will use these texts as accounts of experience that will in turn expand upon the psychoanalytic theories of both Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud.

There are different types of truth to be found in biographical writing. The first notion of truth to consider is that of objectivity. This situates a definition of 'truth' in biographical writing with that of an objective factual account of a life based on evidence and reality. Objective truth aligns with certain philosophical conceptualisations of truth, such as those defined by correspondence theories of truth, as it can be tested empirically or accounted for in documentation, and coherence theories of truth through cross referencing external perspectives. This is the axiologically privileged form of truth, one that aligns with the western cultural preferential associations of empirical research and scholarship. This culturally perceived hierarchical privileging of objective truth suggests that if (auto)biography is deemed to contain details that fall outside of these parameters, or anything fictitious, it is perceived to be consequently less valuable. Virginia Woolf in her essay 'The New Biography' concurs with the perceived supremacy of this form of truth, as she describes it as being virtuous in its 'almost mystic power. Like radium, it seems to give off for ever and ever grains of energy, atoms of light.'⁵² Such preferential treatment for objective truth is contextually determined and has followed a pattern of peaks and troughs throughout time, which can be seen in such movements as the 'rationality' of the Enlightenment, which then moves towards a favoured emotional expression in Romanticism, as a reaction to its predecessor, to return once again to scientific pursuits in the industrial revolution. These patterns highlight the changeable nature of this cultural privilege.

There are further issues to consider with the above cultural preference towards objective truth, particularly in relation to autobiography. If one was to limit a 'true' autobiographical account to that of objective and measurable truth through its ability to be evidenced, there are immediate considerations to be addressed. Pertinent to this thesis in particular is that autobiography relies heavily on the internal experience of the author who often describes intangible truths, such as emotional response and perception. Unlike objective truth, these experiential truths cannot be verified by an observational evidenced-based reality. This thesis will be analysing the autobiographical memoirs of both Michael Peppiatt and Annie Ernaux, which means it must, therefore, also consider a subjective and experiential understanding of truth in order to substantiate their use for a study of the experience after abjection. Peppiatt quotes Bacon as having said, "'I think everyone has their own idea of reality. We think of it as something objective, but in the end its perhaps the most subjective thing that exists.'"⁵³ For Bacon, the notion that there is an objective

⁵² Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," in *Virginia Woolf Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

⁵³ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 118.

truth, or reality, from which to write is considered to be an incorrect positioning of what reality truly is. For Bacon, reality is formed by a mass of subjectivities, all experiencing the same historically factual moments in different subjective, distorted, ways. To further explore this, Denzin states there have been proposals in autobiographical scholarship towards a multifaceted notion of truth, '[t]hese include sincerity, subjective truth, historical truth, and fictional truth'.⁵⁴ These proposals broaden the parameters of truth to include that which is not only externally verifiable but also aligns with both relativist and phenomenological notions of truth. This suggests there are different types of truth to be found in autobiography, which is an amalgamation of true facts, true fictions and truths that are contextual, subjective, and experiential.

The notions of both a personal and fictional truth is worth further exploration as these are highly prominent features of the form of life writing provided in an autobiography. Marjorie Worthington explores the similarities and differences between autofiction, which is a fictional novel that contains some reference to the author and their life, and autobiographical memoir. She argues that autobiographical memoirs rely heavily on historical fact but have the freedom to 'keep the reader guessing'⁵⁵ as to the possibility of fiction. They do, however, 'remain primarily committed to accurate referentiality; even if they do at times employ a modicum of fictionalization.'⁵⁶ Where the modicum of fictionalisation is employed within the text, it is often for the purposes of embellishment or emphasis, but it can also be used to alter the portrayal of themselves in a particular moment. However, there is some truth also to be found within these moments, it suggests a conscious act of the author to change an event in accordance with their own desire to portray themselves in a particular way. However, it is also important to consider that the way in which the author presents themselves within their autobiographical memoir, fictional or not, can be understood to be a form of truth reflecting their sense of self. However, Worthington continues, 'much of the power [of autobiographical memoirs] derives from the accuracy of its correspondence to the world outside itself. This is why the question of whether a narrative is "true" becomes so important for a memoir: if it is not strictly referential, a memoir loses that direct connection with the actual world that constituted part of its appeal.'⁵⁷ Her argument for the necessity of a referential and historical truth in memoir is in part derived from its loss of appeal to the reader, should it fall too deeply into the fictionalization afforded to the genre of autofiction. However, the reference to truth in this passage from Worthington is later explored as also being formed through a personal

⁵⁴ Denzin, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁵⁵ Marjorie Worthington, "Fiction in the 'Post-Truth' Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58 (2017): 472.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 476.

truth that is unlocked through the act of writing a memoir. She suggests, '[m]emoirs reflect their writers' very specific perspective, their very specific view of the "truth."'58 This opens the sense of 'truth' in autobiographical memoirs to be inclusive of subjective truths, as what Worthington argues is that key to the success of a memoir is its personal account of the moments that are, through perspective, subjectivity, and perception, true to the author.

A discussion of truth in life writing, however, differs in some ways between biography and autobiography. The dialectic approach to biography could be understood as situating it within a marginally more stable realm of truth if one views this stable realm as objective facts. The practice of biography aligns with the correspondence and coherence theories of truth, insofar as the biographer can trace various documents, records and often family and friends, to gather a multifaceted perspective and picture of the subject on whom it focuses. This is in contrast to the autobiographer, who relies to the greatest extent on memory, perception and self-understanding. However, despite the seemingly objective foundation on which biography is built, notions of truth are further complicated when one considers biographical writing in relation to the unavoidable requirement of interpretation and selectivity. This issue is present in both autobiography and biography. The author of the biography is condemned to interpret and impose their impressions of the subject in their writing. The author of the autobiography also faces issues of interpretation, but it is interpretation of themselves. Building on this notion, Alan Shelston asserts, 'even if we grant our ideal biographer complete freedom of access to his sources, intimacy with his subject coupled with detachment in his account, independence of taboos, and moral and political objectivity, it remains impossible to evade the ultimate questions about the nature of the truth that he tells.'⁵⁹ This statement emphasises the difficulty with life writing, as even if the author had the ability to operate outside personal interest and wider discourse, the process of life writing is one that requires interpretation and selection, and because of this, it is difficult to assert definitively its objective truthfulness as a whole. The biographer must make judgements on the subject's character, based on documents and external perspective, and select the scenes in that life to portray. The autobiographer must attempt to reflect themselves accurately, but they are only able to understand themselves and their actions from the first-person perspective. The picture the author paints of their subject will also ultimately be influenced by the context, or discourse, in which the biographer is operating. The result will always be an incomplete picture, or a picture portrayed in a chosen light within a specific context.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Alan Shelston, *Biography: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen & Co, 1977), 11.

The critique of life writing, both autobiography and biography, forms part of a wider discussion of the attempt to portray a form of truth from documented facts. Historiographer E. H. Carr describes the process of selection and interpretation as being integral to any historical writing of past events. He states, '[i]t used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.'⁶⁰ This is also true for the author of life writing. The notion of the author speaking through facts emphasises the issue with biographical writing, it is unavoidably selective, and what is selected tells a particular story. If facts were omitted or different facts were selected, the story can change. Finally, in summation, Carr states:

The facts are really not at all like fish on a fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.⁶¹

With this in mind, authors of (auto)biography can be seen to choose both the ocean and the tackle in their fishing for facts depending on the audience for and the context in which they are writing. Selectivity and interpretation are necessary for all biographical writing, but this ultimately leads to difficulty clearly delineating the fact from the specifically bated and embellished facts contained within the biography. Furthermore, as Shelston notes, 'while his source-material must inevitably be factual, the biographer has to deploy the techniques of the novelist'.⁶² Woolf also echoes the sentiments of Shelston and further recognises that whilst an objective truthful documentation of life writing could be seen as the more respected form of biographical writing, it is also the more dull and unreadable form. She therefore emphasises the importance of biographical selection to be choosing those moments that effectively transmit personality. This suggests the fish Carr describes are not only caught through selected oceans and tackle, but also cooked in a particular way to make them more palatable for the reader. Woolf argues, 'in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process,

⁶⁰ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁶² Shelston, *op. cit.*, 65.

they must never lose their integrity.’⁶³ This notion harkens back to the previously discussed issues of selectivity. The integrity of which Woolf speaks is a cautionary note towards the possibility of, and temptation towards, invention. Whilst both the biographer and autobiographer grapple with selectivity and interpretation it is vital, for Woolf, that the facts are not manipulated so far as to have lost their integrity. The fish must remain a fish, even if it is caught and served in a particular way.

Woolf argues that facts can be malleable in the crafting of life writing, but they cannot be invented or distorted so much as to represent fiction as fact. The truth of both fiction and fact, for Woolf, are antagonistic elements that cannot operate simultaneously. In summation she states;

Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible [...] the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact.⁶⁴

For Woolf, the biographer must employ an artistic approach to their subject; it should emphasise the features of the subject’s life of most interest, but they must not divert entirely from the truth of the subject they paint. They can interpret, select and arrange the facts, shining emphasis on particular moments, but they must not disfigure the facts they are presented with to a point where it is no longer the subject. Seen in this light, the biographer could be considered to be creating a caricature of their subject. Such an art form is skilful, as the subject must always remain truthful, despite its exaggerations and dramatizations. To invent is to present an element incongruous to the depiction, one that, Woolf argues, will destroy the work entirely. The biographer must, therefore, mediate and synthesise these two antagonistic elements, they must present a subject true to likeness, but artfully true. It must always remain the face of the subject, and it is important it remains recognisably so, but it is a face with aspects brightened or shaded.

To extend the metaphor further, in life writing the portrait of the subject is created through the artful skill of manipulation. The truth presented in these texts is one that represents the subject as they perceive themselves and others to be. The text cannot be duplicitous, as Woolf argues this would suggest it had fallen too deeply into fiction, but it is the portrait of the subject with certain features emphasised. Peppiatt states, ‘*Francis Bacon in Your Blood* can be seen as a double portrait,

⁶³ Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography,” in *Virginia Woolf Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

a diptych of the kind Bacon sometimes painted, showing two profiles, two personalities, two lives closely intertwined.⁶⁵ This statement from Peppiatt in the preface is the immediate recognition that his autobiographical memoir is like the diptychs Bacon painted, they are true in their representation of the faces they paint in an expressionist's understanding and experience of their subject. Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Art of Biography' alludes to the misrepresentation of the faces in Victorian biographies, (re)constructions that were too fictitious, like 'the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey [...] effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin.'⁶⁶ Here she is describing the tendency of Victorian biographies to misrepresent and paint the subject in a light more agreeable to society, so much so that biographies such as these had 'grossly deformed'⁶⁷ their subjects. This deformity is different to the kind of portrait Peppiatt provides in his autobiography, however, as Woolf notes, this changed towards the end of the nineteenth century to have biographies that 'hint that there were scars and furrows on the dead man's face.'⁶⁸ Contemporary biography focuses on these scars and furrows, these elements of the person that make them truer to the real person's form, as without them the biography has omitted too much and become fiction. It is the task of the biographer to be 'alive and on tiptoe'⁶⁹ to navigate through the possible versions of the same face, provided through interpretation and selectivity of documents and accounts, to decipher which face to paint as artistically true.

With autobiography, there is no separate third party observing at a distance and interpreting their subject, there is only the writer and their own attempts at self-knowledge and interpreting themselves and the people around them. The autobiographer observes themselves, but without the distance proffered to the biographer. The writer can only ever be able to provide an account of their life as the person that they perceive themselves and others to be, which can mean that they create a portrait more favourable of their own perception of themselves, but it also provides an opportunity for a more deeply emotional account. However, it does also mean that where the person they wish to portray is not present in a particular moment they are describing in their life, it is possible for these scenes to be amended, reconstructed favourably, or omitted entirely. This could be a conscious act, or it could be entirely unintentional through unconscious defence mechanisms repressing, denying, or rewriting memories. This further problematises the notion of truth in autobiography as it is difficult to verify, as equally as it is to discredit, the account written by the autobiographical author. The portrait painted by the autobiographer will inevitably be a

⁶⁵ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, XI.

⁶⁶ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography," in *Virginia Woolf Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

(re)presentation of the self they understand, or would like, themselves to be. However, the moments of personal reflection still offer valuable windows into the author's understanding of themselves and their experiences. In the opening preface to *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* Peppiatt notes, '[t]he book I have written here is a very different animal [to his previous biography of Bacon]. Far from the objective account of a life, this is the subjective story of two lives [...] Drawn from diaries and records I kept at the time, it presents an intimate, revealing portrait of the artist as friend and mentor. Bacon comes across here in ways no formal biography could convey'.⁷⁰ Trying to define the level of truth in autobiography detracts from the opportunity to relish in the subjective story that can be seen to be painting a more intimate portrait. Peppiatt concludes in the preface, 'I have decided to tell that story in full, with its seamier sides set in the perspective of my own self-discovery, its harshness and despair leavened by profound admiration, gratitude and love.'⁷¹ The memoir can therefore be seen to be acting as an affirmation of his sense of self. He situates himself in the autobiography as a reflection of the person he understands himself and others to be. The memoir, however truthful objectively, provides a significant opportunity to understand Peppiatt's experiences of himself and the world around him. The truth Peppiatt presents in this text is one based on his subjective perceptions, but one that gets closer to the truth of his experiences with Bacon than a formal biography could. It is a subjective truth that gets closer to the heart of his perceptions and emotions associated with the experience than he would have been able to in a formal biography.

Trying to detach and determine truth in biographical writing leaves one feeling, as Paul de Man describes, like being stuck in a revolving door.⁷² Life writing contains the historical truths, the personal truths, the fictional truths and the author's own conception of what is true for them. In agreement with de Man's imagery of dizzying discomfort, Denzin concludes that rather than being focused on any notion of truth, or lack thereof, in autobiographical writing, 'autobiographies and biographies are only fictional statements with varying degrees of "truth" and "real" lives. True stories are stories that are believed in. The dividing line between fact and fiction becomes blurred [...] it is necessary to do away with the distinction between fact and fiction.'⁷³ He proposes that the inherently fictitious nature of autobiography does not diminish its use as a 'proper subject matter [for] sociology'⁷⁴ and one that requires the preoccupation with validity and reliability to be 'set aside in favor of a concern for meaning and interpretation.'⁷⁵ He argues that the lives written about are

⁷⁰ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, VIII.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, XIII.

⁷² Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1979): 921.

⁷³ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

arbitrary constructions constituted through discourse, which contain ‘traces of the “real” person being written about.’⁷⁶ Fictitious constructions though autobiographies may be considered to be, for Denzin they still offer invaluable case studies to examine the inner workings of society and personal accounts of the experience of larger cultural and meaning making institutions.⁷⁷ This thesis aligns with Denzin’s emphasis on the importance of autobiographical writing as a case study, but for psychoanalytic theoretical, rather than broader sociological, interpretation.

R. Victoria Arana furthers Denzin’s assertion that autobiography is a useful tool for sociological research, to suggest it ‘reveals an up-to-date personality profile not essentially unlike that which an analysand constructs for himself with the help of a psychoanalyst.’⁷⁸ For Arana, the autobiographical form contains an invaluable reflection of the subject’s understanding of themselves.⁷⁹ Arana argues for the use of autobiography as being equal to the dialogue provided by the analysand in psychoanalytical settings. Whilst she recognises there could be issues of projective distortion that occur in transference during a psychoanalytic analysis such as this, she counter-argues this possibility with the question, ‘[i]f psychiatrists and psychoanalysts worry about the unprofessionalism of countertransference, why don’t literary critics?’⁸⁰ This is a consideration for this thesis, as it is for any literary analysis, which will be for the most part mitigated through its commitment to evidencing claims within the text, as one would with a fictional literary text. It will also focus as much on the words contained within the text as it does on the act of writing itself. However, there is always the consideration for countertransference and the author of this thesis is aware of their self as an implicated party to this exploration but seeks to attend to this through its commitment to textual analysis supported by the evidence and the psychoanalytic theories. Furthering the argument for a relationship between autobiography and psychoanalysis, Meg Harris Williams argues, ‘[n]o modern autobiography can have been written without somehow measuring itself in relation to psychoanalysis, implicitly or explicitly. Bion defined psychoanalysis as a means of introducing the patient to himself and autobiography is another of those means.’⁸¹ For both Arana and Williams, the process of writing autobiography is a tool likened to the self-reflection and understanding provided through the process of psychoanalysis. Ernaux’s opening chapter confirms this assertion, as she states in the penultimate paragraph, ‘I want to become immersed in that part of my life once again and learn what can be found there [...] Above all I shall endeavour to revisit

⁷⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁸ R. Victoria Arana, “The Psychoaesthetics of Autobiography,” *Biography* 6 (1983): 54.

⁷⁹ “[autobiography] presents the author’s coherent and self-revealing answer to the question, How does it *feel right now* to be myself?” Ibid., 54.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁸¹ Meg Harris Williams, “On psychoanalytic autobiography,” *Psychodynamic Practice* 18 (2012): 398.

every single image until I feel that I have physically bonded with it'.⁸² The autobiography could be therefore argued to be providing a viable case study for analysis, as it can be seen to be similar to the dialogue between the analysand and the analyst. However, Williams also notes, '[autobiography] is a self-analytic journey of discovery, and its writers often consciously view themselves as involved in a process of actively remaking their present lives.'⁸³ It is important to be aware that the author is (re)presenting events from their lives, ones that they may wish to conceal or alter. However, this is not dissimilar to patients undergoing psychoanalysis. Arana states, 'it is a rare autobiographer who *himself* believes he is truly undressing. Most autobiographers think they are performing in full and elaborate costume [...] most psychoanalysts would agree with them. A person hardly ever stands psychologically naked before another, for where self-protection is not neurotic it is a mature art.'⁸⁴ The elaborate psychological costume worn by the author is present in equal measure for people undergoing psychoanalysis, the subject avoids standing psychologically naked in all circumstances, even times when specifically invited to do so.

Freud answers this prospective psychoanalytical impasse of concealment in the case study of Dora. He states, '[h]e that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.'⁸⁵ It is the role of the analyst of autobiography to see beyond the words on the page and locate the chattering fingertips that betray the elaborate costume the author wears. For this thesis, it is not only the chattering fingertips that betray the author, but it is the very fact that they chatter at all. The act of writing, even if carefully selected, by both the author and editor, and dressed in elaborate costume, cannot hide all unconscious thoughts. The content of the writing, the choice of words and the chosen display of life events provide material for analysis, as Adam Phillips writes, 'language is a contract that no one has ever signed'⁸⁶ but by which the writer invites interpretation. Furthermore, the fact the author has chosen, or deemed it necessary perhaps, to write their life story at all is equally worthy of analysis. Phillips asserts, 'the one thing everyone does have inside them is an autobiography, and that they might even suffer from not telling it.'⁸⁷ Whilst he is aware of the issues of the literary figuration of writing the 'I' as a text, later quoting Barthes' favourite motto '*Larvatus Prodeo* (I advance pointing to my mask)',⁸⁸ he holds true that there is a sense that the subject desires and requires the opportunity to speak and be listened to, both in the

⁸² Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 19.

⁸³ Williams, *op. cit.*, 398.

⁸⁴ Arana, *op. cit.*, 64.

⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 69. (Original work published 1905).

⁸⁶ Adam Phillips, *In Writing* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 35.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

psychoanalytic setting and in writing. On this note, this thesis is indeed concerned with the act of writing as a necessary process of communication after abjection. The text is presented as a literary figuration of their experience that demands closer attention. Laurie Wilson and Harold P. Blum emphasise the, 'critical importance of unconscious fantasy in psychoanalytic approaches to biography',⁸⁹ which are betrayed through 'random traces of the unconscious through slips of the pen or brush as well as discarded "insignificant" works are the counterparts of the anomalies and slips of the tongue that appear and provide clues to unconscious fantasies in clinical work.'⁹⁰ This thesis will focus on the author's experiences as detailed within the autobiographical memoir, analysing the linguistic choices made, the behaviours detailed within, and how these choices of scene and language relate to his acts preceding the described events. Wilson and Blum state, 'biography is not simply factual compilations but a creative selection – a psychological document'⁹¹, they continue, 'unconscious fantasies are often at the root of both style and content. Since they seem to be the defensive surface of the hidden fantasies, they probably are a parallel to the juncture of defence and forbidden thoughts or feelings seen regularly in clinical work.'⁹² The style, the content, the selected scenes in the author's life, the narrativizing of their experience, and the language itself will provide the subject for analysis. Whether the author is seen to be the 'I' that is uttered in the text, or, whether the 'I' only exists in and as text. The very existence of the text, and the author's choices for details and events contained within, can be viewed as a 'psychological document' amongst other things, that awaits further psychoanalytic literary analysis. The primary texts used within this thesis are positioned as discourses of experience and formats through which the authors communicate experience, whilst recognising that the subject is always in process. This thesis understands that all linguistic communication is insufficient as a means through which to precisely convey experience and autobiography is a form through which the author considers more fully the expression of their thoughts and experience into language. This permits a self as created within the narrative device that reflects an understanding of themselves in some ways more intimately, which invites further analysis.

⁸⁹ Laurie Wilson and Harold P. Blum, "Biography, autobiography and history," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86 (2005): 156.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Chapter Two

Artistic Abjection

To better understand the abject complexity of Francis Bacon's artwork, this chapter will first explore a selection of Bacon's artworks through the theoretical lens of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. In doing this, this section will equally develop Kristeva's postulations in relation to this thesis and provide an initial overview of the theoretical underpinning, which will be used thereafter to frame the engagement with the following primary sources. The selection of paintings have been chosen for their alignment with different aspects of Kristeva's theory, however, there are many more that could have been chosen, and the paintings selected could equally be analysed under many of the other aspects of the theory. This approach has been used as a means through which both Bacon's artwork and Kristeva's theory can be better explored and understood in conjunction with each other. Furthermore, the initial analysis of Bacon's works will provide a more coherent understanding of his artwork within the theoretical framework for this thesis, which will, therefore, enable a better positioning of Michael Peppiatt's autobiography within this context. Following this section, this thesis will provide a literary analysis of Peppiatt's memoir *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* explored through the psychoanalytic lens of abjection. It will evidence moments within the text that allude to Peppiatt's encountering of the abject in Bacon's artwork and highlight the affect this has on him in those scenes. Through the chapter's initial positioning of Bacon's artwork within the field of Kristeva's abject, Peppiatt's experiences become illuminated with significance within this theoretical context and can be understood in a new light. This chapter seeks to convey the artistic abjection as created by Bacon and experienced by Peppiatt.

Artistic Abjection: Francis Bacon's Artwork

The artwork of Francis Bacon can be viewed, amongst other things, as a purposeful attack on the senses and he is often quoted as describing his intention in painting to be attempting to convey the violence of life.⁹³ He desired to have his artwork have a direct impact on the nervous system,⁹⁴ one that immediately 'returns you to the vulnerability of the human situation'.⁹⁵ For many, this intention is well met, and his work is seen as *sub specie aeternitatis*⁹⁶ through its address to a core and fundamental human experience. For others, perhaps with frustration, it is painting without limits

⁹³ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 118.

⁹⁴ David Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 188.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹⁶ Viewed in relation to the eternal; in a universal perspective.

and rules, with a trajectory towards an unknown telos, or, as written in one review, pointless and an 'aesthetic failure'.⁹⁷ For those who the paintings of Francis Bacon capture, be it with awe, disgust, or both, they provide a testing experience. This thesis is concerned with the experiential depth in the artwork of Francis Bacon, and it will use the autobiographical account of Michael Peppiatt to explore and evidence this experience, within the framework of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. It will firstly explore some of the paintings of Francis Bacon, a by no means exhausted stock, in light of some of the aspects of the abject and abjection as described by Julia Kristeva, to evidence how the abject could be seen to be materialising in his work.

According to Kristeva, the first moment of abjection marks the infant's desire to move from the semiotic into the symbolic and in so doing psychically creates a bordered and separated self. However, Bacon's paintings pull the viewer back towards this state of semiotic turmoil where the self has been lost. Nicolas Chare discusses *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), one of over twenty pope figures painted in this decade, and the use of "noise" in the painting as an abject experience that takes the viewer back to the pre-linguistic self. He states, '[t]he spectator momentarily encounters pre-meaning, encounters an experience prior to their shaping of self. The self is not lost in this moment, it is left behind. Bacon's paintings explore the noise and pain before the self, beneath the self.'⁹⁸ The violent and disordered brushstrokes inhibit the pope figure from ever becoming a contained and whole self, he is left without clear boundaries and the distinction between 'I' and 'Other', which are formed through the experience of abjection.

⁹⁷ Jonathan Jones, "Francis Bacon and the Masters review – a cruel exposure of a con artist" *The Guardian*, 14 April 2015, accessed 7 March 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/14/francis-bacon-and-the-masters-review>

⁹⁸ Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation* (London: I.B Taurus, 2011), 47.



(Fig 3.) Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953)

Unable to abject and form borders of self, the figure of the pope in Bacon's *Study* (1953) appears trapped in this semiotic experience of pre-abjection where the "noise" is formed by no symbolic understanding or narrative. Chare argues, the observer is momentarily suspended in this pre-meaning experience before the birth of the self at the point of abjection. One such way of conveying this, Chare asserts, is the depiction of the pope as a figure in pain and by extension the pain is therefore observed and felt within the person viewing the painting. Chare argues that intense pain, as understood to be felt by the pope figure, is the disruption of signs and signification, it is beyond language and 'unwordable'.⁹⁹ He continues, '[w]ords are above things, they are the destructive lacquer that is required in order to mean. Pain is the return of the underwork. It is a sensation outside sense.'¹⁰⁰ The pope paintings take the subject in the work back to a pre-linguistic world where sensation and noise are conveyors of meaning. In doing so they pull the viewer with them into this semiotic realm where there is no sense of time, language, or any frame of narrative reference from which to anchor themselves in the meaning-making destructive lacquer of language. This painting captures such a moment and has the potential to pull the viewer into the abject space at the outskirts of the symbolic realm.

Furthermore, Chare denotes the difference between sound and noise to be one of meaning and meaninglessness respectively. A sound, for Chare, is when noise is put into the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

imprisonment of language, he states, '[i]t is impossible to catch this noise in language or perhaps all too easy to do so. To imprison it, to put it behind these bars that are the letters and the words, the crotchets and the quavers.'¹⁰¹ There is an instinctive desire in experiencing the painting that desires to form sound out of the noise, but to articulate the painting in sound is to travesty the noise, and therefore, Chare suggests, the pope's scream is instead necessarily shapeless. Fionna Barber also studies this painting, through the lens of trauma and the gothic, and notes the abject nature of the scream in the painting. She suggests, 'the Holy Father's grasp on authority and temporal power are in turn savagely blasted away by a scream so elemental it seems to come from some place before and outside language.'¹⁰² It is in the noise of the *Study after Velázquez* where meaning is not inscribed, as the scream is outside of the symbolic realm.¹⁰³ Rina Arya echoes these sentiments in her article, where she also focuses on the primal pre-linguistic nature of the pope's gaping mouth in *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. She states, '[i]n depicting the open mouth Bacon exposes the human-animal, while reducing the organ of speech, reason and humanity to its primary pre-linguistic function.'¹⁰⁴ It is an image that horrifies the observer because it so easily disintegrates the line between human and animal. It positions the human as walking a fragile line between living body and its fleshly nature, confronting the observer with the inevitable end to all animal life and reminds one, as Arya states, 'that at any moment the human can become meat.'¹⁰⁵ The ease with which humans are returned to their former animalistic condition 'causes a sense of repulsion, as the viewer becomes aware of the inherent vulnerability and cruelty of a human who is capable of lashing out like a beast.'¹⁰⁶ The distinct separation of 'I' and 'Other', human and animal, is lost in the subject's return to a primal state, a state of animalistic, fleshly, being. The observer witnesses a breakdown in both language and what is constructed as the human self. The human-as-animal depiction in Bacon's works will be returned to later in this section.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Chare, "Regarding the Pain," *ANGELAKI journal of the theoretical humanities* 10 (2006): 136.

¹⁰² Fionna Barber, "Disturbed Ground: Francis Bacon, Traumatic Memory and the Gothic," *The Irish Review* 39 (2008): 130.

¹⁰³ Chare describes the noise of the new-born child as being outside of the symbolic, one that presents anguish outside of a capacity to describe or understand it. He states, 'In the beginning there is the scream outside of which screams emerge. In the beginning there is pain from which pains arise. In the beginning there is noise. Noise is the singularity that is outside the singular and the multiple [...] Noise is gradually abjected, rejected, silenced. In the beginning we retch and wrench ourselves out of this noise. The nausea within noise The gagging and vomiting Starts to pull us out of noise or push noise out of us. Pulling and pushing oppositions separations provisional at first but then fastening as experiences becoming sounds.' Nicholas Chare, "Regarding the Pain," *ANGELAKI journal of the theoretical humanities* 10 (2006): 140.

¹⁰⁴ Rina Arya, "The Animal Surfaces: The Gaping Mouth in Francis Bacon's Work," *Visual Anthropology* 30 (2017): 328.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

Chare also suggests the *Study after Velázquez* induces a moment at which the observer's self is entangled within the subject of the image, as the noise is registered outside of language and registered somewhere base and elemental in the self. For Chare, this induces an experience of abjection, through the breakdown in the clarity of delineation between self and 'Other', operating in a space outside of language. Much like Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), the scream of the pope is heard inside the observer, it is a noise that is registered in them and in this respect, it is a noise that comes from within. The noise of the pope is the noise the observer creates, which transcends the painting and penetrates the subject of the observer. Through this, for the people for whom these paintings connect with their subjectivity, the distinction between self and 'Other' is lost. Chare furthers his argument of the blurred boundaries between self and 'Other' through the notion of pain. He suggests, the subject of the painting is 'painful to look at and painful to listen to',¹⁰⁷ it feels horrific to observe. The scream of the pope is uninterpretable and uncommunicable. Chare states, 'the spectator sees with their stomach. Their stomach sees them [...] Pain pulls their insides out [...] The scream disembodies. It throws the body outside its contours.'¹⁰⁸ Seen in this light, the self is positioned as both a witness and a participant in the pain of the image, it is the place where the noise is registered and where the pain is felt. Chare asserts, the *Study after Velázquez* is the 'experience of an unsound self... the experience of losing experience... of losing the shape that is an experience... it is a falling back to nothingness but a not quite getting there'.¹⁰⁹ Abjection is experienced for the spectator in Bacon's painting, as it is the moment of loss in the self and 'Other' boundaries, it is where the shape of the 'I', as we securely know it, strays. As the subject in the painting loses its boundaries, the observer is entangled within it; the noise and pain of the subject is registered in the self.

Ernst van Alphen complicates the argument both Chare and Barber suggest for Bacon's paintings as inducing the experience of abjection. Whilst he states, 'the painting of Francis Bacon can easily be understood as abject',¹¹⁰ he further asserts that Bacon's work has 'other characteristics, themselves of an aesthetic nature, that complicate such a judgement.'¹¹¹ He suggests that although the paintings are abject in their form and content, they do not induce abjection in the viewer, but instead portray the experience of abjection in the subject matter. He notes, 'that the figures in his paintings demonstrate subjecthood at risk. Bacon is then representing figures from the experience

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Chare, "Regarding the Pain," *ANGELAKI journal of the theoretical humanities* 10 (2006): 136.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Ernst van Alphen, "Skin, body, self: the question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon," in *Abject Visions: Powers of horror in art and visual culture*, ed. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 119.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

of having no boundaries, that is, from the position of being abject.’ He contrasts this to artists such as Cindy Sherman, who impose the feelings of abjection on the viewer. He argues that in contrast to such artists as Sherman, ‘it is not so evident that the feelings raised by the abject are imposed on Bacon’s viewers.’¹¹² He argues that ‘[i]f the viewer is horrified by [Bacon’s] figures, this affect is not the result of the sight of something abject, but rather of identification with figures who experience themselves as abject’.¹¹³ For Alphen, it is only the identification with the subject experiencing abjection in the paintings that causes the viewer to temporarily connect with the subject and simulate the experience of abjection. This argument situates abject objects in a singular category, those objects found in artworks such as produced by Cindy Sherman. It fails to recognise the different forms of abjection that can be experienced from viewing Bacon’s paintings. One such example is mentioned in Chare’s analysis, in so far as the noise of the painting is registered in the viewer, dissolving boundaries of self and ‘Other’. Furthermore, as Barber suggests, these noises can be understood to be operating in the semiotic realm devoid of language, as does the experience of abjection. Abjection can also be induced through contact with taboos, exemplified explicitly in the defilement of the pope figures in his images, as well as rancid food, polluting substances and amorality and corruption. Such abject content can be found within many of Bacon’s paintings. The subjects of Bacon’s paintings do convey that they are experiencing the horror of abjection, their subjectivities have crossed borders, as outside and inside merge together, but there is argument to suggest that this is not the only aspect of Bacon’s images that are abject. There is more within the content of the image that through contact with the painting the experience of abjection can be induced, which this section will continue to explore and evidence.

One such example can be explored through what Kristeva describes as the ongoing abject experience in which one is perpetually encountering moments that expose the lack of space between ‘I’ and ‘Other’. It is an experience that is confronted at points where the subject finds themselves situated in the ambiguous space in between what ‘I’ constitute as a purified, preserved, and idealised self and what is, therefore, a contaminator of the self. It is understood to be something that is recognised as being both outside and inside the self and does not respect socially and personally constructed borders and boundaries. It is a pollutant that is, as Kristeva notes, ‘[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing’.¹¹⁴ She emphasises that the abject is not an object per se, but it is something the body seeks to remove from its bordered self, which cannot be fully removed, and as such it causes the ‘I’ to abject itself.

¹¹² Ibid., 122.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 2.

She states, 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself*'.¹¹⁵ The subject experiencing this abjection of the self, finds themselves crushed under the 'weight of meaninglessness'.¹¹⁶ Guided by this theoretical underpinning, Bacon's *Head II* (1949) can be seen to be capturing this abject violent expelling of the self.



(fig. 4) Francis Bacon, *Head II* (1949)

This image displays an imploded, twisted set of jaws, jaws that appear indiscernible in their species of origin. They have incisors too sharp and jaws gaping too widely for fully confident human association, and yet the shoulders and what appears to be a starched white collar suggest homo sapien ownership. Andrew R. Lee describes the mouth as being of great importance for Bacon, he argues, '[t]he grotesque unfolds around orifices, where the outside world is literally ingested and expelled [...] the canvas-as-body uttering its own ruin.'¹¹⁷ The figure in *Head II* looks unmistakably pained at this ingestion and expelling of the self. It appears to be locked in the continuation of trying to remove that which cannot be removed, a vomiting of the self. The space between 'I' and 'Other' has collapsed for the subject, it has lost all borders, it is an amalgamation, a composite,¹¹⁸ of outside and inside. The crisp white arrow could be seen to be alluding to a sense of direction of travel, as more of the outside enters in. The 'I' in this image appears to abject itself. Kristeva describes this point of the expulsion of the self, stating that, '[in this moment] "I" am in the process of becoming

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁷ Andrew R. Lee, "Vulgar Pictures: Bacon, de Kooning, and the Figure under Abstraction", *Art History* 35 (2012), 372-393, 381.

¹¹⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.’¹¹⁹ *Head II* could be understood to be embodying the birth of the self, amid the violence of the image, as it appears to call out through sharp teeth for its existence. David Sylvester writes of Bacon’s open-mouthed figures, ‘[t]hey are a shout of defiance in the face of death.’¹²⁰ In a manner that could be seen to embody a Cartesian assertion, it appears to exude an exclamation of ‘I abject, therefore “I” am!’, as it asserts its selfhood at the point of abjection.

The abject is further described as that which disturbs and highlights the fragility of identity, system, and order. It ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’¹²¹ as it transgresses the clean and proper self, be that personal or societal. Francis Bacon was an artist whose personal life revolved around transgressing the rules of society¹²² and whose paintings sought to break through preconceived notions of the boundaries of art. The abject is described by Kristeva as being, ‘what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.’¹²³ The paintings of Francis Bacon make the thrusting aside of the transgressed personal and social boundaries entrenched with difficulty, they are an immovable attack on the senses, a confrontation that cannot be so easily thrust aside. The series of pope paintings that captured Bacon’s attention repeatedly over a decade in the 1950s are examples of his work that do not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’¹²⁴ and highlight the fragility of such systems. In *Figure with Meat* (1954), one of over twenty pope figures painted in this decade, this assault on the borders, positions, and rules culminates in a painting of many abject proportions.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

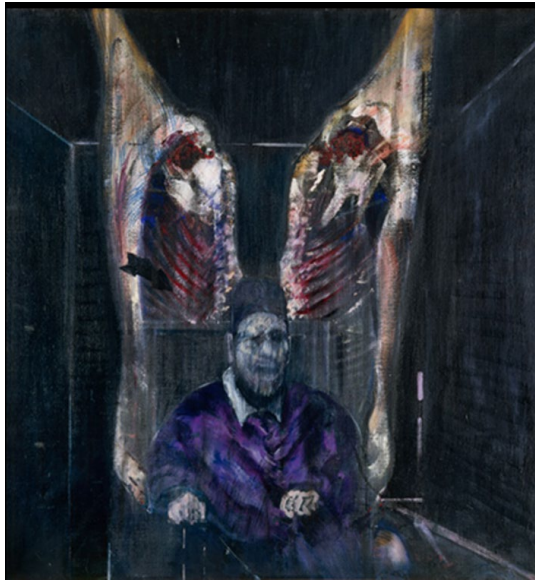
¹²⁰ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 190.

¹²¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹²² Francis Bacon revelled in living between extremes. Enjoying expensive and high-end restaurants, hotels and their clientele, but equally sought to surround himself with drug addicts, alcoholics, thugs – including at one time the Kray Twins - and facilitating and participating in illegal acts of gambling and homosexual relations when this was still a criminal offense in Great Britain. In Michael Peppiatt’s biography of Francis Bacon he states, ‘although he could trust to his charm and guile to get him out of most potentially damaging situations, there is no doubt that Bacon enjoyed sailing as close to the wind as he could in his homosexual adventures.’ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 96.

¹²³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.



(fig. 5) Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat* (1954)

First, the most direct attack on the senses is the abasement of a key religious figure, a man who, for many, holds a position of great authority, respect, and eminence. He sits posed in what looks more like an electric chair than the original throne painted by Diego Velázquez, his fingers clutching the armrest with sustained contraction. A grip that could allude to the final attempts of the pope figure to hold on to any sense of authoritative position in an increasingly secular western society, but any attempts to maintain authority are ironically captured in a painting that mocks any illusion of his power. Furthermore, the gaping cry on the face of the pope, a mouth known to be influenced by a scene in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, is permanently affixed in such a state of unresolvable angst. Bacon's portrayal of Velázquez's Pope Innocent X could be seen to host the spirit of the abject as '[i]t lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game.'¹²⁵ This painting does not respect borders, positions, rules, as it appears to offer the pope up as a tortured, tormented, and abject figure, one that is eternally captured as being at the point of begging to be abjected; begging to be permanently thrust aside.

Behind the pope are two carcasses, richly coloured with raw flesh, blood and veins, set against white bone joints. Gilles Deleuze captures this fleshly vitality in the colours of the image, he writes, '[m]eat is not dead flesh; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colours of living flesh. It manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, color, and acrobatics.'¹²⁶ This visceral display harkens back to Bacon's experiences as a boy going to butcher's shops with his father, but also connects with Bacon's more metaphysical notions as to the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2021), 17.

nature of human existence. His artworks heighten the lack of separation between the 'I'; living, contained human body, and the 'Other'; dead, open, leaking, meat. The image brings forth the living, vibrant, nature of flesh and the ease with which the human body can become meat. As with his work building from the 1930s, exemplified in such pieces as *The Crucifixion* (1933), Bacon had an equal fixation with the associated shapes given through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. *Painting* (1946) brings together the shape of the crucifixion in the slabs of meat, which is also revisited again in *Figure with Meat*.



(fig. 6) Francis Bacon, *Painting* (1946)

Bacon felt the crucifixion was a hugely symbolic event, not for the perceived religious signification, but for its symbolism as a moment that encapsulated the true capabilities of human cruelty.¹²⁷ In this painting there is both the animal meat, a reminder of mankind's corporeality, and the degradation of the religious symbol of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the tortured Holy Father. Kristeva notes of the abject, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.'¹²⁸ This image feels Godless, as it can be seen to be void of faith and hope. David Sylvester comments, 'Francis Bacon was an old-fashioned militant atheist who always seemed to be looking for pretexts

¹²⁷ David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 23.

¹²⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

to issue a reminder that God was dead and to bring a few nails into his coffin.'¹²⁹ Both *Figure with Meat* (1954) and *Painting* (1946) can be seen to have achieved such an aim, it has stripped the pope down to being just a man, a man who is screaming at the unending torment without the protection of God. It holds the body of Christ, God's representative on earth, as just a man, an animal, and, importantly, a piece of meat. It brings to the forefront, as Deleuze asserts, '[m]eat is the common zone of man and beast, their zone of indiscernibility.'¹³⁰ The painting can be seen to have broken socially constructed borders and meets the viewer in this abject space, a space where the corpse is seen, without God and outside of science, as a fleshly body with little that separates it from the animal meat hanging in the butcher's shop.

The body is frequently shown in Bacon's artwork as corporeal, portrayed as meat, flesh, and bones. Such a presentation of the human body can be seen to be, as Kristeva notes, 'death infecting life'¹³¹, which must be abjected in order to stabilise the ego's perception of the self. These images confront the viewer with their fleshly finite existence and presents them with a reminder of their abject decaying bodies. Kristeva asserts, 'refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live [...] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.'¹³² In experiencing these images, the viewer is faced with death and decay visually presented to them, which can be understood to be inducing an experience of infecting their preserved sense of a clean and living self. This places them at the border of their condition as a living being. One also confronts this experience in works such as *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), *Crucifixion* (1965), and *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus* (1981). All of which present the viewer with slabs of meat, often intermingled with the human subjects, such as the first panel of *Crucifixion* (1965).



(fig. 7) Francis Bacon, *Crucifixion* (1965).

¹²⁹ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 185.

¹³⁰ Deleuze, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹³¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 3.

In this example the blood is pooling on the floor around the subject, who lies, ironically, in what appears to be a relaxed position on an armchair or chaise longue. This corpse figure has strips of flesh left on an otherwise bare boned face, and smatterings of dark paint look as though mould is spreading. The presentation of decay and death can be seen to be infecting the viewer with its abject content, as Kristeva asserts, '[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards.'¹³³ This image, and others like it, are abject to view and must, therefore, be abjected from the preserved and clean self. This corpse-like figure outstretched, leaking blood and decaying must be permanently thrust aside in order that 'I' may live with death repressed.

The abject is further embodied in the artwork of Francis Bacon through its engagement with subjects that break with the idealised socially constructed identity. Kristeva suggests, '[a]bjection [...] is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you.'¹³⁴ Such people can be understood as being represented in the artwork of Francis Bacon. Wieland Schmied, in discussing the violence of a Bacon painting, describes Bacon as looking 'for the seeds of evil in the banality of quotidian existence. What interested him was the latent homicidal urges harboured by the seemingly peaceful neighbour, the potential for violence and murder that lies dormant in every one of us that manifests itself in regular outbursts on the streets of our cities.'¹³⁵ Bacon sought to highlight the smiling hatred and capability for violence that exists intrinsically in mankind. This is the sinister identity that is abjected from society, as it seeks to expel any association with such contaminating ideals. There is a sense of this violent capability in *Three Studies of the Human Head* (1953).



(fig. 8) Francis Bacon, *Three Studies of the Human Head* (1953)

¹³³ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹³⁵ Wieland Schmied, *Francis Bacon* (London: Prestel, 2006), 99.

The left-hand panel of the triptych is of Peter Lacey, the middle panel is of a photograph of a politician¹³⁶ and the right-hand panel is of an unidentifiable man's head, mouth agape, head upon a pillow. There are similarities in the three figures in the triptych in their attire, sex and the acute focus of the painting on their mouths. The first two figures appear caught mid-stream in conversation or laughter, and whilst the sense of claustrophobia and unease is still present in the colour palette, background and disfigured faces, the final image in the triptych is distinctly the focal point. The right-hand figure is framed with a yellow spaceframe indicating a corner, it is hunched over, eyeless and crying out. The shape of this mouth does not indicate conversation or laughter, more of shock, discomfort, and fear. It appears to allude to this figure as being like an animal backed into a corner. Kristeva notes, '[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*.'¹³⁷ This triptych presents the ease with which mankind can return to its previous evolutionary state, a state of being that operates on the instinctive violence of fight and the terror of flight. David Sylvester describes this final panel in the triptych as 'an image of a "broken" man'¹³⁸ with his hand raised either 'in pain, or to ward off an attack, or to claw at nose and mouth and eyes as if in an effort to wipe them away'.¹³⁹ Be it that the figure is warding off an attack, or, clawing at his face, such behaviour equally feels animalistic in its nature. The triptych offers a view of mankind as one in which three suited, arguably respectable, men could be backed into a corner and reduced to their animal instincts, instincts that care not for socially constructed identities, rules, and order. Michael Peppiatt, in *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma*, describes Bacon's fascination with the animal-as-man portrayal. He states, '[p]erhaps because he has been brought up in close proximity to animals, Bacon retained a strong awareness of the animal in man. The more he moved in sophisticated social circles, the more aware he was of the raw, uncivilised impulses that govern human conduct. Like the mouth, with its disarming exterior, society would periodically crack open to show the savagery beneath.'¹⁴⁰ Whether the third head is of Peter, the politician, or a new figure altogether, we see how the suited man, a seemingly respectable neighbour, can hold the potential for violent eruptions and crack open to reveal the uncivilised savagery beneath. It is this raw impulsive savagery and sinister capability in all of mankind that most interested Bacon.

¹³⁶ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 70.

¹³⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

¹³⁸ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 215.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 74.

The reference to the depiction of man as animal is present not only in the violence of Bacon's images but is often also intertwined with overtly sexual imagery. Bacon sought in his artwork, 'to make the animal thing come through the human.'¹⁴¹ Kristeva suggests, 'by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.'¹⁴² Biographically, Bacon's sexual tastes were masochistic, so for the artist, the pleasure of sex was often found in violent behaviour. These two seemingly antagonistic elements materialise often in the sexual scenes of his artwork, which also take inspiration from the Eadweard Muybridge photographs of wrestlers. The *Two Figures* (1953) painting, an example of a painting that encapsulates this sexual entanglement mixed with a sense of violence, was literally abjected from society, as it was not shown in gallery spaces due to its homosexual content. This was until the turn when the Tate Gallery exhibited it and in this respect, the Tate could be seen to have been acting as the gatekeeper for the borders of tasteful acceptability at this time in conservative British art.



(fig. 9) Francis Bacon, *Two Figures* (1953)

Representing sex with such aggressive overtones brings the animal side of intercourse more overtly into the image. The two figures in this painting are of Peter Lacey and Francis Bacon himself, Peter portrayed as quite distinctly the dominating figure in this picture, and there is a sense from the facial expression of Bacon that he is trapped and pinned down, in much the same manner as frequently

¹⁴¹ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 192.

¹⁴² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

observed in mammalian sexual intercourse. The animalistic nature of this sexual scene is again explored in *Two Figures in the Grass* (1953); however, this painting also further reinforces the animalistic imagery in its grassland setting. The two figures presented in these paintings transgress into the abject, as they appear to thrust into the territories of animal and are therefore perceived as taboo, pollutant and improper in this regard and contextually in its illegality. Their coalescing bodies are abject in both their violent animalistic depiction and taboo sexual behaviour in their socio-political context.

The overlapping sense of pleasure and pain in Bacon's imagery touches upon another note in the description of the abject by Kristeva. The concept of *jouissance* is intermingled with the horror and revulsion associated with the abject; 'abjection is above all ambiguity.'¹⁴³ Kristeva describes, '[o]ne does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. [...] One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones.'¹⁴⁴ The images discussed above have shown but a few of the multitude of ways Bacon's artwork can be seen to have transgressed into the abject. Bacon himself and the many followers of his work could be understood to be operating in this space of abject *jouissance*. It suggests a disturbing sense of joy, one that violently and painfully 'beseches, worries, and fascinates desire.'¹⁴⁵ It is within this ambiguous space of joy and pain that both the subjects contained within the paintings and the followers of Bacon's work are often situated. Ernst van Alphen alludes to this painful captivation and engagement with Bacon's work. He states,

Seeing a work by Francis Bacon hurts. It causes pain. The first time I saw a painting by Bacon, I was literally left speechless. I was touched so profoundly because the experience was one of total engagement, of being dragged along by the work. I was perplexed about the level on which these paintings touched me: I could not even formulate what the paintings were about, still less what aspect of them hurt me so deeply.'¹⁴⁶

The abject pulls its fascinated victim 'toward the place where meaning collapses',¹⁴⁷ a place where 'the abject simultaneously beseches and pulverizes the subject.'¹⁴⁸ The pain mixed with total engagement can be understood to be the ambiguity of the abject. In this experience van Alphen is bewitched, he is at once drawn towards this painting and at the same time 'pulverized' as a result of

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Van Alphen, *op.cit.*, 9.

¹⁴⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

his engagement. This is the unsettling and destabilising effect of *jouissance* in the abject. Where these paintings thereafter continue to stay with the person, touching them on a level that ‘hurts so deeply’, the aspect of *jouissance* in the abject makes them ‘its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones.’¹⁴⁹ Despite van Alphen admitting the paintings hurt him and cause pain, he has written extensively on Bacon, he becomes through abject *jouissance* the willing victim of this pain. Of Bacon’s paintings, Lee argues, ‘[h]ere lust mingles with repulsion: as Stallybrass and White note “disgust always bears the imprint of desire”.’¹⁵⁰ This aspect is key to the abject intensity of Bacon’s work. They at once both repulse and attract the viewer, despite the painful repulsion Alphen experiences, he continues with his desire to return to these paintings in his personal interests and professional enquiry.

There is difficulty in separating the pleasure and the pain felt by the observer of a Bacon painting, but there is often also the pleasure-pain ambiguity in the subjects of the paintings. Sylvester argues, ‘were it necessary to decide that the convulsions [in Bacon’s artwork] meant *either* pain *or* pleasure, the second seems the likelier alternative.’¹⁵¹ However, this assertion does not seem wholly convincing when faced with paintings such as *Study After Velázquez* (1950), *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (1950) and *Study of a Head* (1952), although perhaps this is a matter of perspective and subjective framing, however, there are works that do fall into this ambiguous space that could be perceived to be sexual outcry, rather than the horror alluded to in the aforementioned paintings. Rina Arya suggests this inability to definitively categorise Bacon’s work is precisely the point, as it ‘explores the boundaries between intimacy and brutality.’¹⁵² It is the ambiguity of the open mouth that has its abject effect on the viewer, the fascinated victim, as they are ‘[d]rawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.’¹⁵³ Sylvester’s assertion is one made when forced to, but he equally recognises the difficulty with having to make such a choice. As many faced with a Bacon painting, he could be understood as the fascinated victim of the abject. Arya suggests, ‘[t]he viewers experience the ruptured effects of the *jouissance* that consumes the figures, and, in the case of the copulating figures in, for example, *Two Figures* and *Triptych August 1972*, the orgasm experienced expresses isolation, alienation and the loss of self. As the Baconian figures are flayed to their bare flesh, we as viewers are taken apart and our nerves are exposed. Viewing therefore becomes a

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Andrew R. Lee, “Vulgar Pictures: Bacon, de Kooning, and the Figure under Abstraction”, *Art History* 35 (2012), 372-393, 390.

¹⁵¹ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 188.

¹⁵² Rina Arya, “Constructions of Homosexuality in the Art of Francis Bacon”, *Journal of Cultural Research* 16 (2012), 43-61, 52.

¹⁵³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

wounding experience.¹⁵⁴ The sense of jouissance is depicted in these images, if indeed pleasure is to be seen, suggests a pleasure found at the extremes and crossing over the border into pain. As Arya highlights, it is not only the subjects who are flayed to their bare flesh, but also the viewer whose nerves are exposed in the process and wounded. It is a desire that is punished, Kristeva states, 'the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination to shame.'¹⁵⁵ To enjoy in a Bacon painting, as Sylvester, Arya, Alphen and many others do, is to violently and painfully succumb to the pleasure of its fascinating and, as Kristeva describes, magnetizing appeal.¹⁵⁶

Finally, Kristeva provides Nazism as an example of one particular height of the abject. She states, '[t]he abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.'¹⁵⁷ For Kristeva, Nazism is the manifestation of the abject apex, one that symbolises the crescendo in human cruelty and death. While Bacon's work was not intending to be making a greater moral claim,¹⁵⁸ it does feature direct references to Nazis and war-like machines. It was Bacon's wish to capture the mental atmosphere of post-war Europe, one Sylvester describes as being, 'full of menace, guilt, disquiet, doubt, a sense of nearness to death.'¹⁵⁹ Evidencing this sentiment, Bacon argued throughout his career that the greatest art was the art that returned you to the vulnerability of this human situation. Set within the post-war atmosphere, Bacon fuelled his artistic drive with trying to capture the vulnerability of human life, the potential for violent eruptions and the cruel capabilities of mankind, which reached its climax during the war. Schmied asserts, '[t]here is little to be gained by trying to interpret particular paintings by relating them to specific events in the twentieth century's chronicle of terror – any attempt to do so will fall some way short of the truth. Bacon does not speak of the horrors of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, he speaks of the apocalypse of everyday life.'¹⁶⁰ However, the references to Nazis are potent and overtly evident¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ Rina Arya, "Constructions of Homosexuality in the Art of Francis Bacon", *Journal of Cultural Research* 16 (2012), 43-61, 59.

¹⁵⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

¹⁵⁶ Kristeva describes the abject as being a 'magnetized pole of covetousness.' Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Wieland Schmied argues, 'we should not allow ourselves to be misled by the photographs of historical scenes and figures [...] these are exemplary images of brutality, commemorating its victims in the one case and its perpetrators in the other, but Bacon himself never sought to depict violence in such terms, by concentrating on a single, outstanding case [...] They are a commentary on man's intrinsic nature.' Wieland Schmied, *Francis Bacon* (London: Prestel, 2006), 99.

¹⁵⁹ Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, 197.

¹⁶⁰ Wieland Schmied, *Francis Bacon* (London: Prestel, 2006), 99.

¹⁶¹ In describing *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* Michael Peppiatt notes, 'The outpouring from this dark orifice neatly rimmed round with teeth [...] conveys a specific threat since it was clearly inspired in part by photographs of the Nazi war leaders.' Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 103.

and one cannot assume to be able to detach the significance of such abject signifiers latent within certain paintings. Their purpose might not have been to moralise, but they are heavily loaded signifiers contained within some of the paintings that cannot be ignored, even if they were not intending to be making a greater moral claim.

Martin Hammer has dedicated a book to this topic and explores the influence of Nazi propaganda on the paintings. There are overt references to Nazis contained within some of Bacon's works, which are evidenced throughout the book, but there is also a sense that these references allude to more of the abject attributes discussed in this chapter than the highly influencing Nazi iconography. Paintings such as *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), *Man in a Cap* (1945), and *Figure in a Landscape* (1945) allude to Nazi military figures or weapons, as evidenced through the photographs that most inspired Bacon during the painting of these works, whereas paintings such as *Figure getting out of a Car* (1943) and *Crucifixion* (1965) have more direct references to Nazis. The former having been known to have been copied from a photograph of Hitler getting out of his Mercedes at a Nuremberg rally and the latter triptych with its bright red Nazi armband. Of this latter painting, Hammer states, '[i]t is the Swastika that inserts an over allusion to modern history, a site of hubris and its destructive consequences in real life.'¹⁶² As discussed above, Bacon saw no religious signification to the crucifixion, but instead saw it as an event that epitomises mankind's capability for cruelty, as much can be said for the harrowing events of the war. Hammer, in discussing *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) and *Crucifixion* (1965), states, 'they compel the viewer to contemplate such issues as where, if anywhere, we can legitimately enforce boundaries between our attitudes to people and animals; between those who commit evil deeds and those in the immediate vicinity who walk by and pretend that nothing is happening; between private, sexual brutality and public, political violence.'¹⁶³ Although Hammer is not exploring Bacon's work in relation to Kristeva's theory of abjection, he touches on multiple abject qualities. He notes here that these paintings emphasise mankind's animalistic nature and its ability to treat other human beings as such. For Kristeva, '[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*.'¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, in the final panel of the *Crucifixion* (1965) triptych, shown above, there are two figures at the back of the frame, observing, standing behind what appears to be a fence similar to that of the stands at racing tracks, as the rest of the butchering scenes unfold within the triptych. As this is the panel with the Nazi-figure, it could be understood that these observant figures represent the multitude of by-standers who witnessed atrocities, humans being treated as animals for slaughter and acts of cruelty both due to fear for themselves,

¹⁶² Martin Hammer, *Francis Bacon and Nazi Propaganda* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 196-197.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁶⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

or, having been indoctrinated to believe in its necessity. In this painting's reference to the bystanders to evil deeds being committed, 'living within the vicinity and doing nothing' as Hammer suggests, we are confronted here again with Kristeva's description, '[a]bjection [...] is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles [...] a friend who stabs you.'¹⁶⁵ The people in the images who seem unopposed but certainly aware of the slaughter-house style brutality in the other panels conjure this sense of sinister abjection. Focusing on these abject elements is not to make a moralising statement out of the triptych, as Bacon did not wish to have this as an implication of the painting, but rather to emphasise the greater claims on human nature at work within these paintings, which culminated in extremes in Nazi Germany. These aspects of human nature are the abject qualities Kristeva describes as 'a hatred that smiles' and this is the confrontation the viewer is presented with in looking at this painting. It is an abject humanity, one that both observes and participates in the 'fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*' and in doing so, smiles with hatred as friends turn sinister and scheming.

This section has exposed the multiple ways in which the abject can be understood to be manifesting in the artwork of Francis Bacon. It has explored the theory alongside Bacon's works in order to set out the theoretical underpinning of the thesis, but also to provide material examples of where the theory can influence both a reading of Bacon's works and, therefore, a better understanding of Michael Peppiatt's experiences of viewing these pieces. In setting out Julia Kristeva's theory as applied to a primary text, the case studies contained within the thesis will link together through this positioning of the theory and how this can, therefore, be seen to be affecting the subjects who encounter the abject. The following section will explore Michael Peppiatt's autobiographical memoir having positioned Kristeva's theory as the foundational underpinning to the analysis of Peppiatt's experience of Francis Bacon.

Artistic Abjection: Michael Peppiatt's *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*

The previous section articulated the theory of abjection as manifesting in the artwork of Francis Bacon. This section will now turn to the thesis' first primary source and case study, Michael Peppiatt's autobiographical memoir *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, to understand better the experiences detailed within the memoir as being an experience of encountering the abject. Michael Peppiatt can be positioned within the autobiography as having become the fascinated victim of the abject, as both his pain and pleasure at confronting the paintings of Francis Bacon have been

¹⁶⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

described in detail in his autobiographical memoir. Peppiatt has published numerous books on his close friend Francis Bacon, including both biographies and critical works, and of this collection, his 2015 memoir cuts most deeply to the core of his own experiences of and with the painter. *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* follows Peppiatt's life and his deeply rooted fascination with Bacon and his paintings. He describes himself as being a man 'as fixated by the intense, twisted vision of Bacon's paintings as by the power of his iron-willed personality.'¹⁶⁶ In this memoir, one can see how intricately intertwined Peppiatt's life was with Bacon. The memoir offers an opportunity for Peppiatt to explore the experience of being around Bacon and reflect on how his paintings have affected, and, in many ways, infected, him. *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* is so suitably named as it conveys succinctly how Peppiatt feels about Francis Bacon, he describes himself as being 'drawn deeply into the orbit of an immensely vitalizing, manipulative genius. Fascinated by his magnetism and sheer delivery.'¹⁶⁷ His friendship feels like an addiction and what is made clear is that his experiences with Bacon have buried into the core of what is fundamental to Michael Peppiatt's understanding of himself and shaped who he is today. Bacon is indeed shown in this memoir to be figuratively in his bloodstream and unable to be removed. Both Bacon and his paintings are described as being incredibly wounding to be in the presence of; Bacon with his quick temper and venomous words that could locate a person's insecurity and strike without remorse, and his paintings with their pained figures and disturbing scenes. This section will explore Michael Peppiatt's autobiographical memoir in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. It will situate Peppiatt as a subject who experiences the abject in Bacon's works, in order to explore what happens to the subject after abjection.

Michael Peppiatt, born 9th October 1941, is a University of Cambridge graduate specialising in art history. His life has been adventurously lived and he has absorbed and detailed these experiences within his autobiographical memoir. He has resided for long periods of time in both Spain and France, but his centre of gravity always seemed to pull him back towards London, and more importantly, Bacon. Peppiatt's life orbited around Bacon from the moment John Deakin accidentally introduced them to each other in 1963,¹⁶⁸ until the centre of gravity for Peppiatt's life changed when he fell in love with his wife Jill, and they had their first child. However, Peppiatt and

¹⁶⁶ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, X.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Peppiatt goes to the known drinking spot of photographer John Deakin on a tip from his friend that Deakin knew Bacon and might be willing to introduce him. Upon finding and asking Deakin, he loudly refutes Peppiatt's request, mocking him for thinking Bacon would speak to 'the flot-sam and jet-sam, the Tom, Dick or Harry, the *je ne sais qui* and the *je ne said quoi* of the hoi polloi [...] I fear *she* wouldn't even consider meeting a mere student like you!' This is overheard by Bacon, who is in close proximity, and he turns to say 'don't listen to that old fool [...] I simply adore students. Come and join us. Now what are you having to drink?' Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 8.

Bacon remained good friends, and Peppiatt gained a unique insight to the life of Francis Bacon, and he kept detailed notes and records of their conversations. According to Peppiatt, Bacon was a generous but highly volatile man. He would do anything his friends asked of him, he paid for every meal, tipping highly, he was intelligent, charismatic, insightful, and unfailingly generous. However, he could also quickly change, his mood would shift, and he would be 'like a cobra ready to strike, in a poisonously wounding remark'¹⁶⁹ and his venomous bite was always directly on target. In this 'subjective story',¹⁷⁰ as Peppiatt refers to the memoir, he states, 'Bacon comes across here in ways that no formal biography could convey: close up and unguarded, grand and petty, tender and treacherous by turn'.¹⁷¹ Peppiatt experienced this cruel side to Bacon personally and he has also witnessed it multiple times directed towards others. Much like the experience of his paintings, friendship with Francis Bacon was one mixed with highs of both pleasure and pain. Peppiatt notes in the preface to the book his reading of an article in the *Observer* by Peter Conrad, who described Peppiatt 'as having been "burnt" for life by [his] contact with the painter.'¹⁷² Peppiatt elaborates on this statement to suggest it implied 'that you did not survive the influence of a genius as dark and powerful as Bacon.'¹⁷³ Throughout the memoir, Peppiatt is shown to have been indeed burnt by this experience, and there are scars to match conveyed through the language and details contained within the autobiography, but it was nevertheless an experience he continually sought and relished. He felt drawn towards Bacon and his paintings since his first exposure to them, and there is a sense that the magnetising pull of being burnt was in some way part of the pleasure.

His first experience of being burnt is after he first meets Bacon and manages to secure an interview with him. Peppiatt knows nothing, or at least very little, of Bacon's work beyond it being highly influential in the modern art world. Before Peppiatt met with Bacon again, he had 'at least the wit'¹⁷⁴ to look for a catalogue containing pieces for his retrospective at the Tate, so that he may have a better understanding of Bacon's work before he interviewed him. This is notably Peppiatt's first exposure to the abject qualities of Bacon's artwork and this detailed scene can be understood to be inducing qualities associated with the experience of abjection. Peppiatt was, 'taken aback and deeply disturbed by the brutal ugliness of the imagery.'¹⁷⁵ This scene is placed at the start of the chapter, which is symbolic both literarily and autobiographically, as it suggests an immediate sense of the significance of this moment and the impact of this peripeteia in his life. This is a new chapter

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., IX.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., XI.

¹⁷³ Ibid., XII.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

for Peppiatt, this pivotal moment in meeting Bacon and seeing his works, alters his life completely. He already felt drawn to Bacon for his intelligent sophistication and charisma but is hereafter also hooked on and drawn toward his paintings. In this first encounter, however, he feels repelled by what he sees in the catalogue, he continues, '[a]lthough the reproductions were small, the shock waves coming off them were palpable, and I was almost relieved not to have had to confront them head on during their relatively brief showing.'¹⁷⁶ Peppiatt confides in this moment his initial instinctive rejection of the images, as the waves of shock lap against the shores of his very being, destabilising him. His sense of relief seems almost palpable at not having had to confront these paintings in their full and textured presence in the gallery. For Peppiatt, these images remind him of 'a sort of horror show, exposed to the public for a moment, then hurried like a collection of freaks out of view.'¹⁷⁷ He continues, '[w]here paintings like that ended up I had no idea, because the thought of having to live with them was unbearable – a deliberate, constant reminder of things better left unseen and unsaid.'¹⁷⁸ Peppiatt feels these paintings reflect a sense of unbearable horror, one that should not be exposed to people. They feel to him like a deliberate attack, a manifestation of all that should not be confronted and what society should be protected from witnessing.

There is a sense in this description that Peppiatt's reaction is biologically and psychologically instinctive. What he is describing here is not a considered reaction, but one of immediacy, a reaction based on the powerful impact of the painting and his feelings are produced without conscious thought. When faced with the abject qualities of Bacon's works, Peppiatt feels the instant sense of horror and need to reject what he is seeing. Kristeva suggests that it is the superego that causes this reaction upon confronting the abject, as it 'lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game.'¹⁷⁹ This sense of rejection and banishment from what is agreeable to the superego comes through clearly in Peppiatt's description of the paintings as being like a collection of freaks in a horror show. It suggests they are indeed beyond the set and the parameters of acceptable quotidian existence, causing the superego to abject the paintings as an infiltration of this existence. They should be 'hurried like a collection of freaks out of view'¹⁸⁰ and taken away from what is the uncontaminated and purified perception of self and society. For Peppiatt, having these paintings exposed for too long would be unbearable, 'a deliberate, constant reminder of things better left unseen and unsaid.'¹⁸¹ Even mild exposure, seen in small images in the retrospective catalogue, proves too much for Peppiatt as he feels the physical sensations of shock and horror. The

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 21.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

artworks confront Peppiatt with what is usually 'permanently thrust aside in order to live.'¹⁸² Their very existence deeply disturbs Peppiatt, and he feels relieved not to have had to have seen them in the gallery; with this catalogue he can thrust the abject aside, but in the space of the gallery, he would feel trapped with them.

Peppiatt further describes the paintings as having abject qualities that cause his strong reaction. Peppiatt states, 'Bacon's writhing figures, on the other hand, clearly had no future and no exit; their suffering took place in anonymous rooms that were vacuums unto themselves, signifying nothing and leading nowhere.'¹⁸³ The abject operates beyond language, it is an empty signifier, just as the paintings of Bacon are here described by Peppiatt. He is unable to follow the rules of the symbolic order through linguistic means, as the abject operates outside of this structure. The paintings signify nothing, they lead to nowhere, they are first and foremost a confrontation. There is no sense of logic, teleology, or destination for the writhing, suffering images. At this point of ineffability, Kristeva suggests, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away.'¹⁸⁴ For Peppiatt, it feels that there is a breakdown in communication in the paintings, as they do not convey a sense of narrative or endpoint to their suffering, it is an anonymous suffering and in a communicative vacuum. There is no signified to apprehend for Peppiatt, no way to deconstruct the image semantically. This can be seen as the point of breakdown in the foundations of homo sapien society, as linguistic communication is a key component of what separates the human from the animal. Furthermore, as Peppiatt notes in *Francis Bacon an Anatomy of an Enigma*, '[i]n these images the human body is reinvented as a set of dislocated, semi-organic forms, but it remains fully recognizable, creating an ambiguity between what is seen and what is signified that challenges many assumptions about what it is to be a human being.'¹⁸⁵ Through the painting not operating within the symbolic order of signs and signification, and its commitment to remain in this ambiguous state, it is situated permanently within that which is abject. Peppiatt confronts this sense of the breakdown of the world of meaning in these images, as he confronts the empty signifier of the abject.

Furthermore, as this short but pivotal moment in Peppiatt's life continues, he notes, 'Even from the reproductions, one could see how the paint itself revealed pain, as if the skin of the swirling red, green and black oils had been pulled back, the grain cut open, to show the confusion beneath.'¹⁸⁶ The very texture of the paint itself splits open and the protective skin which acts as a

¹⁸² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹⁸³ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹⁸⁵ Michael, Peppiatt, *An Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 74.

¹⁸⁶ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 21.

physical border to protect the inside from contamination tears, pulls back, and gives the subject to the outside. The cuts on the skin of the paint emphasise the ambiguous space between what is the purified and whole self and what is not 'I', the boundaries are blurred, and the outside is invited to seep in through the cracks. This ambiguous space is the 'painful confusion' Peppiatt notes as being revealed beneath the open cracks; his own painful confusion is reflected in this abject form. The abject is, as Kristeva describes, 'death infecting life'¹⁸⁷ through the open wounds of the skin of the paint where the subject bleeds swirls of red, green, and black. The wounded image, with lacerations across the skin of the paint, psychologically wounds Peppiatt in turn. Kristeva notes, '[a] wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death [...] no as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.'¹⁸⁸ The subject in the painting confronts Peppiatt with death. The wounded and bleeding image does not signify death but presents itself manifested in the images Peppiatt is confronting. The horror of the images, where 'figures corkscrewed, sofas buckled, perspectives skewed; the only straight lines were those that immured these mutant elements in their airless space',¹⁸⁹ presents to him a wounded and suffocated image. It is an image of death, it is what is 'permanently thrust aside in order to live',¹⁹⁰ but with these paintings, the abject is trapped within the image and is unable to be thrust aside. The viewer is left and permanently situated, as Kristeva notes, 'at the border of [their] condition as a living being'¹⁹¹ unable to abject and thrust aside what is presented in this image: 'death infecting life'.¹⁹²

In this scene in the memoir Peppiatt further describes the abject qualities of the representations of the pope in many of Bacon's paintings from the 1950s. This image, as previously discussed, captivated Bacon and he produced many variations of the same study of Diego Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X. They are all debasing, disturbing and disfiguring of the man who is, for many, God's representative on earth. They portray him as weak and tortured, immediately suggestive of an upheaval in the 'borders, positions, rules'¹⁹³ that Kristeva highlights as an abject transgression. Peppiatt comments;

I found the screaming popes particularly intimidating, as if I had been made brutally aware of the shameful truth kept hidden for centuries. Was the pope himself, the head of the

¹⁸⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 22.

¹⁹⁰ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

Catholic church and spiritual leader of millions, just another victim of bestial emotion and despair? Behind the pop and dogma of religion, did he dissolve like Bacon's naked lovers into spasms of lust and rage?¹⁹⁴

Peppiatt's intimidation is felt through his encounter with the paintings of many abject proportions. Kristeva states, '[t]he corpse, seen without God or outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.'¹⁹⁵ In these paintings Peppiatt is immediately confronted with the pale grey, corpse-like faces of the pope figures. The scenes seem devoid of God, or any such transcendental beauty or salvation, as Peppiatt states, 'a shameful truth kept hidden for centuries.'¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, Peppiatt notes the animalistic nature of the screaming figure of the pope. He sees the display of bestial emotion and despair as being aligned with extremes of lust and rage, which are socially perceived to be connotative behaviours of the animal. Kristeva states that such abject qualities are to be found in 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.'¹⁹⁷ In these paintings of the pope, Francis Bacon displays a corpse-like figure, without God, outside of science, and with the lust and rage associated with the animal. These images, with displays of bestial emotion, the breaking of social conventions and rules, the presentation of death and the breakdown in the symbolic order, pulls Michael Peppiatt into an experience of abjection.

Peppiatt's description of the images he has witnessed in the catalogue explores the elements he finds most disturbing, most abject. He then continues to note his experience physically and emotionally, which follows the physical components of the experience of abjection as described by Kristeva. She states, '[d]iscomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise.'¹⁹⁸ In these paintings the demarcation of space between objects in which the signified world is constructed is lost. The images present a world without demarcation of space and signs, it is a world that perpetually displays ambiguity and the physical sensations of discomfort, unease and dizziness. He describes himself as being, 'shocked and nauseated by what came over as the systematically wilful distortion of every form'.¹⁹⁹ The nausea is a key physical sensation of encountering the abject, as it is

¹⁹⁴ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 22.

¹⁹⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

¹⁹⁶ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 22.

¹⁹⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 22.

a reproduction of the physical reaction experienced at the primary moment of abjection. Kristeva states;

I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up in the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire, along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it.²⁰⁰

Bacon's paintings induce in Peppiatt these feelings of nausea and shock. Through positioning this text alongside Kristeva's theorisations, he can be understood to be feeling the horror of the abject and the sickness associated with it. This is not the only moment in Peppiatt's many encounters with the paintings that he describes himself as feeling physically threatened in this way. His second physical encounter with the paintings, after seeing them once before in person at the Galerie Maeght and seeing many reproductions in catalogues, proves to be equally as deeply disturbing for him. Peppiatt had been asked to write an essay for *Art International* on Bacon's collection for his New York exhibition. He is left alone in a cellar at the Marlborough Gallery surrounded by Bacon's paintings and Peppiatt admits, 'being left alone in a silent space underground completely surrounded by them is another experience altogether.'²⁰¹ He tries to 'counter the great waves of threat [he] feels breaking all over [him]' by going to observe the images more closely, to try to understand and find 'the source of so much pain', but to no avail, it only 'reveals further sadomasochistic refinement and humiliation'²⁰² as the 'contours deliquesce, limbs buckle, and the head is reduced to a mere stump of misery.'²⁰³ He finds himself 'too overwhelmed'²⁰⁴ by this space and is unable to write any eloquently coherent notes on the images, beyond the self-professed observational inanities of "'V. violent clashes of colour'".²⁰⁵ In these nauseating moments where Peppiatt feels the threatening perversion of the abject, he feels overwhelmed and trapped, he states '[o]nce you have seen them, there is no getting away, no exit.'²⁰⁶ In this moment, Kristeva states, "'I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.'²⁰⁷ These moments of great threat and discomfort mixed with the existential dread and the violence of the encounter,

²⁰⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

²⁰¹ Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 136.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

Peppiatt feels himself drawn 'toward the place where meaning collapses',²⁰⁸ there is no source for the pain or his own reaction. Viewed in this light, he can be understood as feeling the destruction of the self in viewing these images as he becomes an 'Other'.

These encounters are described as intense moments of great discomfort for Peppiatt. However, the experience of abjection is situated in the ambiguous space between pain and pleasure. There is a sense that Peppiatt, despite describing the horror and the pain of his experience, enjoys these moments on a deeper level and feels continually compelled to keep experiencing them. Michael Peppiatt becomes a victim of the cycle of abjection and what Kristeva describes as the *jouissance* contained therein. For Kristeva the abject can initially fulfil the subject's desire for the 'Other', but also highlights the necessary separation from the 'Other'/ object of desire, by making it abject and repulsive. For Peppiatt, he seeks this state of ambivalence in the paintings, where he finds the pleasure for the lost object of desire, but these moments become repulsive as they only highlight the separation between him and the state of oneness with the mother; the primary moment of abjection. He thereafter continuously seeks the *jouissance* from the images, even if only brief and followed by the pain of abjection. From his initial encounter with the images in the catalogue, his 'fascination with Francis accelerated'²⁰⁹ and he forms an appetite for Bacon and his works that ceaselessly compels him and drives him toward the abject. Continuously putting himself in the position of interviewer with Bacon, to try desperately to solve the puzzle of the images, just as the subjects in the images have no exit from their unending torment, Peppiatt feels equally trapped in the cycle of his own abject addictions. Kristeva notes, '[o]ne does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. [...] One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones.'²¹⁰ Throughout the autobiographical memoir, Peppiatt seems to revolve around this joyful oblivion, he appears to be the submissive and willing victim of the abject. He is described as being a fascinated subject of Bacon's paintings, despite the gut-wrenching response he has to them, as Kristeva notes 'the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject.'²¹¹ Peppiatt feels this magnetising pull toward the images, despite the expectation of their horror and knowingly submits to being pulverized by his encounters. The reaction he describes feels as though he, and all that he has known, is at once both annihilated and born in these encounters, it is the 'sublime alienation'²¹² of encountering the abject. It is as though the world as he knows it is corrupted, poisoned, 'a topology

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁰⁹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 23.

²¹⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 9.

²¹¹ Ibid., 5.

²¹² Ibid., 9.

of catastrophe',²¹³ and yet, at the same time, the paintings reveal to Peppiatt a concentrated horror that he also knows exists, but thrusts aside so that he is not 'swallowed up'²¹⁴ by the encounter. The paintings present to him the world, and human beings, as one knows it to be, but rejects thinking about, 'a forfeited existence'.²¹⁵ In seeking these encounters with the abject paintings of Bacon, Peppiatt is inviting the abjected world into his purview, he is '[d]rawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.'²¹⁶ Despite this, each encounter with this abject view of the world concentrated in the paintings of Francis Bacon, 'beseches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive it turns aside; sickened, it rejects.'²¹⁷ Peppiatt is drawn toward the abject paintings, but then instinctively abjects them as the *alter ego*²¹⁸ as they present a self, separate to the construction of his conscious self, with which he wishes to remove all association. The repugnant possibility of pre-abjectal being.

This cyclical sense of the magnetism of the paintings, the sublime temptation, happens throughout the autobiography and continues throughout his life. He admits in the memoir that, 'Bacon has become a kind of religion for [him], certainly a form of belief.'²¹⁹ He often commented on his own, and others, addiction to Francis Bacon, he describes the equally eminent painter Lucian Freud as being 'in awe of Francis, or even in love with him', he continues, 'But then I suppose most of us are, whether it's Lucian or George or me, Sonia Orwell or models like Henrietta Moraes [...] He is the point, whether we know it or not, around which we all turn.'²²⁰ Given this sense of the fetishized gravitational pull Peppiatt felt, he stayed close to Bacon and was often the first to view his paintings and frequently asked to write about them. This meant Peppiatt's experience with Bacon's works were often raw and isolated, without the preamble and security afforded to the gallery space and its patrons.

Despite his awareness of the pain and angst that these images inspired in him, he appears trapped within a cycle of desire, pleasure and horror. Each time Peppiatt knowingly submits himself to the horror of the paintings, and whilst they cause him physical discomfort, they equally vivify and verify his existence with each confrontation. Peppiatt notes, '[s]eeing so much fleshed racked by anxiety and guilt also recalled and strangely validated an intimate, barely avowed anguish in myself,

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 1.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Julia Kristeva describes the abject as, 'a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence.' Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 9.

²¹⁹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 61.

²²⁰ Ibid., 41.

something I tried to keep at bay and not think about.’²²¹ There is a sense that Peppiatt is aware that the images reflect a repressed anxiety in him, this could be understood to be the primal repression, the first instance of abjection that leaves the subject continuously searching for the object of affection. Kristeva states, ‘[t]he abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations for its very being.’²²² In confronting the abject in Francis Bacon’s paintings, Peppiatt relives the traumatic moment of the birth of himself as a separate subject. In these moments he is presented with an image that inspires in him the anguish of the lost wholeness of pre-abjection, the ‘barely avowed anguish in [himself].’²²³ The initial moment of abjection is described by Kristeva, “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.”²²⁴ Seen in this light, in these abject images, Peppiatt is forcibly reminded of the moment of the birth of his subjectivity, an anguish he represses until confronting the abject in the paintings, it can be understood to be psychologically bringing him back to the violent and painful moment when he separates from his mother. This primary moment of repression returns cyclically with each encounter with the abject, and it is ‘within [this] same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*.’²²⁵ In Peppiatt’s encounters with the paintings, he is reborn, and his sense of self is further established. He admits that before Bacon and his paintings he felt he was ‘an obscure young man filled with self-doubt and painfully adrift in the universe’.²²⁶ At the point of abjection, Peppiatt discovers a sense of self and establishes the ‘I’ through his own death.

This experience proves to be one that he seeks out throughout his life in his compulsion to view and write about Bacon’s artwork, which is in need of further exploration. *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* has shown to be a text that, through Kristeva’s theorisations, can be illuminated with significance in relation to experiencing the abject. It has also presented a consideration for this thesis that requires further exploration. Despite Peppiatt’s descriptions of psychological assault in viewing the paintings of Francis Bacon, he shows a distinct desire to repeat these experiences after his encounter with the abject. In order to understand better the cyclical nature of Peppiatt’s pull towards encountering the abject, the next chapter will turn to Freud’s theories of ‘repetition compulsion’ and ‘working through’. It will combine Kristeva and Freud’s theories to illuminate Peppiatt’s experience of abjection and further explore the effects of after abjection.

²²¹ Ibid., 22.

²²² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

²²³ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 22.

²²⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

²²⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

²²⁶ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 24.

Chapter Three

Sigmund Freud: Repetition Compulsion and Working Through

Repetition compulsion as a psychological phenomenon has remained as a consideration for practicing psychoanalysts since Freud's initial articulation in his essay 'Repeating, Remembering and Working Through'. It describes a person who repeats an event, or seeks circumstances akin to an event, consistently, which also includes the person purposefully situating themselves in circumstances where a repetition of an event could occur. This repetition can also manifest in dreams, whereby the memory or emotional experience is re-lived. These repetitive patterns of behaviour are usually unpleasant and stir up distressing emotional and or physical events from previous experiences that the subject would otherwise not seek to encounter. The theoretical development of repetition compulsion can be seen to be an important moment for Freud, as it marked the point at which he saw the inconsistency with his previous assertion that people are solely driven by the pleasure principle; the theory that the subject only seeks pleasure and avoids unpleasure, which is kept in check by the reality principle. He states, using language that Kristeva later echoes in her later theorisations, 'this compulsion appears to us more primal, more elemental, more deeply instinctual than the pleasure principle, which it simply thrusts aside.'²²⁷ This defining moment broke with Freud's understanding of what can be understood to be an economy of excitation – the seeking of pleasurable experiences in line with the reality principle – in so far as the compulsion to repeat required the subject to seek experiences that do not provide pleasure. It is this moment in his theorisations that he discusses the possibility of a drive 'beyond' that of pleasure and directed towards harmful and destructive behaviours caused by Thanatos, or death drive. His observations of a child repeating the behaviour of throwing a toy away and pulling it back into his crib and a soldier whose dreams frequently brought back traumatic images from his wartime experiences, caused Freud to reconsider the pleasure principle and look more closely at the phenomena of the compulsion to repeat negative experiences. He suggested that in order to cease or alleviate the symptoms of the compulsion to repeat, the causal root of the repressed experience must be discovered and dealt with in a process he briefly discusses in his paper called 'working through'.

Important to Freud in this psychoanalytic process, however, was the distinction that 'the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it*

²²⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 61.

out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it.²²⁸ This emphasises the unconscious nature to these repetitive behaviours and goes some way towards explaining how people can seem to seek out experiences that are unsettling or upsetting to them, but not understand what is compelling them to do so. Freud argued that the patients were “shutting out” the forgotten scenes and experiences that were distressing, which later manifested in the repetitive acts and were embodied in certain behaviours attributed to their personality, such as ‘his inhibitions and unproductive attitudes’.²²⁹ The subject ‘repeats rather than remembers’,²³⁰ so the cycle continues as the “forgotten” content manifests, unbeknownst to the patient, in repetitions symptomatic of the repressed experience. Freud furthers this concept to argue that the patient ‘does not properly appreciate the conditions under which his phobia functions, does not listen carefully enough to what his obsessional ideas are saying to him, or does not grasp the real intention of his obsessional impulse’.²³¹ The repetitions seem unconnected to the subject’s knowledge of themselves and their desires and are therefore discerned to be inexplicably unrelated to anything from the subject’s immediate experience. Without listening more carefully to the impulse, the subject cannot tackle the root cause of the repetitions, as Freud surmises, ‘one cannot destroy an enemy if he is absent or out of range.’²³² It therefore becomes the role of the analyst to listen to the patient and discern from their narrative and actions the cause of the repetitive symptoms.

Once the causal experience for the repetitive symptoms had been located and highlighted to the subject, Freud suggests the analysand must thereafter ‘work through’ these experiences. Freud discerns that the example of the child’s repetitive behaviour of throwing the toy away, pulling it back and doing the same again was due to his wishes to take an active role in his mother’s leaving him. The child found her leaving unpleasant and wished to take some level of control over this experience, and so he throws away a beloved object in order to control its coming back to him when he reels it in. Freud concludes, ‘... by thus being active he gains far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experiences than was possible when he was merely its passive recipient. Each new repetition seems to add to the sense of command that the child strives for...’²³³ Given this seeking of mastery over an event, Freud suggests the initial experience that requires this sense of control should be brought to light through analysis in order for the subject to work through it. The

²²⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through,” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 36.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²³² *Ibid.*, 39.

²³³ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 75.

subsequent sections in this chapter will explore Freud's theory of repetition compulsion in more depth in relation to Kristeva's theory of abjection.

Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva: Repetition Compulsion After Abjection

Through combining Freud and Kristeva's theories one can understand more astutely the subject and their behaviours after abjection. In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the destruction of a contained and purified sense of self during the experience of encountering the abject. This threatening loss of subjectivity harkens back to the primary point of abjection in infancy when the subject marked itself as a separate being to that of its previous state of being one with the mother. At the birth of subjectivity there is the inevitable loss of wholeness, which creates an unresolvable absence marked by trauma.²³⁴ This psychologically wounding moment in the development of subjectivity leaves a scar of trauma deeply repressed within the subject, one that is reopened in subsequent encounters with the abject. Taking this notion forward, it can be positioned, therefore, that repetition (of repressed trauma) is inextricably linked with the process of abjection. In each experience of abjection, the subject is forcibly confronted with their repressed traumatic break from the wholeness of the maternal embrace and unavoidably faces the painful loss from this separation. However, alongside this, they also experience in these moments the disgust felt at the potential lack of subjectivity that the abject represents, as a result of their past psychical fusion with the mother. It is a trauma that both entices and repulses, and one that is repetitively confronted at each encounter with the abject.

The repetitive seeking of extreme experiences that provide a confrontation with the trauma of abjection is a phenomenon that is sought after by some individuals, and one that has not yet been explored fully. This thesis argues that the pull some subjects feel towards experiencing extreme abject moments could be being repeated due to the rawness of the experience simulating repressed memories of primary abjection and these extreme confrontations with the abject provide what Freud describes as the 'playground in which [the trauma] has licence to express itself',²³⁵ to attempt to work through this repressed experience. The proposition this thesis offers would go some way towards understanding the case studies presented within this thesis and the compulsion to repeat abject experiences. It also offers a new methodological approach to understand further subjects

²³⁴ This differs from Freud's theory of *nachträglichkeit*, as the trauma is not retroactively ascribed to the event, but present and scarring from the moment the subject separates physically from the mother through abjection.

²³⁵ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 40.

who seem to repeat these discomforting experiences after abjection. It is important to note that what constitutes an extreme abject experience is individually marked out by the subject in their psyche. Furthermore, the level to which the moments of abjection become repetitive fixations is uniquely based on the individual, their previous experiences and perceptions of the world, and the psychological depth to which the experience wounds the individual. What is abject-traumatic for one subject might not be for another, but this does not lessen its affect for the individual.

Reading Kristeva's essay on abjection against the background of Freud's repetition compulsion offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between these two theoretical concepts in more depth and further understand the compulsion to repeat after abjection. In both Kristeva and Freud, they describe a loss of control for the subject, one in which they involuntarily gravitate towards the experience or act. For Kristeva, the surrender is to 'that impetus, that spasm, that leap, [where the subject] is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.'²³⁶ The verb spasm is used to describe a mechanical reflex, one that is devoid of conscious thought and, subsequently, any potential for intervention. This reflex is one that has momentum - a leap, an impetus - towards an unknown, and an unfathomable, territory. For Kristeva, it is a leap towards an unknown that holds the potential for reverting the loss of the mother; a leap that positions the subject hurtling towards the condemned. Furthermore, the biblical references in this passage to describe the pull towards the abject evokes imagery of the temptation of Eve. Eve is drawn towards the unknown 'elsewhere' of knowledge, but her leap towards the temptation results in the fall of humankind and such a draw and fall is emulated by the subject of abjection, who is drawn towards the tempting abject 'elsewhere' that is laden with condemnation.

Freud also notes the draw of the subject towards repeating trauma. Freud speaks of trauma experienced in a broad sense, to be found in a multitude of experiences and repeated through distillations in their actions. He states that the analyst, 'must therefore expect that the patient will yield to the compulsion to repeat.'²³⁷ Freud's description of the patient yielding to temptation to repeat, conjures up similar imagery to that of the subject who is drawn towards the abject. It is a magnetizing pull, one that the subject seems incapable of resisting. Kristeva asserts that the subject, 'cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart.'²³⁸ Both Kristeva and Freud describe the subject as not being fully in control of their actions in these moments. What this thesis argues is that the draw towards the experience of abjection is the uncontrollable repetition of an unresolved trauma, which Freud describes as being one of the catalysts for repetition compulsion. It is the primary abject experience that is sought after in distilled experiences of abjection, which the

²³⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

²³⁷ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 37.

²³⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

subject repeats to temporarily sedate the traumatic loss of the mother. As extreme experiences of abjection go some way towards sedating their compulsion, the subject repeats these experiences as a pseudo-encounter with primary abjection.

A further aspect of the draw towards the compulsion to repeat after abjection that must also be considered is the crucial role of *jouissance*, as the ambivalent nature of the object is what 'simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject.'²³⁹ Through communicating their experiences of abjection, the authors discussed within this thesis are met with the joyful oblivion that draws them 'towards an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned'.²⁴⁰ Leo Bersani's essay on Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' offers a distinct illumination on the discussion of the arguably masochistic elements that cause a subject to feel drawn towards repeating that which appears to cause the ego harm – in so far as the memories that the authors discuss in their writing are not pain-free per se. Bersani asserts that the examples given by Freud in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' constitute an argument for a reconsideration of pleasure itself, rather than providing evidence for drives 'beyond', or devoid of, pleasure. He outlines that the case study examples provided by Freud denote a sadistic or masochistic quality to pleasure, which he argues triggers the repetition. In describing the example of the child with the toy reel, Bersani writes,

the urge to master is affectively charged; it includes what can only be read, it seems to me, as a pleasure at once sadistic and masochistic. The child enjoys the fantasy of his mother suffering the pain of separation which she originally inflicted on him [...] In other words, mastery is simultaneous with self-punishment; a fantasy of omnipotence and autonomy [...] is inseparable from a repetition of pain.²⁴¹

Kristeva's description of the object as being an experience tinged with *jouissance* – pain and pleasure in excess – links well with Bersani's assertions that the repetitions described in Freud are not *beyond* pleasure but are instead fuelled by a pleasure in such (sado)masochistic excess that it would appear harmful to the ego. Of *jouissance* in the object experience, Kristeva notes, 'one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion.'²⁴² It can be argued, therefore, that the repetition of the object is linked to the violence of pleasure formulated by such experiences. Whilst it would appear to be a solely painful experience to write these experiences, repeating them through their recounting of the trauma, it is also an action tinged with the *jouissance* of the object. This

²³⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴¹ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 58-59.

²⁴² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 9.

‘enjoyment’ can therefore be understood as one that stretches the subject beyond the bounds of pleasure and towards the “traumatic”. It is a desire for a pleasure that leads ultimately to suffering. This is an aspect of after abjection that will be returned to later in the thesis in the discussion on Freud’s ‘working through’.

The subject is therefore compelled to continue repeating the experience to try to satiate the appetite for stimulating the trauma and jouissance of abjection. Freud asserts that the subject, ‘is driven to repeat the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past.’²⁴³ Kristeva echoes these sentiments in her description of the abject, ‘curious primary, when what is repressed cannot really be held down.’²⁴⁴ It can therefore be positioned as being a moment of overflow of the repressed primary moment of abjection that causes the repetitions of seeking out experiences that connect the subject back to this moment in the creation of their subjectivity. Unable to contain the compulsion, unable to repress or keep it as an experience for the past alone, the subject is driven to repeat. For the subjects of this thesis, this materialises in their compulsion to repeat their extreme experiences of abjection. For Peppiatt, it is in the seeking out of the deeply wounding images of Francis Bacon, for Ernaux, the repetition of visiting the space, both physically and mentally, of her abortion. For Shirley Jackson, it is her fictional narratives that act as proxies to encounter the abject experiences that haunt her. For the subjects writing their autobiographical memoirs they imply their awareness of their compulsion to repeat, but as Freud describes they, ‘[do] not properly appreciate the conditions under which [their] phobia functions’²⁴⁵ and they do not ‘grasp the real intentions of [their] obsessional impulse.’²⁴⁶ The repressed primal event of abjection, and the unrelenting feeling of loss therefore created, Kristeva states, ‘from its place of banishment does not seek challenging its master.’²⁴⁷ It returns in the acts of repetition in seeking out exposure to experiences that destabilise the subject’s psyche as they are inescapably drawn towards it and succumb to its magnetising pull. Kristeva describes this yielding to the desire for the abject; ‘he is on a journey during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him [...] And the more he strays, the more he is saved.’²⁴⁸ This salvation is momentary, enough to satisfy the hunger for the lost object, before the subject ‘unflinching, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsions, places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.’²⁴⁹ It is not what

²⁴³ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 56.

²⁴⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

²⁴⁵ Freud, “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through”, 38.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

the subject is in vain hope repetitively drawn towards, but rather the pseudo-object, one that presents a place of condemnation. The compulsion to repeat the abject is a hitherto unexplored area of psychoanalytic thought and one that this thesis will explore in more detail through three case studies that present literary figurations of their experiences.

Otto Fenichel and the Compulsion to Repeat After Abjection

The behavioural phenomena of the compulsion to repeat after abjection seems to be at odds with the expectations one might have of the horror associated with the experience. What drives the subject towards repeating the same abject experience cyclically, knowing it is not going to be physically or psychologically pleasant, can be better understood in light of the proposals written by Otto Fenichel, who categorised three possible causes for the compulsion to repeat. Fenichel's categories will also be employed in this thesis as they provide a more comprehensive understanding of the compulsion to repeat after abjection. His postulations in *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, and specifically his thoughts in this text on repetition compulsion, are useful propositions to apply and explore the repetitive behaviours of Peppiatt, Ernaux, and Jackson. Building on Freud's writing on repetition compulsion, Fenichel offers further insight into understanding the drivers of the compulsion to repeat, which provide useful sub-categories through which one can understand subjects exhibiting these compulsive behaviours. Fenichel's expansion of Freud's theory can be directly applied to the subjects of this thesis and permit a more perceptive understanding of their compulsive repetitive behaviour after abjection. Fenichel suggests the three categories of these repetitions can be distinguished as, first, '[t]he periodicity of instincts, roots in the periodicity of their physical sources.'²⁵⁰ For this category he suggests the repetition is representative of a 'somatic problem [...] one with profound psychological consequences [...] Every kind of hunger is ended by satiety, and satiety, after a certain time, gives way to hunger.'²⁵¹ He asserts that manic-depressive subjects and their repetitive cycles belong to this category. Second, and most usefully for gaining a deeper understanding of Ernaux's and one of Jackson's repetitions after abjection, Fenichel describes a repetition that is 'due to the tendency of the repressed to find an outlet'.²⁵² In this category of repetition compulsion Fenichel suggests that 'a repressed impulse tries to find its gratification in spite of its repression; but whenever the repressed wish comes to the surface, the anxiety that first brought about the repression is mobilized again and creates, together with the

²⁵⁰ Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (London: Routledge, 1946), 542.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

repetition of the impulse, a repetition of the anti-instinctual measures.²⁵³ For this compulsion, the subject's attempts to thwart an unwanted impulse through repression is not achieved and it is enacted in compulsive behaviours that seek experiences akin to the impulse. The repressed content is cyclically repeated, repressed and repeated once more. Ernaux's writing collection exhibits this compulsion, as she continually touches the abject experience of her abortion in her written work – the repressed traumatic experience finding an outlet – only to need to be satisfied again in further works.²⁵⁴ This is a repetition that seeks to find an outlet for the abject, expelling repressed trauma through her writing in an attempt at aborting her repetition compulsion in each text. For Jackson, she writes *The Haunting of Hill House* in an attempt to find an outlet for the repressed feelings of abjection caused by her relationship with her mother. This connection with Fenichel's theorisations will be explored in the subsequent chapters and will bring together Kristeva and Freud's theories to analyse these two primary texts in further depth. The final category of repetition compulsion Fenichel asserts aligns with the repetitive behaviours of Michael Peppiatt after his experiencing the abject in Francis Bacon's works and Shirley Jackson in her final novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. This category of repetition compulsion will now be explored in line with the previous chapter's analysis of *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* to show that through the proposed methodological approach of combining the theories of repetition compulsion and abjection, the subject after abjection can be better understood.

Michael Peppiatt After Abjection

Francis Bacon in Your Blood has been previously discussed in this thesis in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection alone. This initial exploration identified how the descriptions of Peppiatt's experiences can be understood to be intense and often overwhelming encounters with the abject. The images produced by Francis Bacon have been shown to speak to Peppiatt's psyche in a way that induces the physical and emotional responses that are indicative of a subject experiencing the abject; sweating, nausea, fear. Whilst the previous exploration of Peppiatt's work provided a unique reading of the text itself, this thesis would like to push further not only the reading of the memoir, but to advance the theoretical underpinning of this reading; chronologically shifting the focus to start to understand why Peppiatt, after experiencing such horror, would continue to expose himself to Bacon's artwork in this way. For this reading the same text will be used, but it will exemplify and highlight moments in which Peppiatt seems on some level aware, rather than fully conscious, of his desire to return to the abject. As previously stated, this analysis will look intricately at the syntactic

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ References can be found to Ernaux's abortion in her texts *The Years*, *Les Armoires Vides*, and *Simple Passion*.

and semantic choices in the text, for these will provide the exposure to the unconscious, as Laurie Wilson and Harold P. Blum, previously discussed state, in the 'random traces of the unconscious through slips of the pen or brush [as these] are the counterparts of the anomalies and slips of the tongue that appear and provide clues to unconscious fantasies in clinical work.'²⁵⁵ These are understood to be the chattering fingertips Freud describes where 'betrayal oozes out of [them] at every pore.'²⁵⁶ Framing the textual analysis in this light will illuminate both the primary text and the primary theory to better understand Michael Peppiatt in *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection.

The shift in focus for the experience of abjection to the subject after this experience highlights a commonality between the primary subjects of this thesis, which comes to light more exactly against the background of Freud's theory of repetition compulsion and working through. Peppiatt is drawn towards the temptation of the abject content of the paintings and seems unable to control this repetitive behaviour, despite knowing that they affect him deeply. There is a sense that these compulsions are 'more primal, more elemental, more deeply instinctual than the pleasure principle, which it simply thrusts aside.'²⁵⁷ Freud's description of the subject's repetition aligns with the compulsive desire to seek the abject, as it is a compulsion that is based on the primal moment at the birth of subjectivity and thereafter creates an uncontrollable instinct to seek the pseudo-object that the abject represents. The descriptive language both Freud and Kristeva use is interestingly echoed in the sentiments that Bacon describes as being the aim of his painting, 'you have to try to get the paint down in such a curious way that it comes back on to the nervous system more exactly and more profoundly. [...] it has to unlock sensation at a deeper level, it has to go in at an instinctive level.'²⁵⁸ Michael's description of the paintings as being a 'vast theatre of cruelty'²⁵⁹ speaks not only for the subjects in the painting whose bodies have been stretched, twisted and exposed, but the cruel exposure of his own psyche at this instinctive level. And yet, despite recognising the cruelty, Peppiatt seems unable to resist the continual subjugation to these unyielding desires and pull towards the traumatic experience of abjection.

For Peppiatt, it is this sense of enslavement to his desire for the abject that can be understood to be the cause for his repetition compulsion after abjection. This inescapable

²⁵⁵ Laurie Wilson and Harold P. Blum, "Biography, autobiography and history," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86 (2005): 156.

²⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 69. (Original work published 1905).

²⁵⁷ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 61.

²⁵⁸ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 149.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

boomeranging²⁶⁰ effect can better understood in relation to Otto Fenichel's third category for the cause of repetition compulsion. For this category, Fenichel asserts;

Repetitions of traumatic events for the purpose of achieving belated mastery. [...] The same pattern occurs in the repetitive dreams and symptoms of traumatic neurotics and in many similar little actions of normal persons who in thought, stories, or actions repeat upsetting experiences a number of times before these experiences are mastered.²⁶¹

Fenichel's notion of repeating exposure to the abject in order to achieve a sense of mastery over the event aligns well with Peppiatt's description of his actions. Through using Freud and Fenichel's writing in conjunction with each other to understand what happens to the subject after abjection, the sense of the inescapable pull to repeat after abjection comes into focus more clearly. Fenichel's categorising of the causal roots of repetition compulsion provides a useful lens to explore further the subjects present within this thesis. In light of this, this chapter will explore Michael Peppiatt in his autobiographical memoir as experiencing a repetition compulsion after abjection in order to achieve a belated mastery of the event. It will explore this through analysing moments in the text that speak to this sense of repetition and desire for mastery, but also highlight the subtle glimpses into Peppiatt's psyche through his writing in relation to the experience of the paintings.

Peppiatt's original motive for meeting Francis Bacon was not due to any personal interest in his work or connection to him, but for an interview for his university's magazine. However, he notes, 'long after my original interview was published, I kept going back to Soho',²⁶² recognising the magnetism of Bacon, his world, and in particular his artwork. Moments such as this in the autobiography, give a glimmer of insight into Peppiatt's awareness of his pull towards repeating encounters with the abject. Throughout the novel he finds himself seeking a way to understand this compulsion, in a moment of self-reflection after visiting the recent paintings at the Marlborough Gallery he thinks to himself;

We are all vestal virgins tending to the sacred flame, yet none of us appears to know what is really going on. Lucian claims that Francis is "The wildest and the wisest man" he has ever known. That's a good start, but it doesn't exactly explain anything. In fact, we all repeat the

²⁶⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

²⁶¹ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 542.

²⁶² Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, X.

formulae of the maestro as if we belong to some superior claue. What is really going on, I long to ask Miss Beston, what does it all mean.²⁶³

The reference to vestal virgins was perhaps initially chosen by Peppiatt to describe the dedication towards Bacon apparent in his friendship group, but there is more to consider with this metaphor that aligns it with the underlying association of Bacon and the repetition of the abject. The vestal virgins were priestesses who vowed to chastity in order to tend to the sacred flame of the Roman Goddess Vesta. This reference indicates that the draw towards Bacon, his artwork, and his world, was one of subservience and required the sacrifice of the body in order to fulfil their desire to remain near the sacred flame. This could be seen to allude to the sacrifice of the subjectivity Peppiatt experiences in order to fulfil the desire towards the abject and its potential for satiating the desire for the lost wholeness of the mother. However, like the abject, the pull towards the sacred flame can only draw one in so far, lest the subject be put at risk. The metaphorical incarnation of Bacon as the Goddess Vesta positions him as a manifestation of the ultimate mother, as she is the Goddess of fertility and was often addressed as 'mother' by the Roman people. Peppiatt's subservience to Bacon as depicted in this description can be understood to be a worshipping of the lost mother and a desire to bond with her.

Peppiatt's awareness of his compulsion to follow the repetition of 'the formulae of the maestro' is one he cannot seem to fathom or pin down to a particular rational understanding or need. He does note in this passage his awareness of his compulsion to repeat, but also emphasises his desperation to understand it. References to Peppiatt's awareness of the strange nature of his draw to Bacon are made throughout the book, but equally there are also references to Peppiatt trying to locate the cause for his desire. He remains in the role of interviewer, long after he has published his original article, because he feels that through understanding Bacon, he can understand the paintings and therefore solve the reason as to why they have affected him. Over a glass of champagne at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris, Francis is discussing art and life with Peppiatt, who thinks, 'I want to know more, in fact I want to know everything [...] Each time we meet and he's in the mood to open up, I feel I'm filling in a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, the enigma that he and his paintings represent for me.'²⁶⁴ He describes these conversations as interactions that help him to live.²⁶⁵ It is this sense of Peppiatt's insatiable need to understand the paintings, and by extension understand himself, throughout the memoir that causes the repetitive cycles of abjection. The

²⁶³ Ibid., 140.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 168.

²⁶⁵ Peppiatt states, 'Hearing about him helps me form or clarify my own attitudes to life and sort out my contradictions. It helps me to live.' Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 169.

linguistic choices in this passage also echo those of Kristeva when she describes the abject as being 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.'²⁶⁶ Through this comparison in the language, Peppiatt's desire to fill in the jigsaw that helps him to understand the paintings is in some way his method for thrusting aside the experience of abjection caused by the paintings. The more he understands, the greater the mastery he feels he achieves, the better he can thrust them aside in order that he may live. He continues to subjugate himself to the experience of these paintings after abjection in order to fill in the pieces of the jigsaw that make up the depths of his psyche. Peppiatt feels as though with each exposure to the paintings, with each jigsaw piece he collects, he gets closer to understanding the question he longs to pose; 'what is really going on'.²⁶⁷

His drive to discover the root cause of the 'barely avowed anguish in [himself]'²⁶⁸ that the paintings disturb, fuels his repetition compulsion. It is this sense that Peppiatt has repressed the anguish in himself that provides evidence towards Freud's understanding of the repressed driving the need to act out what they cannot simply shut out of their subjectivity.²⁶⁹ After abjection he is aware that, 'there ran a powerful dark foreboding, a sense of having got involved in something that went all together beyond my control.'²⁷⁰ It is the entanglement with the primary abject trauma that Peppiatt confronts in a Bacon image and his inability to control his instinctive response to this that ignites his compulsion to repeat these experiences. This compulsion is therefore best understood through Fenichel's understanding that some '[r]epetitions of traumatic events [are] for the purpose of achieving belated mastery',²⁷¹ as the subject seeks to gain control of his response and his experience. The need Peppiatt exhibits to master the events that seem out of his control, due to the instinctiveness of his reaction, creates this continual compulsion to repeat after abjection. Bacon aptly describes this when he states that, '[art] has to have something that reverberates within your psyche and disturbs your whole life cycle.'²⁷² For some, such as Peppiatt, the artwork resonates on a deeply psychological level, connecting him to the traumatic primary moment of abjection and in the same instant he is repelled. In these moments he feels the artwork provoke the wound of trauma and in the same instant he is drawn towards it, he rejects this connection. After such an event he feels the unyielding desire to repeat the exposure to gain a sense of mastery over these events, to continue to act out the repetition, knowing it will affect him deeply. Throughout the memoir the

²⁶⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

²⁶⁷ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 140.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶⁹ 'The forgetting of impressions, scenes, experiences comes down in most cases to a process of "shutting out" such things' Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 34.

²⁷⁰ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 23.

²⁷¹ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 542.

²⁷² Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 260.

strong sense of desperation to fathom the paintings becomes an unconscious desire to locate the trauma and master his response to it.

Through connecting Kristeva and Freud's theories one is able to better understand Peppiatt's experiences as detailed in the memoir. Furthermore, in framing the compulsion to repeat through the third category Fenichel presents, the motivating factors driving this compulsion are appreciated in a new light. To take this methodological approach forward, this thesis will now turn to its second primary text which exhibits a similar compulsion to repeat after abjection, but in order to attempt to achieve the second category put forward by Fenichel. The subsequent case study will explore an entirely different set of life experiences to that of Peppiatt, but it will connect through the overarching thread for this thesis in its focus on the subject after abjection.

Chapter Four

Abjection of the Self

Before this chapter turns to analyse the second primary text for the thesis, it will first explore abortion in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. It will explore scholarship and critical writings on abortion, framed by Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, in order to interrogate culturally constructed perceptions of abortion as abject and the complex levels on which these cultural signifiers operate within Annie Ernaux's autobiographical memoir, *Happening*. To assert the centrality of Kristeva's thought in relation to abortion and the second primary text for this thesis, this chapter will first explore the act of abortion as represented in cultural depictions. The selection of cultural references and scholarly works have been chosen to exemplify the theory of abjection as it operates within the works, both on a physical and a social level. This approach has been used as a means through which both Ernaux's *Happening* and Kristeva's theory can be explored and better understood in relation to one other. Following this discussion, this thesis will thereafter turn to *Happening* to explore through literary analysis the abject content that is present within Ernaux's text on multiple levels. This text will be illuminated with abject significance that will evidence how Ernaux both abjected herself and experienced social abjection throughout her experience of being pregnant and seeking to terminate the pregnancy.

Abjection of the Self: Abortion

Cultural depictions can provide useful examples to understand better societal perceptions of the subject matter and their relationship with context. Through positioning artwork and literature in this light, they can be understood as being windows into understanding social context and cultural perceptions, in particular those works that seek to challenge these perceptions. This section will use a range of texts in this approach to explore the experience and perception of abortion. It will follow this with some statistical context and discuss a selection of critical works on abortion and its representation in the arts. This section will begin with Dame Paula Rego's abortion series paintings. Thereafter, the discussion will be furthered by using critical works to explore Tracey Emin's painting *Terribly Wrong* (1997) and the role the abject has in this artist's depiction of abortion. These texts will provide the cultural background against which the following section will explore Annie Ernaux's *Happening*.

Rego's paintings of abortion scenes provide a strong starting place to connect with Annie Ernaux's *Happening*. In particular, the painting *Untitled No. 5, 1998*, shows the tight grip of the

subject, the strength, and wilful certitude of the woman on the bed, much like the scene Ernaux describes in her memoir.



(fig. 10) Paula Rego, *Untitled No. 5* (1998)

Whilst the women in Rego's paintings in the abortion scenes collection display a disquieting eroticism and stoic strength, the intensity of what they have and will experience in these scenes connects them with Ernaux's text in a visual form. Rego, in discussing her abortion scenes paintings, remarks, 'I didn't put in the blood. I was focusing on what the women felt.'²⁷³ The same is true of Ernaux, as there is a distinct absence of melodramatic gore and in the abortion scenes in *Happening*. The scenes of *Happening* that would have involved a substantial quantity of blood loss, the gory nature to the scene is not weighed down with descriptive gravity, such as intricate descriptions of the colour and consistency of the blood. As with Rego, for Ernaux the focus is on the subject's experience. Ernaux's desire to focus on the aching slowness of time during this period and centre the perspective on the facts, strips out the melodrama, leaving behind the stark reality of her experience, much like the women portrayed in Rego's abortion paintings.

²⁷³ Juliet Rix, "Paula Rego – interview: 'I'm interested in seeing things from the underdog's perspective. Usually that's a female perspective'" *Studio International*, 20 June 2019, accessed 27 March 2020 <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/paula-rego-interview-obedience-and-defiance-mk-gallery-milton-keynes>.



(fig. 11) Paula Rego, *Triptych* (1997–1998)

These abortion scenes are painful to behold in the paintings, just as they can at times feel torturous to read in Ernaux’s text. They are abject on multiple levels and Rego’s paintings offer the fierce resolve that is equally powerful in *Happening*. Her ability to depict the strength and determination of these women offers an unmistakably powerful connection to the second text for this thesis. However, before this thesis turns to the second primary text for analysis, it will continue to explore the connection between abortion and the abject as represented in art and literature more broadly. It is important to stress that this thesis seeks not to reiterate the condemnatory discourse surrounding abortion,²⁷⁴ but rather to apply a psychoanalytic theoretical understanding in order to explore how it is culturally perceived to be pejoratively associated with the abject. This will expose the perceptual construction of meaning in relation to abortive practices and images, so that Annie Ernaux’s *Happening* can be understood better as both a text of the abject and a means through which Ernaux can work through her experience of abjection.

To understand more fully the wider context surrounding this discussion, it is important to clarify the terminology and note the statistical evidence that goes some way toward understanding the abject positioning of abortion. Abortion describes the termination of a pregnancy through the removal of the embryo or foetus from the uterus, spontaneously or due to complications during pregnancy, which is caused by or results in its death. Spontaneous abortions are usually termed miscarriages, whereas what will be discussed in this thesis using the broader term of abortion will be in reference to those purposefully induced to terminate the pregnancy. The statistics from a 2019 report from the World Health Organization show that between 2010 and 2014, on average 56 million induced abortions occurred each year and, among the 56 million, 25 million of those were classified as unsafe abortions and eight million were deemed to be carried out in the least-safe and dangerous conditions.²⁷⁵ For many cultures it is considered to be an act that transgresses the ethical

²⁷⁴ Such as that represented in the discourse of pro-life campaigns and organisations.

²⁷⁵ World Health Organization, “Preventing Unsafe Abortion: Evidence Brief,” <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329887/WHO-RHR-19.21-eng.pdf?ua=1>

and religious borders of prohibition, and, as is still the case in many countries, it is also something which operates outside of the boundaries of legality. This discussion has again been brought to centre stage in the media as the supreme court in the United States of America have now overturned the 1973 landmark legal ruling in the Roe vs Wade case that had previously made abortion legal in the country.²⁷⁶ As 25% of pregnancies end in induced abortion,²⁷⁷ this abject subject matter sparks heated controversy around the world. It is an act that aligns with the many prevailing conditions of the abject, as it is centred on an ambiguous subjectivity, an act that strays on the territories of animal²⁷⁸ - to use Kristevan terms – and, in many cultures, transgression of legal and ethical boundaries. Kristeva remarks that '[a]n unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside',²⁷⁹ however, remaining critical to this approach, she continues, 'Religion, Morality, Law. Obviously always arbitrary, more or less; unfailingly oppressive, rather more than less; laboriously prevailing, more and more so.'²⁸⁰ Abortion remains a subject matter that, for many cultures, is strictly legally bound in, what can be seen to be, an attempt to hem in the abject perverse interspace that it represents. However, this oppressive thrusting aside of the culturally perceived abject nature of abortion is equally present in societies where it is not illegal, as it still connotes the abject sphere of experience. Due to its perception of being considered abject, it is designated as being a subject that many societies expel from open discussion, which further acts to oppress those who have had, or are looking to have, an abortion.

Kristeva also notes in her discussions of the abject, the key role that the religious dimensions play in configuring the sacred and taboo. She asserts that the religious structures that demarcate cleanliness and purity, in opposition to defilement and sin, set up many of the boundaries of the abject that pervade cultural associations. In this section she specifically refers to the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, but this can be expanded to include other religious structures that follow notions of contamination. She states, '[a]bjection persists as exclusion or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more "secondary" forms such as transgression (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy.'²⁸¹ Kristeva continues, '[i]t finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the

²⁷⁶ BBC News 'Roe v Wade: What is US Supreme Court ruling on abortion?' *BBC News*, 24 June 2022, accessed 30 July 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-54513499>.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ 'The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal* [...] which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.' Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 13.

²⁷⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 16.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 17.

Christian Word as a threatening otherness – but always nameable, always totalizeable.²⁸² It is the religious discourse surrounding the notion of exclusion for sinful practices, which permeate many societal understandings of abjection. This is particularly relevant to abortive practices where the religious dimension holds particular power in its cultural perception. Abortion becomes a totalizeable otherness, to be excluded and removed, either from legal medical procedures in some societies, or from open conversation in others. The religious underpinning for societal perceptions is particularly key in Ernaux’s experience as, whilst not described as the dominant feature of her experience and moral compass, this would have been a contextual factor in the legal systems within which she was operating. Tightly connected to religious doctrines, abortion remained illegal in France until 1975. Whilst present-day France has legalised abortion up to twelve weeks of pregnancy, the abject associative nature of abortion prevails as the dominant discourse, despite efforts to the contrary. As Kristeva notes, ‘abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse.’²⁸³ As a secular country the religious element to taboo aspects of abortion are not dogmatically imposed from the state to the extent they have been in the past, they are, however, working under a new guise through social abjection. To understand better the relationship between abortion and abjection, before analysing Ernaux’s text, this section will again turn to scholars and artists’ works exploring abortion and or abjection to position the thesis in the wider critical discussions on this subject.

In discussing various images of the grotesque and representations of abortion, Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer state, ‘there is no place in grotesque realism for that other operation which kills the child but delivers the mother.’²⁸⁴ In this essay they explore the notion that it is culturally often depicted to be both crass and immoral to consider the mother being saved at the death of the baby, however, in contrast to this, Minogue and Palmer explore the often heroic and courageous image that is portrayed in both historical and fictional narratives for the death of the mother during the birth of the infant. This former narrative, of the death of the infant for the life of the mother, is considered to be the power behind works such as those of Paula Rego, as they bring forth this untold narrative that is more often hidden from mainstream culture. In particular, these images display the strength and courage required to undertake an abortion, which contrasts the dominant discourse surrounding these issues. Minogue and Palmer continue to highlight that it is the guiding legal and moral social structures that have led and continue to lead women to make the decision to abort the baby to save their own life, as they state, ‘[t]he illegal, life-threatening abortion

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer, “Confronting the Abject: Women and Dead Babies in Modern English Fiction,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29 (2006): 103.

is the result of an official morality that imposes oppressive rules as to who can legitimately give birth.’²⁸⁵ The notion of legitimacy for childbirth is beginning to be dismantled in some cultures, however it remains a dominant discourse for many, as birth is often considered to be illegitimate outside of marriage. As noted above in the quotation from Kristeva - ‘abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse’²⁸⁶ - it is the prevailing guide of the fragile notions of morality upon which the oppressive structures that determine these abject experiences are built. These structures, as Minogue and Palmer note, provide the parameters of legitimate births and in many cultures force women to make the choice between social abjection due to illegitimate births or, what can be considered to be, abject abortive practices by the oppressive legal and moral standards.

Minogue and Palmer further their argument through exploring multiple presentations of female experiences and representations of abortion in literature from the twentieth century. One text they explore is *Eyeless in Gaza* by Aldous Huxley, which presents the character of Helen as being ‘practical and decisive’²⁸⁷ in her determination to have an abortion. Her resolve to terminate the pregnancy is comparable to Annie Ernaux’s experience and, in much the same vein as Ernaux, the character of Helen equally finds her maternal body as being an abject prospect. Minogue and Palmer state, ‘Helen has been conditioned by the elevated image of the sealed classical body presented by official culture [...] she is horrified by her body’s potential for openness, for outpourings of milk and babies and, by extension, babies’ feces.’²⁸⁸ This is the same abjection of the self that Ernaux experiences, which will be discussed in depth later in this chapter. What is important to note here is the relationship females are conditioned to have with their own bodies, as they are constructed culturally as being open and uncontained and, due to socially constructed expectations, can be horrified by its ‘openness’ and desire for it to be contained. This is present in a heightened state during pregnancy, for example through the production of milk, but the same is true during menstruation.²⁸⁹ The abortion, therefore, becomes the apex of abject outpourings, as it mixes the body’s openness with the death of the infant inside the body. Helen and Annie Ernaux both experience this abjection of the self at viewing their body as contaminated and open to the external. The literary presentation of female experience, discussed in both Minogue and Palmer’s paper and present within *Happening*, emphasises the ways in which the female subject builds their relationship

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 105.

²⁸⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 17.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ The author of this thesis has explored the relationship between abjection and menstruation in their article ‘The Abject in Education’. Cassie Lowe, “The Abject in Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 54 (2020): 17-30.

with their body, framed by abjection, and how abortion can be considered to be the ultimate abject state of reproduction.

The relationship between cultural perceptions and the reproductive female body is further explored in Karen Weingarten's writing on biopolitics at the turn of the century in America. She suggests the illegitimately pregnant women's experience is based on 'a state of inclusionary exclusion'.²⁹⁰ There are distinct connections to be made with Ernaux's experience in Weingarten's analysis, as she states, '[t]he foetus often works conversely to mark how precariously close women's reproductive bodies are to the bare life [...] the foetus often comes to mark a kind of death for the woman.'²⁹¹ Ernaux's abjection of the self through her abortion is representative of not only the death of the foetus, but her own death and rebirth in the process, as she becomes a subject at the expense of her own death. This also echoes the experience of the character Helen in *Eyeless in Gaza* that Minogue and Palmer described, as needing to expel the foetus in order to regain their sense of a contained subjectivity and escape the bare life. Weingarten continues, 'the "illegitimately" pregnant woman loses not only her rights to motherhood but her rights to personhood. In other words, reproduction and the refusal to reproduce through abortion cannot exist outside a biopolitical regime that manages the gendered body.'²⁹² Whilst Weingarten's writing centres on illegitimate pregnancies that cross racial and class boundaries leading to abortion in the American context, the notion of the loss of personhood through seeking and experiencing an abortion links with the memoir of Annie Ernaux. In Ernaux's experience, this loss of personhood is tied into the social abjection she encounters with her rejection of the mother within herself, going against the biopolitical regime that manages the gendered body and her own abjection of the self, as she no longer feels part of the social groupings around her. In describing the female's experience as losing their rights to personhood, Weingarten's writings describe the abjection of the self experienced through undergoing an abortion. This abject state is laced throughout the narrative fabric of Ernaux's writings but can equally be seen to be a domineering feature of the experience of abortion more broadly due to its culturally informed positioning within society.

Building on this understanding, it can therefore be argued that the socially constructed connotations of abortion and women who undertake this act are predominantly pejoratively situated within the sphere of the abject. It is the heated controversy surrounding abortion that enables the continued silence on abortion and the experience as a whole to be 'permanently thrust aside', as Kristeva would state, in order that society may live self-deluded and ignorant to its happening. Irrespective of the illegality in some countries, abortions are still taking place, but in

²⁹⁰ Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 17.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 35.

horrific conditions in order to avoid having their 'personhood', their right to be a subject, taken away from them. When confronted with the notion of abortion, there are often large amounts of distress amongst those that find it abject and or morally reprehensible. For example, Aliza Shvarts, a student at Yale University in 2008, produced performance art whereby she informed the University's newspaper that she would be repeatedly inseminating herself to become pregnant and following it with drinking herbal teas that would induce an abortion.²⁹³ There was huge upheaval about this and large-scale media coverage, which can be understood as being due to its positioning as a topic and act that is considered to be abject. Dismissing this performance art as disgusting, *The Irish Times* quote Shvarts stating, "the act of ascribing a word to something physical is at its heart an ideological act . . . in a sense, the act of conception occurs when the viewer assigns the term 'miscarriage' or 'period' to that blood."²⁹⁴ This is followed by a trivializing line from the journalist, "[i]t's hard to say what causes the worst case of dry heaves, the graphic bodily-function-speak or the gratuitously inaccessible art-speak."²⁹⁵ This example emphasises how abortion is an act that is seen to be in need of societal abjection, and, moreover, how the female bodily functions are constitutive of the nausea, or 'dry heaves', associated with the abject. More contemporary examples of cultural engagements with abjection include the 2020 exhibition 'Abortion is Normal', which was sparked by the series of challenges to abortion rights in the United States. The exhibition houses contributions from more than 60 artists, including the abject artist Cindy Sherman, and sought to remove the stigma and cultural perceptions of abortion to encourage the normalisation of this practice for the pro-choice rights of the female reproductive body. Highlighting the social stigma attached to conversations and laws concerning abortion, brings to the fore the contemporary nature of a text such as *Happening* and shows how the constructions of the abject in relation to the female and abortive practices continue to shape society.

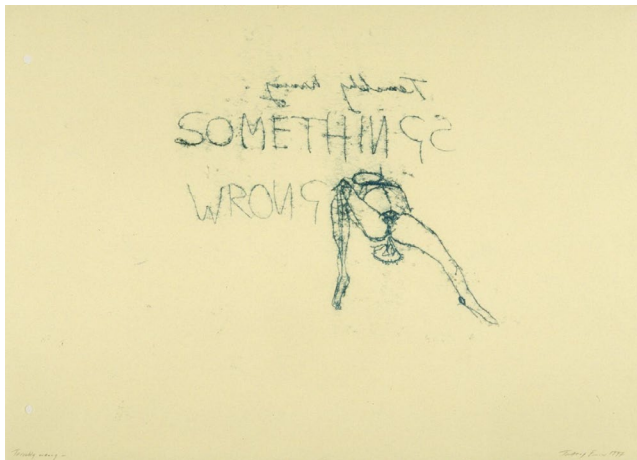
Artists engaging with such abject subject matter disrupts the ego's perception of the social constructs of cleanliness. Tracey Emin is a prominent example of an artist who displays taboo and abject subject matter as a key feature in her work, as she seeks to confront her audience with her experiences and shake the foundations of their being. In discussing the confessional aspect to Emin's work, Christine Fathome remarks, 'Emin's candour, specifically about traditionally "taboo" subjects such as rape, sexual abuse, promiscuity and bodily functions, is fundamental to the public response she generates, which spans the spectrum from shock and abhorrence to intimacy, resonance and

²⁹³ Whether or not this narrative was part of the performance or whether it actually happened is debated. Peter Eddin, "Controversy Over Abortion Art" *New York Times*, 19 April 2008, accessed 29 April 2020 https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/19/arts/design/19arts-CONTROVERSYO_BRF.html

²⁹⁴ *The Irish Times*, 2 May 2008, accessed 29 April 2020 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/abortion-as-an-art-form-1.919557>

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

intense shared meaning.²⁹⁶ It is this mixing of what one both abhors but also resonates with that characterises her artistic works with abject significance, as it is something that one rejects but equally, and ultimately, recognises as being part of themselves. The 'Otherness' in the images of Tracy Emin presents the body's corporeality; the flesh and blood present in all bodies. Whilst many might not share a connection with the specifics of the same experiences that Emin has had throughout her life, the openness and overflowing nature of the body is an aspect of human existence that resonates with the audience of her work and is resultantly abjected. Capturing moments such as her botched abortion, Emin presents her viewers with a drawing of her experience.



(fig. 12) Tracey Emin, *Terribly Wrong* (1997)

The emptying out of the insides, the transgression of borders and sharp, almost staccato form, to the lines of the drawing convey the breakdown of subjectivity. The lopsided head and shape to the form grounds the subject with a sense of vulnerability, whose open and uncontained body in this abject state must be thrust aside. The capitalised writing 'SOMETHINGS WRONG' echoes the title of the painting, but the ambiguous nature to what is specifically being referred to as 'wrong' is not clarified. This drawing has been noted as being in connection to the abortion Emin experienced in the back of a London cab,²⁹⁷ which could reflect the medical nature of something going wrong for her in this experience. However, it could also point to the preconceived notions of 'wrongness' of the female subject in this maternal state, particularly one who is in the throes of rejecting motherhood through abortion. The backwards letters further this discussion of something being out

²⁹⁶ Christine Fanthome, "Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art," *Social Semiotics* 18 (2008): 229.

²⁹⁷ As referenced by Smith; 'the monoprint is easily taken as a self-portrait of Emin, as it recalls a story often told by the artist about her first abortion, which was mishandled by her doctor. Days after having the procedure, Emin says in multiple accounts, she found herself bleeding uncontrollably and eventually holding a dead foetus in the back of a London cab. In reality, Emin had been carrying not one child but two, and the procedure had only removed one foetus.' Laura Lake Smith, "Telling stories: performing authenticity in the confessional art of Tracey Emin," *Rethinking History* 21 (2017): 298.

of kilter with expectation and disjointed. Much like the female form presented here, the body is sprawling and opening, disjointed at the seams that stitch it together, which have left it thrown down like a rag doll, unhuman, and discarded.

Tracey Emin's image provides an unsettling depiction of the female subject experiencing abortion. It forces the viewer to confront the human body in its open corporeality and potential for eruption. For Emin, her work gives her the outlet through which she can express her experiences and generate reactions that inspire heated discussion. She seeks to provoke; to 'probe the wound of trauma',²⁹⁸ to revisit a previous quotation from Hal Foster in discussing the abject, and claim the connection between what she presents to the audience and its recognition in their subjectivity. In discussing the presentation of the maternal in a range of contemporary artworks, Rosemary Betterton asserts, 'In *Terribly Wrong*, Emin presents the monstrous spectacle of an abject maternal body, but in a way that insists we recognize the embodied pain of a maternal subject who has suffered loss through termination. She refuses to accept the invisibility assigned to abortion or the boundary between self and other that it constitutes.'²⁹⁹ It is this refusal to accept the invisibility of abortion and be discarded as an 'Other' that fuels her desire to, as Betterton asserts, 'speak back through her art, [as] a means of resistance against silencing',³⁰⁰ which connects fundamentally to the narrator of the second primary text for this thesis.

Annie Ernaux uses her writing to resist the social stigma surrounding abortion, so as to convey effectively the desperate experience of many women for whom abortion remains illegal and avoid continuing 'the same veil of secrecy'³⁰¹ that shrouds these experiences as when it was illegal in France. As has been explored in this section, abortion is an experience that is too often suppressed from social consciousness, which perpetuates the negative stereotyping and associations with the abject. As shown, there have been movements to resist this through artwork, which operates through confronting the viewer with these experiences in an attempt to break down the connotations of shame and guilt. The following section will provide an in-depth analysis of Annie Ernaux's *Happening* to explore how the representation of her experience of abortion lead to the experience of social abjection and her own abjection of the self.

²⁹⁸ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (1996): 115.

²⁹⁹ Rosemary Betterton, "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination," *Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 21 (2006): 92.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 19.

Abjection of the Self: Annie Ernaux's *Happening*

Annie Ernaux, born 1st September 1940, grew up in Yvetot in Normandy, France. She describes herself as being from a working-class background, one that she sought to break free from through attending both the Universities of Rouen and Bordeaux, earning a higher degree in modern literature and qualifying as a schoolteacher. Her socio-economic beginnings play a significant role in many of her texts, featuring as something of a self-conscious shadow on her past, which she is desperate to avoid falling back into again. Ernaux has documented her experiences of life and death in many of her literary accomplishments, but there is an anchor around which her focus often returns, even if only fleetingly, which is that of her illegal abortion in 1960s France. She dedicates two books to this experience explicitly, the first of which is *Cleaned Out*, narrated by Denise Lesur, a thinly disguised fictional depiction of herself, the second a directly autobiographical memoir that uses quotations from the journal she kept during the experience to guide her writing. This life-altering experience for Ernaux is deeply traumatic and, unable to feel a sense of resolution, it continues to haunt her literary creations in other texts, such as a brief reference in *The Years*³⁰² and revisiting of the location in which it happened in *Simple Passion*.³⁰³ She asserts at the start of the memoir that she writes in order to have 'physically bonded'³⁰⁴ with the 'reality of this *unforgettable* event',³⁰⁵ which suggests the memoir is in effort to engage with the experience more meaningfully. However, the writing process in relation to the subject after abjection will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis, this section will now turn to *Happening* to explore through literary analysis the scenes that are considered to be abject for both Ernaux and the reader of this text. It will thereafter turn toward focusing on the psychological complexities of this text as Ernaux's pregnancy and abortion story follows her abjection of the self.

Throughout this experience for Ernaux the law in France was strictly clear and she references this in the opening section of her memoir.³⁰⁶ The placement of this reference positions it

³⁰² Speaking of herself in third person, she writes, 'A few months later, Kennedy's assassination in Dallas will leave her even more indifferent than the death of Marilyn Monroe had the summer before, because it will have been eight weeks since her last period.' Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), 86.

³⁰³ 'One day I felt an overriding urge to go to the Passage Cardinet, in the 17th arrondissement, to the place where I had a clandestine abortion twenty years ago.' Annie Ernaux, *Simple Passion*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), 40.

³⁰⁴ Ernaux, *Happening*, 19.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰⁶ The *Nouveau Larousse Universel*, 1948 edition, as quoted in *Happening*, states, 'The following persons shall be liable to both a fine and term of imprisonment: 1) those responsible for performing abortive practices: 2) those physicians, midwives, pharmacists and other individuals guilty of suggesting or encouraging such

prominently as the legal background against which Ernaux was operating in her seeking out and receiving an abortion. This immediately situates her actions and experience as being legally condemnable during this period, but equally, due to the contemporary nature of this text, it is ambiguous in its status in relation to present law in France. It is important to emphasise here that this thesis is not positioning itself as aligning with the law in 1960s France, but rather it will refer to Ernaux's actions at this time as being in relation to the law that prevailed and, therefore, would have been seen to have been condemnable, and socially abject, by a large proportion of society as the text will later highlight. The memoir opens with this as the legal context to highlight the author's awareness of the law and to ensure her actions are set against this context, potentially opening her actions to judgement in relation to this. However, equally, it is placed at the forefront to serve as a narrative context that opens up the flaws and highlights the fragility of the prevailing legal consciousness of society in 1960s France and situates the law alongside the horrors of the lived human experience. Ernaux effectively conveys the dreadful experience for women who were operating outside of the legal system, but who were also firmly situated within actions that are in accordance with female reproductive rights, she states, 'you couldn't tell whether abortion was banned because it was wrong or wrong because it was banned. People judged according to the law, they didn't judge the law.'³⁰⁷ Through opening her memoir with this context the text immediately strikes the reader as being that which, to use Kristevan language, 'disturbs identity, system, order. [That which] does not respect borders, positions, rules.'³⁰⁸ In equal measure, it is also presented as being 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'³⁰⁹ This text is therefore immediately placed within the abject ambiguous status as being a narrative that does not follow the rules set out by the legal system in 1960s France, but also a narrative that opens up the questionability of such rules through exposing the lived experience for women. However, as Kristeva states, '[a]ny crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.'³¹⁰ Ernaux's actions are certainly premeditated – as she states, 'I wasn't the least bit apprehensive about getting an abortion'³¹¹ - and whether or not one is to view abortion as murder per se is a

practices: 3) those women who have aborted at their own hands or at the hands of others; 4) those guilty of instigating abortion and spreading propaganda advocating contraception. The guilty parties may also receive an injunction requesting that they leave the country. Moreover, those belonging to the second category will be deprived of the right to exercise their profession either temporarily or definitively. Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 21.

³⁰⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 31.

³⁰⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 23.

contested ethical issue still present in contemporary society, but it was considered to be a criminal act, and murder, in this context. The ambiguous nature of this text and Ernaux's highlighting of the fragility of the law, strengthens the text's position as a narrative in the abject realm, securing its need for further exploration in relation to Ernaux after abjection.

Before exploring Ernaux's experience of abortion further, there is an early scene in the text that, set against the gore and horrors that follow, seems potentially mild and less significant. However, this scene has a particularly unique abject quality that, whilst comparatively minor to the later assaults on her being, is worthwhile highlighting to situate further Ernaux's entire experience of seeking an abortion as being one of a process of ongoing abjection. It is the scene in which Ernaux tries to find help through Jean T, a friend who 'belonged to a vaguely underground movement supporting free contraception and birth control'.³¹² She visits his home for dinner where he lives with his wife and child because she 'didn't feel like going home to an empty room'.³¹³ After dinner his wife takes leave to go to her workplace. Jean T betrays Ernaux's trust and attempts forcing himself upon her after dinner. She writes, '[h]e grabbed me and said that we had enough time to make love. I pulled free and continued to wash the dishes. The child was crying in the room next to us, I felt like vomiting. Jean T kept pressing into me while he was drying the dishes.'³¹⁴ This disturbing assault forms part of the overall abject experience for Ernaux. Kristeva states, '[a]bjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady [...] a friend who stabs you'.³¹⁵ Jean T's behaviour in this scene is immoral and shady. He takes advantage of Ernaux's desperate need for support and whilst his wife is out of the house, he tries to force himself on Ernaux and get her to have an affair with him. His actions towards Ernaux are disturbingly abject in their sinister motive and immorality, as his child cries in the next room. Furthermore, his belonging to an underground movement supporting women's reproductive rights suggests he would be a friend to respect Ernaux and her position, but proves himself to be scheming and luring her into a trap. He both literally and figuratively becomes 'a friend who stabs you' as he continues pressing, what one can assume to be an erection, into her while drying the dishes, in an attempt to break her resolve.

This scene fades in its abject quality next to the onslaught of imagery that is to follow in this text, but it sets up the experience of Ernaux as being positioned as an 'Other', a *demi-monde*, and no longer seen as an uncontaminated, contained and bordered self, through both her pregnancy and her legal transgression in seeking an abortion. Jean T's actions embody the treatment that typifies Ernaux's narrative, she is seen on multiple occasions as an abject 'Other' and treated poorly as a

³¹² Ibid., 24.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

³¹⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

result. The sexual assault on Ernaux from Jean T enacts the behaviour that Imogen Tyler describes. As previously discussed, Tyler emphasises the treatment of pregnant women as abject and the domestic abuse that follows as a result of their abject association. Ernaux's experience in this scene provides further evidence to Tyler's claims. Tyler states, '[a]bjection is [...] a social experience. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanizing effects of law are integral to processes of abjection.'³¹⁶ *Happening* exemplifies the social experience of abjection through Ernaux's experience of pregnancy, but even more so in her seeking an abortion. The law in this context acts as a means to dehumanise the female body and its right to independent status once impregnated. This social abjection is thereafter experienced multiple times for Ernaux, from the sexual assault from Jean T, to the injection provided by a doctor that is given to her under false pretences,³¹⁷ and thereafter the final cruel treatment from the doctors in the clinic at the hospital. She is positioned as an abject and threatening 'Other' and is treated as such by those around her. She is seen as having lost the purity of being a contained subject and seen as abject in her transgression of the laws, systems and order that determine society's values.

Decisive in her actions to transgress the law, Ernaux's desperation to find a way to abort the foetus increases. She is left with little choice but to make an attempt herself. She describes the process in detail in her memoir and in so doing subjugates the reader to experiencing the process with her. She brings back knitting needles from her parent's home and tries to induce an abortion. She writes, 'I lay down on my bed and slowly inserted a knitting needle into my vagina. I groped around, vainly, trying to locate the opening of the womb; I stopped as soon as I felt pain.'³¹⁸ This is the first instance in the memoir where Ernaux attempts to physically free herself from the foetus. This scene, amongst others throughout the text, is painful to read. Just as discussed with the Bacon images in Chapter Two, the pain feels almost as though it is also located in the reader, crossing the threshold of art at a distance from the self. As this memoir is written in first person narration, to read it can feel as though the transgression of self and the pain is also located in the person who reads and experiences the text. Her abject body is heightened through the insertion of an object across the borders of her body and into herself, and the description of the 'shiny blue needles'³¹⁹ provides the visceral imagery needed to locate this pain inside the reader's own subjectivity. Such disturbingly evocative writing connects with Kristeva's opening lines to her essay, '[t]here looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to

³¹⁶ Tyler, *op. cit.*, 87.

³¹⁷ The doctor injects Ernaux with a drug used to prevent miscarriage but does this after she has asked him 'to make the bleeding come back, at any cost', clearly indicating she would like to terminate the pregnancy. Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 37.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.³²⁰ This passage in *Happening* causes a violent ‘revolt of being’ that seems neither inside nor outside of the body. It is therefore a passage of writing that is considered to be a threat and is abjected as it is beyond what is tolerable to consider.

This rejection of what culturally seems unthinkable is met at other instances where the author of the memoir transgresses social expectations in the language used to describe the foetus. Ernaux’s ‘itifying’ of the foetus growing inside of her removes any human association, as she describes it as, ‘a shapeless entity growing inside me which had to be destroyed at all costs’³²¹ and in her journal she notes that she would write, “‘it” or “that thing”, only once “pregnant”’.³²² This reflects the language used by Kristeva to describe the abject, ‘a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer’.³²³ This detached removal of any humanising element to the foetus is culturally considered to be abject, as it transgresses the rules, systems and order of the expectations of women in a society governed by patriarchal ideologies. It is worth reemphasising that this thesis seeks not to make a moralising statement from *Happening* and Ernaux’s experience, but rather in order to explore this text in relation to the abject means that it must be viewed in relation to cultural, societal, ideological expectations, systems and laws that it transgresses. In line with this, Kristeva states, ‘if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me.’³²⁴ In being affronted by Ernaux’s wilful removal of the characteristic of the foetus as having a form worthy of description, it is, as Kristeva states, due to the structures and connections that have conditioned this abject affect. The reference to the collection of cells that make up the foetus, particularly in the initial stages of their development are ethically contested in their right to be viewed as having a form that constitutes human affection. However, despite the contested nature of human associations being attributed to foetuses, the patriarchal ideological governing of society has conditioned cultural meaning-making systems, which renders Ernaux’s relationship with the foetus strikingly abject. Kristeva notes, ‘shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.’³²⁵ Before the symbolic system that generates the meaning-making values can be judged, actions such as Ernaux’s are purged of their intent and abjected. Similarly, the abject description of the foetus is again met in the abortionist, who ‘spoke of

³²⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

³²¹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 22.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 11.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

it gleefully as of an evil creature.’³²⁶ Continuing with the objectifying language, the foetus also takes on an abhorrent descriptive imagery in this scene, as being referred to gleefully as having the qualities of being an entity that is profoundly immoral or wicked. The abortionist, as a practising nurse at the hospital, is made further abject in this scene as not only does she transgress the ideological expectations for women in patriarchy, but also undermines the life-saving connotations, crossing the ethical boundaries, of the medical profession. However, as will be later discussed, the abortion Ernaux undergoes does indeed save *her* life, so this is a deeply complex relationship that does not easily fit into categories of clear-cut transgressions. It remains the ambiguous composite, which, as an irony in of itself, equally characterises that of the abject.

In contrast to the ambiguity of the ideological and ethical transgressions, the abject scenes that take place towards the end of the memoir are more distinctly abject in the description of bodily fluids, amongst other things, leaving what is a contained and bordered self. In what is arguably the most memorable abject scene, after the second probe has been inserted and induces labour contractions, she aborts the foetus. Ernaux writes, ‘I was seized with a violent urge to shit. I rushed across the corridor into the bathroom and squatted by the porcelain bowl, facing the door. I could see the tiles between my thighs. I pushed with all my strength. It burst forth like a grenade, in a spray of water that splashed the door.’³²⁷ These descriptions in *Happening* are, as Kristeva describes, ‘at the border of my condition as a living being’³²⁸ for both Ernaux and the subject reading the text. They are a stark reminder of the human body as open, contaminable and contaminating. Kristeva states, ‘[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands’.³²⁹ Ernaux’s body is rendered abject in these scenes, as she notes that she feels the urge to defecate as her water breaks. Her body’s corporeality ‘signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be’,³³⁰ as Kristeva describes. Kristeva’s assertion that anything that crosses the borders of the subject, both inside and out, is abject, strengthens the text’s need to be explored in relation to Kristeva’s theory to understand better the experiences of Ernaux as detailed in the memoir. This scene is the height and crescendo of Ernaux’s uncontained bodily existence, she is a borderless subject, without the boundaries that demarcate her insides from the outside. The force with which the three-month-old foetus leaves her, in a spray of bodily fluids, exacerbates the abject quality of her body. It becomes a nauseating explosive event, one that provokes the abjection of the text itself. Ernaux’s insides are no longer contained as her ‘entire body falls beyond the limit’³³¹ that

³²⁶ Ernaux, *Happening*, 49.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

³²⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

safeguards the subject from encountering their corporeality. She is ejected from the clean and proper, she is no longer assimilated into society, and is rejected. Kristeva states, '[t]he repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck.'³³² In rejecting Ernaux's narrative, one is rejecting the defilement of the body containing it and removing the contamination. In this moment, as Kristeva states, '[t]here, abject and abjection are my safeguard. The primers of my culture.'³³³ Through the necessary process of abjection, this scene becomes that which must be removed, as it highlights the fragility of the borders of what is the uncontainable nature of the body.

This bodily overspill is continued after the foetus is aborted. It stays attached to the umbilical cord and she describes herself as being 'a wild beast'³³⁴ in this scene, as after the foetus has been expelled, she walked it squeezed between her thighs to the bedroom. She writes, 'I am sitting on the bed with the foetus between my legs. Neither of us knows what to do. I tell O we must cut the cord. She gets a pair of scissors; we don't know where to cut it but she goes ahead and does it.'³³⁵ In this depiction one is confronted here with a highly charged abject scene and one that requires further attention and analysis in relation to its aligning theoretical components. Furthering the above discussed breakdown in the borders of inside and outside the body, Ernaux has the umbilical cord attached to her body, representing the ambiguous state of being at once both inside and outside of her body. This depiction of the openness of Ernaux's body through the orifice of the vagina can be likened to the openness of the orifice of the mouths in Bacon's paintings, as it draws our attention to the border between inner and outer bodily space. The average umbilical cord is fifty centimetres in length, emphasising the amount of what was once internal has left her body. In this scene she has become a composite of external and internal subjectivity, as Kristeva asserts, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders [...] It is something rejected from which one does not part'.³³⁶ This is the total erasure of Ernaux's borders, with her umbilical cord still attached which is both rejected from the body, but also does not part with the recognition that it is still her body. For Ernaux, this cord represents the abject, which is both 'I' and not 'I'. The cutting of the cord only further ties the relationship with the internal body connecting to the outside, as without first clamping the cord, the vein and arteries that once physically connected the foetus to her remains signified thereafter in the blood that is 'gushing from the severed cord in spurts',³³⁷ leaving her body through the cord still attached to her.

³³² Ibid, 2.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ernaux, *Happening*, 61.

³³⁵ Ibid., 62.

³³⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

³³⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 63.

Ernaux's description of herself as being 'a wild beast'³³⁸ during the abortion of her foetus further ingrains her body with the abject. Kristeva asserts, '[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*.'³³⁹ The emotive description of Ernaux in this state of beastly characterisation, evokes the imagery of her hunched over and operating without the depth of conscious thought that typifies human existence. Kristeva continues, '[t]hus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.'³⁴⁰ We meet Ernaux in this scene as being in the throes of aborting her three-month-old foetus as a result of sexual intercourse. Her beast-like description is at the forefront of representing the attributions of animalism, both sex and murder. Ernaux's depiction of herself connects with the representative factors Kristeva outlines as having been removed from culture by the way of abjection. In this scene Ernaux threatens the parameters of cultural expectations and, in the state of a 'wild beast', is made abject.

Finally, and perhaps most prominently, this scene is haunted by the presence of the aborted foetus. It is, as Ernaux describes it, a grenade that explodes into the scene in a spray of water and thereafter lies hanging between her legs, before being flushed down the toilet. She describes the foetus as 'a baby doll dangling from [her] loins',³⁴¹ removing once again the characteristic of this being an entity with the potential for life. This foetus is the corpse present throughout this moment, which ultimately makes this scene a powerfully horrifying combination of abject images. Kristeva states, 'refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live [...] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.'³⁴² The presence of the aborted foetus presents the body as corporeal and as ever-decaying matter. The dead baby dangling by the umbilical cord from her loins provides that disturbing connection between life and death. Kristeva asserts, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life.'³⁴³ This scene is abjection in its most contaminating form, the subject is fully immersed in the state of ambiguity that the abject represents, her life has been infected by death. It remains to be permanently thrust aside in order that 'I' may live. One meets this text at the border of their condition as a living being, faced with the human waste, fluids and organs that move from the internal to the external; horrified at the human so easily slipping into its animal origins, and, finally, assaulted by the stark reality of the baby's

³³⁸ Ibid., 61.

³³⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 61.

³⁴² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

³⁴³ Ibid., 4.

corpse dangling throughout the scene before being flushed down the toilet. This text is in of itself abject, demanding to be thrust aside.

The previous section has exposed the abject contents of Ernaux's text through analysing the description of her experience, against the background of the legal context, and in relation to Julia Kristeva's theorisations. To take this analysis further, this thesis will now explore the complexities at the heart of Ernaux's writing to understand better the ambiguous and, at times, contradictory nature of the abjection of the self. There is little sense of any emotionally driven moralising content to this narrative, but there is the shadow of a legal battle that has been fought and won for women to have rights to their reproductive bodies in France.³⁴⁴ However, as Ernaux outlines, she writes this narrative because the fact that it 'is a thing of the past does not seem a good enough reason to dismiss it.'³⁴⁵ She wants to avoid the 'same veil of secrecy'³⁴⁶ that surrounded abortion when it was illegal and her story, in some respects, can therefore speak to an element of the abject horrors of female experience in contexts where abortion is still illegal. The tone in which this text is written, speaks in a more starkly alarming nature than it would have if it had been written otherwise. Through its uncompromising language, it is not a text that invites an ethical discussion on abortion, but instead focuses on Ernaux's experience and rights as a separate and living subject who is horrified at the feelings of contamination with a foetus growing inside of her. There is no sense of purposefully persuasive, nor melodramatic, writing in this text in relation to whether abortion is right or wrong, instead it focuses on the horror of facing the need to have an abortion without the support of the law and therefore the medical assistance required. Unlike the previous discussion, this section will therefore avoid reference to the ethical and legal context, where it is not necessary to do so, in order to fully explore the abjection of the self that Ernaux experiences, which is not due to her wavering moral and or ethical dilemmas at facing an abortion. It will explore the abjection of the self as framed by Kristeva's theorisations and break down the points at which Ernaux finds her own subjectivity compromised and in need of abjection.

Ernaux's abjection of the self begins at the slow dawning realisation that she is pregnant. She writes, '[w]hen I got back to my room in the girls' halls of residence in the Rue d'Herbouville, I would still hope to see a stain appear on my panties. I began writing in my journal every evening –

³⁴⁴ There are also multiple countries where this legal battle is still yet to be won. The Centre for Reproductive Rights outlines laws on abortion on the world map, highlighting in colours relating to the strength of the law. Centre for Reproductive Rights, "The World's Abortion Laws", accessed 16 April 2020 <https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws>.

³⁴⁵ Ernaux, *Happening*, 19

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the word NOTHING in big, underlined capital letters.³⁴⁷ There is an irony to the abject nature of this passage, where, for Ernaux, the sight of blood in her underwear would have been a positive occasion, which acts in opposition to the culturally formed abject connotations of menstrual blood as being the visual signifier of death.³⁴⁸ For Ernaux, what is abject here is the lack of internal fluids leaving her body, as it is in this absence that she recognises her body's contamination with an 'Other'. She writes in her diary 'I am pregnant. What a nightmare.'³⁴⁹ This marks the point at which Ernaux's contained and preserved self becomes knowingly infiltrated with something that is it once both 'I' and not 'I'. Kristeva aptly describes this moment of compromised subjectivity, she states, 'unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsions, places the one haunted by it literally beside itself.'³⁵⁰ Ernaux is desperate to regain the distinctive separation of the 'I', noting in her journal, '[i]f only I didn't have this REALITY inside me.'³⁵¹ These two passages with the underlined capital letters stand out structurally on the page. The two words that are therefore prominent to view in this section of the text are 'NOTHING' and 'REALITY', these act as expressing the extreme manner in which Ernaux is viewing her body. The reality is that there is nothing that can easily separate and save her from the contamination of the self. She speaks of the 'Other' that infiltrates her body as 'a shapeless entity growing inside [her] which had to be destroyed at all costs.'³⁵² For Ernaux the shapeless entity becomes the abject Kristeva describes as '[a] "something" that I do not recognize as a thing',³⁵³ one that is '[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either.'³⁵⁴ Kristeva continues, 'On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.'³⁵⁵ It is only through the destruction of the shapeless entity growing inside of her that she can regain the sense of her own necessarily bordered subjectivity, lest she be annihilated by, what she considers to be, an abject contamination. It is the reality of her pregnancy that Ernaux has acknowledged and desires to expel. On holiday she takes herself for an exasperating walk up a snowy mountain, she states, 'I wore myself out to kill it under me.'³⁵⁶ She recognises that it is only through the destruction of the "'something'", the shapeless entity, that Ernaux feels she can once again regain her 'I' as a separate and contained self.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

³⁴⁸ The author of this thesis has explored the relationship between abjection and menstruation in their article 'The Abject in Education'. Cassie Lowe, "The Abject in Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 54 (2020): 17-30.

³⁴⁹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 16.

³⁵⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

³⁵¹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 14.

³⁵² Ibid., 22.

³⁵³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ernaux, *Happening*, 46.

There is an element of Ernaux's writing in these passages and throughout the text, which provides evidence towards a claim for certain words as having become abject. For Ernaux, the attribution of the word pregnant becomes harmful in association with her subjectivity, as it expresses the abject state she seeks to remove, and, unable to accept their alignment with herself, she refuses to use it to describe her body. As previously explored under the analysis of the maternal expectations being undermined through Ernaux, and therefore made abject, Ernaux writes, '[t]o convey my predicament, I never resorted to descriptive terms or expressions such as "I'm expecting", "pregnant" or "pregnancy". They endorsed a future event that would never materialize [...] In my journal I would write, "it" or "that thing", only once "pregnant".'³⁵⁷ She disassociates herself with these descriptive terms and refuses to use them in an attempt to avoid the language that has become abject for her. She recognises their attachment to her and in an attempt to remove that which causes her to abject herself, she refutes their attribution to her body. The relationship between the abject and language is further encountered with the descriptive term used to describe the act of purposefully removing the foetus to cease its development and natural birth. Ernaux visits her physician Dr N. to seek his help with eradicating the issue of her pregnancy, without explicitly stating what she would like him to do. He sends her away with penicillin to try to save her from the inevitable complications associated with illegal abortions, however, this exchange is completed without having said the words. Ernaux reflects, '[n]either of us had mentioned the word abortion, not even once. This thing had no place in language.'³⁵⁸ Just as the term to describe her pregnancy is avoided, so is the word abortion. Whilst the abject is considered to be operating outside of language, it is the associations of these words with the acts that become unspeakable in these circumstances and therefore, abject in their own right. Abortion in particular, in this instance, is a word with such abject associative qualities that, for Ernaux at this time, could not be given a place in language. Kristeva states, '[t]he abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being.'³⁵⁹ Whilst the abject is ineffable, as it is not a singular definitive substance per se, the constituent parts that make the act of abortion abject culminate psychically in the singular word used to convey that experience. The signifier, due to its connotative associations, makes the language itself abject. It becomes a word that does not have a place in language due to the act itself being abject.

Despite her unwillingness to attribute the state to herself, in being pregnant Ernaux no longer feels a contained and bordered self, through the loss of the distinction between 'I' and 'Other'. She feels herself as having been opened, filled and left without the demarcations that make

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 38-39.

³⁵⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 11.

her being separate and whole. After attending a party whilst pregnant, she finds herself dancing with and attracted to a man at the party. She writes, brooding at her body's willingness to remain open to infiltration, '[s]o, nothing could stop a woman's cunt from stretching and opening, even when her belly already contained an embryo that would receive a stranger's spurt of semen without flinching.'³⁶⁰ The abrasive language used in this section amplifies the strength of Ernaux's exhaustion at her body's lack of borders, which were designed to keep her from contamination, from impurity. The evocative verbs stretching and opening connote images of the opening of the cervix for birth, which is used ironically here, as for in birth, this same process of opening and stretching signifies life, but for Ernaux, this signifies the death of her subjectivity. Kristeva states, '[t]he one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing [...]. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.'³⁶¹ In viewing her body as abject, as open and welcoming of invasion, she separates herself from her body, rejecting it in the process, seeing it as a site of horror in its stretching and opening. The boundaries that make up her subjectivity have been sacrificed through her pregnancy and the borders themselves have become an object in need of abjection.³⁶² She no longer views herself as contained, bordered and able to reject the external, but rather a contaminated being that invites the outside in.

It is at this point of Ernaux's abjection of the self that she also finds herself abjected from social groups. She sees herself as being no longer part of the society that surrounds her, but an 'Other', an entity that must be removed as abject. She writes, 'There were other girls with their empty bellies, and there was me.'³⁶³ Through her pregnancy, through the infiltration of her separate and contained subjectivity, Ernaux feels the need to abject herself. For Ernaux, her abject body becomes a symbol of the 'stigma of social failure'³⁶⁴ that is a result of 'inescapable fatality of the working-class – the legacy of poverty'.³⁶⁵ Concerning the one who has been abjected, Kristeva writes, '[i]nstead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: "Where am I?" instead of "Who am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.'³⁶⁶ Ernaux feels she is no longer part of the place in which those around her are existing, after hearing a friend

³⁶⁰ Ernaux, *Happening*, 35.

³⁶¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

³⁶² 'The border has become an object.' Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

³⁶³ Ernaux, *Happening*, 22.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

discussing her mundane activities, she writes, 'it was all so meaningless, and terrifying too since it signified my exclusion from the real world.'³⁶⁷ In this moment Ernaux is the deject who asks 'Where am I?', as she feels her subjectivity cast out from the social norms and everyday existence. She no longer feels her place is with the social groupings that signify the real world, instead she finds herself in the catastrophic and divisible elsewhere of the abject. She therefore abjects herself from 'such people embodying normality'³⁶⁸ and into, as Kristeva describes, the 'space that engrosses the deject, the excluded'. Her abjection of the self is socially marked through this experience, as she feels herself attached to the symbol of social failure and excluded from the real world.

In contrast to the experience of feeling like a deject due to her abject state, there is another relationship to the abject from society that is also present in the memoir. The state of rejection and repulsion she feels from others and towards herself, represents half of the experience of the subjects who encounter the abject. Equally present with the experience of abjection is the aspect of *jouissance*, which will be returned to in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis. This describes the experience Kristeva asserts as being where 'the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject'.³⁶⁹ There are multiple occasions in which both Ernaux and the people around her seem fascinated by her abject state and the act she is about to undertake, whilst also experiencing the disgust that characterises abjection. *Jouissance* in these moments is inseparable to the shame of their fascination in her suffering. With regard to her own condition, Ernaux writes, 'I couldn't decide whether I had reached the outer fringes of horror or beauty.'³⁷⁰ It is the ambiguous sense of the abject sublime that simultaneously exists as both beauty and horror. It draws the subject towards it, representing for the subject an unfathomable abject beauty that in the same instance one is pulled toward it, it turns repugnant and repulses, as Kristeva states, one is 'drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.'³⁷¹ Ernaux's description of her condition echoes the horrified fascination she notices in the men to whom she turns for help. After noting that Jean T's face 'took on an intrigued, thrilled expression',³⁷² while being told she was pregnant and looking to abort, she also finds this same fascination with another friend from whom she asks for help. She writes of this experience, 'I felt that his determination to make me change my mind was underpinned by a powerful emotion combining fear and fascination. Men found my desire to abort strangely enticing.'³⁷³ The linguistic choice from Ernaux here directly mirrors that of Kristeva in her

³⁶⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 35.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

³⁷⁰ Ernaux, *Happening*, 71.

³⁷¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

³⁷² Ernaux, *Happening*, 24.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 40.

description of the abject, who states, '[i]t beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects.'³⁷⁴ It is this combination of attraction and repulsion that Ernaux both feels towards herself and notes that the same is felt by, she references specifically here, men. It draws the subject towards it with its fascinating beauty, to turn this aside with a sickening horror and fear. Ernaux recognises this abject quality in herself, its horror and its beauty, but equally, she recognises the appeal that this abject status has for those around her. She has become the abject, a non-object, with its beseeching desire, only to thereafter experience the rejection that typifies the abject.

As Ernaux feels contaminated by the abject that has now become her body. She feels repulsed by the infiltration of the self and disgusted at the growth inside of her. She experiences, as one might expect, the physical symptoms associated with pregnancy such as nausea. These symptoms, however, are described with visceral abject terminology. Ernaux writes, '[e]very morning, on waking up, I imagined the feeling of nausea had gone but seconds later it would well up inside me like a dark, sinister wave.'³⁷⁵ This again mirrors the language Kristeva uses to describe the abject – 'immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles'³⁷⁶ – emphasising the grip the abject has on her subjectivity. This nausea continues to haunt her as she continually feels 'seized with both desire and disgust for food.'³⁷⁷ These bouts of morning sickness are the expected signs of pregnancy, however, it is in her description of her attempts to eat food that the sinister edge of abjection takes hold. Furthermore, it is also noted in the *Powers of Horror* that '[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection',³⁷⁸ where one is placed at 'the border of [their] condition as a living being.'³⁷⁹ Ernaux describes her relationship with food; '[t]he sight of some foods made me feel sick; others, with pleasing appearance, seemed to decompose in my mouth, as though revealing their future putrefaction.'³⁸⁰ It is in these symptomatic moments of Ernaux's pregnancy that the abject reveals itself, as Kristeva asserts, '[i]n the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject.'³⁸¹ In her description of her attempts to consume food, it is almost as though, in its coming into contact with her abject body, the food is defiled and turned to waste. In her abject state, Ernaux's body permeates the purity of the food and it reveals to her the decomposition of organic material, connecting with the corporeality of the human body, 'death

³⁷⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

³⁷⁵ Ernaux, *Happening*, 34.

³⁷⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

³⁷⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 34.

³⁷⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁸⁰ Ernaux, *Happening*, 34.

³⁸¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 11.

infecting life',³⁸² as Kristeva surmises. In these moments, the attempts to ingest food are compromised by their contact with her and, as Kristeva states, they '*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.'³⁸³ The food presents itself to Ernaux as decay as soon as it touches her mouth, bringing to the forefront of her psyche the infected state of her body and its own inevitable decay.

One of the key elements of abjection, which sparks heated debate amongst feminist critics, is that in order for the subject to become an 'I' at all, requires the death of the mother. This particular aspect of Kristeva's theorisation is uniquely significant in relation to this text, as Ernaux herself rejects the mother in herself in order to become an 'I' again. She recognises the relationship her body has to her mother's body at this juncture in her life, as in the same instance she both becomes and rejects being a mother. She writes, '[n]ow my loins had been exposed, torn apart, my stomach scraped, opened up. A body not unlike my mother's.'³⁸⁴ There is a strong sense in this text that the female body in its reproductive state has been compromised. In opening up, the subject becomes infiltrated, by both the growing foetus and the continual use of speculums throughout pregnancy and the abortion. Ernaux's uncompromising, harsh linguistic choices of exposed, 'torn apart', 'scraped and opened up' in quick succession emphasise this sense of abjection. The borders that constitute the subjectivity are dismantled in this state, the birthing process, abortive or natural, forces the body to become borderless and ambiguous in its status between 'I' and 'Other'. Most poignantly in this abject state is Ernaux's comment on the abortive process as being one of matricide. She writes, 'I feel that the woman who is busying herself between my legs, inserting the speculum, is giving birth to me. At that point I killed my own mother inside me.'³⁸⁵ Ernaux conveys the feeling of abjection in this rich phrasing of killing the mother inside of herself. The primary repressed moment of abjection is precisely this sense of killing the mother in order to become an 'I', but as the infant views the mother and itself as one whole being, the mother can be understood to be both inside and encapsulating the entirety of its subjectivity before primary abjection. At this primary point of abjection, the mother is removed from the self, killed from the inside of the subject and permanently placed outside as a separate and independent being. For Ernaux, her abortion represents this primal scene once again but with the complexity attached to ambiguous linguistic choice of her 'own mother', which could either represent that of her biological mother or the potential mother that the pregnancy represents. The death of the mother in this scene, in either sense, brings to the fore the writings of Kristeva that describe the primal abject experience. She

³⁸² Ibid., 4.

³⁸³ Ibid., 3.

³⁸⁴ Ernaux, *Happening*, 66.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 53.

states, “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it.’³⁸⁶ Ernaux expels the mother inside of herself that the foetus represents, it is a symbol of society’s desire for females to be inherently maternal and one that Ernaux rejects, abjects, from her body. Through the death of the mother, Ernaux becomes an ‘I’ once more.

It is through the experience of Ernaux killing the mother inside of herself that the abjection of the self is complete. In these harrowing scenes Ernaux abjects herself in order to become her own subject. Through expelling the foetus, she establishes her body as its own separate subject. With the stark detachment that typifies Ernaux’s writing, after the probe has been inserted into her cervix, she notes, ‘[s]light twinges of pain, I wonder how long it will take for this embryo to die and to be expelled.’³⁸⁷ However, in this moment it is not only the embryo that is expelled, but herself in order to become an ‘I’, a separate self, reconstituted through the act of abortion. As Kristeva writes, ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* [...] “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself’.³⁸⁸ It is in this abortive birthing scene that the death of the embryo is marked, and, at the same time, it is also both the death and rebirth of Ernaux as an ‘I’, as she notes, ‘life and death in the same breath. A sacrificial scene.’³⁸⁹ Reinforcing the close relationship between life and death for both her and the foetus in her abortion, Ernaux writes, ‘[i]n my student bathroom, I had given birth to both life and death.’³⁹⁰ This is the final act of her abjection of the self, the point at which she kills the (m)other from inside of herself as she demarcates herself as a separate subject, as Kristeva writes, ‘[r]epelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting.’³⁹¹ The abjection of the self, marks a traumatic point for Ernaux in her life where she, ‘became engulfed in the misery of the world and eternal death’³⁹² but in this process of becoming an ‘I’ she also notes, ‘I felt saved.’³⁹³ She extricates her body from an ambiguous subjectivity, saving herself from the death of the ‘I’ that the abject condition represents.

Annie Ernaux After Abjection

The previous chapter has outlined the ways in which Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection has permeated Annie Ernaux’s experience of pregnancy and abortion. It has shown how this gruelling

³⁸⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

³⁸⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 59.

³⁸⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

³⁸⁹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 62.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁹¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 13.

³⁹² Ernaux, *Happening*, 71.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

and traumatic event can be understood to be underpinned by the elements of Kristeva's theory, which ultimately lead to the necessary abjection of the self in order to regain her borders as a contained and whole subject. This section will now turn to the text using the methodological approach this thesis proposes for exploration after abjection. Through combining the theoretical writings of both Kristeva and Freud, one can better understand Ernaux after abjection and illuminate the sense of repetition that lies at the heart of this experience. In contrast to Michael Peppiatt, whose writing conveys only a vague awareness of his repetition compulsion after abjection, Annie Ernaux presents the writing of this autobiographical memoir as being something of a conscious repetition in order to work through the event. In a similar approach to Peppiatt, Ernaux does not frame her experience and writing through Kristevan or Freudian interpretations, but such theoretical underpinnings offer a richness to the understanding and the analysis of the 'I' that is operating within the autobiography. As such, this section will analyse the text and the acts of repetition described therein through the after abjection methodological approach to understand better Ernaux's writing and experience. For Ernaux, it is both the abortion itself and the experience of seeking of an abortion in the pro-life socio-political context that is an ongoing and continuous trauma that she feels the need to communicate through writing this text. There is the sense that this deeply abject experience for her is being repeated in both the act of writing and the physical seeking of the spaces that bring her closer to this abject-traumatic event psychologically. She describes in the opening to *Happening* that she aims to 'physically bond'³⁹⁴ with the memories, which suggests that the writing of this memoir is an attempt to directly associate this event with her own subjectivity in a way that she has not done so in the past. The event has either been unsuccessfully repressed or transferred onto others such as the character Denise Lesur in her first book, *Cleaned Out*. After this extreme experience of abjection, it can be understood that Ernaux feels compelled to repeat the memories physically and psychologically until she feels that she has been able to work through them. *Happening* is therefore positioned by Ernaux as the act (writing) through which she is attempting to work through the experience.

As has been outlined in Chapter Three, the subject after abjection experiences an inability to control the impulse that draws them towards the repetition of events, or circumstances akin to those events, which inspire the same feelings of abject horror. Ernaux describes herself as being victim to this compulsion; someone who seems unable to break the cycle of repetition. She writes, 'I began this story one week ago, not knowing whether I would go through with it. [...] Despite my efforts to fight it, I became obsessed with the idea. Obeying this impulse seemed a terrifying

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.

prospect.³⁹⁵ Reconnecting with the horrors contained within this repressed traumatic experience is a prospect that acts in opposition to psychological instincts. As Freud notes, 'this compulsion appears to us to be more primal, more elemental, more deeply instinctual than the pleasure principle, which it simply thrusts aside.'³⁹⁶ It is an impulse that works against the subject's conscious desire to avoid deeply unpleasurable experiences. However, it is not able to be controlled as it is so deeply instinctual that Ernaux has no conscious choice but to follow this impulse to its full potential in exploring it through writing. The moment she enables this repetition of encountering the trauma psychically, the compulsion takes over and she becomes 'obsessed' with detailing the abject event. This compulsion is noted as being 'the same urge that would seize [her] as soon as [she] sat down to the book'.³⁹⁷ It is a compulsion that draws her subjectivity back towards the abject experience and, as she notes in the text, '[i]t has cost me quite some effort to resist the powerful hold of these images'.³⁹⁸ The irresistible nature of the abject has Ernaux 'drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned'³⁹⁹ and the compulsion to repeat yields to this desire in response. Freud asserts that the subject must 'treat the illness not as a matter belonging to the past, but as a force operating in the present'⁴⁰⁰ and in so doing will be able to isolate the cause of the repetitive symptoms. In writing this text, Ernaux is prepared to treat the repetition after abjection as a live and present force in her life and responds to the urge that seizes her body to write. Once enabled, the writing acts as a repetition of the repressed trauma, inescapably drawing her in towards the abject experience. She writes, 'I feel that this narrative is dragging me along in a direction I have not chosen, proceeding along the inescapable road of fatality. I must resist the urge to rush through these days and weeks'.⁴⁰¹ Ernaux is a victim of the compulsion to repeat after abjection, as she is drawn towards the abject experience in her memory and compelled to continue on the road toward the epicentre of the abject trauma that shook the foundations of her subjectivity. As Kristeva asserts, '[t]he abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered.'⁴⁰² The inescapable road of fatality Ernaux describes leads towards the land of oblivion that the abject represents. On this journey she is compelled to reach the traumatic encounter with the experience of abjection present throughout her pregnancy and abortion. It is this sense that the subject is unable to control their returning to the abject that provides evidence towards the subject's inescapable compulsion to repeat the experience after abjection.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁹⁶ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 37.

³⁹⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 18.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 31.

³⁹⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁴⁰⁰ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 38.

⁴⁰¹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 32.

⁴⁰² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

Despite the pull the subject feels towards repeating abjection, the memories of the experience are equally as disturbing to the individual recounting the experience. It is both the immediate affect and long-term effect of the experience after abjection that permits this compulsion to repeat encountering the abject. In the moments of repetition compulsion, as Freud asserts, 'the patient experiences it as something intensely real and immediate',⁴⁰³ which cause the subject to relive the experience of abjection as a present shock to their being. Ernaux corroborates this assertion, as she details in her memoir, '[f]or years these events have occupied my mind. Reading about an abortion in a novel immediately plunges me into a state of shock that shatters thoughts and images, as if words had metamorphosed into a maelstrom of emotions.'⁴⁰⁴ Ernaux's willingness to return to the abject scenes that personally affected her compares to that of Peppiatt's cyclical desire to view the paintings that deeply touched his psyche by way of abjection. In reading about abortion in novels, Ernaux provides evidence towards the claim that she is repetitively drawn towards the abject, despite knowing its effect will be to plunge her into experiencing a state of shock. Ernaux experiences the abortions described in literary fiction as being connected to her own experience and something intensely real and immediate. Of the abject victim, Kristeva states, 'weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that is none other than abject.'⁴⁰⁵ In Ernaux's reading of novels that discuss abortion she finds that this experience constitutes her very being and, unable to detach herself from the traumatic experience, she finds herself repeating in her psyche the intense abject shockwaves that shattered her subjectivity. In writing *Happening* Ernaux states, 'I shall try to conjure up each of the sentences engraved in my memory which were either so unbearable or so comforting to me at the time that the mere thought of them today engulfs me in a wave of horror or sweetness.'⁴⁰⁶ In attempting to reconnect with the memory of her abortion, she relives the wave of horror and sweetness that characterise the experience of abjection. However, as Freud surmises, this 'means summoning up a chunk of real life, [which] cannot therefore always be harmless and free of risk.'⁴⁰⁷ The intensity of this traumatic memory for Ernaux is not free of risk and continues to haunt her in repetitions of seeking encounters with the abject. Kristeva asserts that the abject 'is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.'⁴⁰⁸ This same use of the verb engulf from both Kristeva and Ernaux heightens the sense

⁴⁰³ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 38.

⁴⁰⁴ Ernaux, *Happening*, 18.

⁴⁰⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴⁰⁶ Ernaux, *Happening*, 19.

⁴⁰⁷ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 38.

⁴⁰⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

that the traumatic memory for Ernaux is an all-encompassing submersion in the abject. This remains to be the experience after abjection as she repeats the memory in her actions and describes the repetitions as being destructive in a present intensity.

The repetition of engaging with the traumatic memory through writing and reading is also encountered in Ernaux's physical acts of seeking the places and people that are associated with this abject event. Ernaux purposefully repeats her steps from the day of the first probe being inserted into her, she writes, '[t]his afternoon I went back to the Passage Cardinet in the 17th arrondissement. [...] I wanted to find the café where I had waited until it was time to see Madame P-R as well as the church where I had sat for a long while [...] I felt like a puppet re-enacting a scene without the slightest hint of emotion.'⁴⁰⁹ Whilst she notes that she does not feel an emotional connection to the places she visits, she equally recognises the puppet-esque impulsive drive to this repetition. Her body performs the compulsion to repeat, driven by its desire to find the connection with the abject experience. She recognises this in reflection as she notes, '[s]tanding on the platform at Malesherbes Métro station, I realized that I had gone back to the Passage Cardinet in the hope that something might happen to me.'⁴¹⁰ She is not able to find this connection in the church, so she instead goes in search for the café and upon finding one that she thinks is the same, she writes, 'I ordered a hot chocolate and got out some essays to mark but I couldn't read a single line. I kept telling myself that I had to check out the bathroom.'⁴¹¹ The bathroom of the café is marked out as a place of significance for Ernaux, as it was the moment at which she saw herself in the mirror before entering the abortionist's apartment and stared at her body as a foreign, unrecognisable, object.⁴¹² In Ernaux's abjection of the self, the mirror presents her with her body as an 'Other' and opposed to the 'I' that constitutes her being. Ernaux's repetition of visiting the physical spaces that represent the abjection of the self is an unfulfilled quest to connect with the traumatic event. However, she does remark that, '[t]he closest I can get to the state of terror thrust upon me that week is to pick out any hostile, harsh-looking woman in her sixties waiting in line at the supermarket or the post office and to imagine that she is going to rummage around in my loins with some foreign object'.⁴¹³ Through imagining that women of a similar age and comparable physical features are Madame P-R, the abortionist, she finds the horror of the abject event, using the same Kristevan language of being thrust into responding physically with a state of terror. Ernaux is drawn towards engaging with this

⁴⁰⁹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 76.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² 'I stared at my reflection in the mirror above the sink, thinking: 'I can't believe this is happening to me' and 'I don't think I can take it.' Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 51.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 51.

experience of abjection in seeking out the spaces and people that represent this time for her. She repeats this cycle of behaviours to meet the edge of her existence as an 'I' after abjection.

Following this evidence towards repetition compulsion after abjection, Otto Fenichel's propositions for the drive behind the compulsion to repeat provides greater insight to Ernaux's experience. For Michael Peppiatt, his compulsion was fuelled by his desire to gain mastery over his experience of abjection, through exposure to the abject experience he sought to uncover the roots and control his response. Annie Ernaux, however, would seem to fit more with Fenichel's second category, which is that the repetitions are '*due to the tendency of the repressed to find an outlet*'.⁴¹⁴ Whilst these categories provide some way towards explaining the compulsion to repeat after abjection, the subjects present within this thesis, and human beings more broadly, are not totalizable in their alignment to Fenichel's work. However, the categories do provide a useful approach that enable a greater understanding of the texts present within this thesis and certain attributes of their character and response to abjection. Ernaux's repetition after abjection can be understood to be fuelled by her desire for the repressed traumatic event to find an outlet. Despite the terror these memories stir up in Ernaux, she feels compelled to engage with them, as Kristeva states, '[t]he abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgements.'⁴¹⁵ In shattering the wall of repression, Ernaux's drive to repeat the search for engaging with her experience of the abjection of the self is, as Fenichel states, 'a repetition of the anti-instinctual measures'.⁴¹⁶ It is a search for the experience of abjection that draws the subject towards it and at the same time destroys their sense of self. However, in writing the experience, Ernaux feels she is finding some way to release the experience, not to detach from it, but to feel as though the experience has been given the personal voice it had not been given in her previous book *Cleaned Out*.

Through using this approach, Ernaux's writing of this memoir becomes in itself a repetition of the event in order for it to find an outlet after abjection. This outlet is the memoir she writes to recount the experience, giving energy to the dormant emotions that she has unsuccessfully repressed. Ernaux reflects, '[t]hrough this story, time has been jerked into action and it is dragging me along with it. Now I know that I am determined to go through with this, whatever the cost, in the same way I was determined to go through with my abortion after tearing up the pregnancy certificate, aged twenty-three.'⁴¹⁷ She is being dragged along with the memory, repeating the painful experience that is determined to find an outlet. Kristeva describes the subject seeking the abject,

⁴¹⁴ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 542.

⁴¹⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁴¹⁶ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 542.

⁴¹⁷ Ernaux, *Happening*, 19.

which aligns with the process Ernaux undertakes, she writes, '[h]e is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger [...] but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved.'⁴¹⁸ The journey for Ernaux is dragging her to its conclusion, the scene of the abortion and resultant near-death experience, however, in order for this experience to be fully explored in this literary outlet, she must convey in her writing the achingly slow decline of her immersion into the abject. It is in Kristeva's phrasing that the end of this journey continues to elude the subject, receding from their grasp, that enables this cycle of repetition. Straying from the path of repression, determined to go through with the writing, Ernaux hopes to save herself in the very moment she sets herself apart through recounting this experience.

In order for the repressed to find an outlet that enables the subject to work through the experience, they must, as Freud asserts, 'no longer regard the illness as something contemptible, but rather as a worthy opponent, a part of his very being that exists for good reasons'⁴¹⁹ Ernaux displays this resolve towards the memory of her experience of pregnancy and abortion, as she writes,

I have rid myself of the only feeling of guilt in connection with this event: the fact that it had happened to me and I had done nothing about it. A sort of discarded gift. Among the social and psychological reasons that may account for my past, of one I am certain: these things happened to me so that I might recount them. Maybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing in other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to merge into the lives and heads of other people.⁴²⁰

Ernaux determines that the event requires an outlet through her writing, for her own sake and to make an impact on her readership. She hopes that this text will provide the destination for her experience that will turn it from being regarded as something contemptible and give it a purpose in this literary outlet. However, Fenichel states, 'Type (2) of repetition is not intended to be a repetition. When the excitement is "repeated", it is done so in the hope that its outcome will be different, a gratification instead of the preceding failure. But this intention fails, and what actually occurs is a repetition of the frustration.'⁴²¹ However, what makes the production of this memoir different is that the writing of *Happening* is not set out to be solely a repetition of the experience in

⁴¹⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁴¹⁹ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 38.

⁴²⁰ Ernaux, *Happening*, 75.

⁴²¹ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 543.

engaging with the traumatic memory, but it is also an act of working through. This text is intended to be different to the previous texts insofar as it seeks to conclude the repetitive behaviour by working through – physically bonding as Ernaux writes – with the memory. In writing this memoir Ernaux is determined to confront and process the experience, using her writing as an outlet for the anti-instinctual measures that constitute this repetition. However, as will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, there is more to consider with the act of working through after abjection, which does not so easily lend itself to a conclusion of the repetitive behaviour.

The extent to which the act of writing can become the process of working through will be further explored later in the thesis alongside all three case studies. However, to apply this methodological approach in a different literary medium and therefore broaden its application as a means to understand the experience after abjection, this thesis will now turn to the fictional works of Shirley Jackson alongside her biography as detailed in Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. The two fictional texts featured within the next section also align with Fenichel's categories for repetition compulsion, with one relating to the subjects need to gain mastery over the event, in a similar manner to Michael Peppiatt, and the other text providing an outlet for Jackson's experience of abjection, in line with the writing of Annie Ernaux.

Chapter Five

Haunting Abjection

This thesis has explored two autobiographical memoirs which offer first-hand experiences of their encounters with the abject. This thesis proposes that the authors of these memoirs have detailed their experiences through literary means in order to psychically repeat the exposure to some extent and provide an account of their understanding of the experience. To move the application of the methodological approach forward into another context, this chapter will now apply the understanding of after abjection to a different literary genre to emphasise its viability across different forms of artistic production. It will show that an awareness of an author's experiences of abjection can lead to new understandings of their fictional works. Their literary production can, therefore, be seen to offer a means through which the author can repeat and attempt to work through their experiences of abjection at the distance afforded to them through fictional narratives. The subject of this chapter will be Shirley Jackson and specifically her fictional works, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. It will explore these fictional works through grounding their connection to Shirley Jackson's biography and her experiences as detailed in Judy Oppenheimer's biographical account *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*.⁴²²

Through first exploring Jackson's biography in light of Kristeva's theory of abjection, the subsequent literary analysis of the fictional works will be better understood through applying the methodological approach proposed by this thesis, which is that after-abjection leads to some form of compulsion to repeat. This chapter will be different to the previous two chapters, which focused on autobiographical memoirs, as it will be focusing on secondary analysis of characters and events created by the author for the purpose of fiction, however, it will maintain the same underpinning methodological approach. The connection between autobiographies and fictional literature more broadly has been established in this thesis in Chapter One, which explored the consideration of 'truth' in autobiographical writing and is based on the understanding that this thesis proposes in its view of autobiographies as being unavoidably subjective in their production and, therefore, not far removed from the work of fiction. In viewing fiction and autobiography in this light, the connection between the two texts previously analysed and Jackson's fictional works being illuminated by her biography, shows a greater applicability to the after abjection understanding of the psycho-creative process. The two ways in which Shirley Jackson experienced abjection will be shortly summarised

⁴²² Another biography of Shirley Jackson is written by Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, however, Oppenheimer's biography pulls out the emotive and darker experiences of Jackson in a way that better feeds into the discussion of this thesis.

below to outline the direction of the chapter, before exploring each in depth alongside a text of Jackson's creation.

Shirley Jackson's first self-recorded experience of abjection came from her mother. Jackson was considered to be abject by her mother from the point of conception right to the end of her life. The strained relationship Jackson had with her mother, Geraldine, took its toll and, despite her wilfulness and strength, continued to corrode and burn away at her resolve until she died at age 49 in 1965. The cause of her death was the result of a concoction of unabated alcohol, prescription drug, cigarette, and food consumption. However, these addictions were exacerbated and encouraged in the final decade of her life as her mental state withered, and she developed an all-consuming paranoia and uncontrollable anxiety. Her anxieties related mostly to leaving her house and, at its peak, also being unable to leave her bedroom. However, this was also compounded by her feeling rejected by the local community of North Bennington and the paranoid jealousy at her husband's continued infidelity. The crippling agoraphobia and paranoia inhibited her life entirely towards the end and the journals that she kept throughout this experience speak testament to her mental struggle. It is this duality to her experience of the abject that will form the basis for the literary analysis of Shirley Jackson's fictional works. This chapter will explore the abject in relation to Jackson's biography with a focus on two major elements that affected her throughout her life. The first being the corrosive experience of abjection from her mother, who rejected her in multiple cruel and insidious ways throughout her life. The second aspect of Jackson's experience of abjection will be her understanding of the fragility of society and the 'knowledge of human evil'⁴²³ that lay beneath the polished surface. It is her ambiguous relationship to the maternal and her knowledge of the fragile state of societal order that lies at the heart of some of her fictional works, which warrants the need for the exploration of Shirley Jackson's experience after abjection to gain a new and critically informed understanding of her literary production. This chapter will first turn to the maternal notions of abjection and explore *The Haunting of Hill House*. This will be followed by an exploration of the abject in relation to the fragility of societal systems and order through Jackson's novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. It will discuss these aspects of abjection in relation to Jackson's biography, before focusing on the literary production in an approach that will inspire a new understanding of Jackson's writing and inform the thesis' proposed methodological approach for understanding the subject after abjection.

⁴²³ Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 131.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson, the Mother, and *Private Demons*

Shirley Jackson, born 14th December 1916, was an unwelcome arrival for her mother. Judy Oppenheimer, the author of Shirley Jackson's biography *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*, opens the book by noting that, '[s]he was not the daughter her mother wanted; that much was clear from the start.'⁴²⁴ Geraldine was not the conventional, idealistic depiction of a loving mother; she was more interested in high society and her own appearance than to relish in her daughter's talented difference. Difference, for Geraldine, was incompatible with her ideas of what a person should be; it was something to be removed. The more unique and unlike her mother's image she became, the more Geraldine attempted to squash her back into the mould that Shirley Jackson continued to escape. Oppenheimer writes, '[t]here was something – [Geraldine] was beginning to suspect with growing horror – truly different about her daughter'.⁴²⁵ The further Shirley Jackson strayed from her mother, the worse their relationship became. Jackson, determined to flourish in her creativity and idiosyncratic behaviour,⁴²⁶ became the daughter that Geraldine felt deeply ashamed of and one that she would continue throughout her life to attempt to make clean and proper. Shirley Jackson, however, would continue throughout her life to evade conforming to any predetermined mould that her mother felt that she should be destined to become. However, in doing so, she was presented to her mother as an abominable creature that she could not recognise as her own. In Kristevan terms Shirley Jackson was 'a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer'⁴²⁷ and one that needed to be 'ejected beyond the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.'⁴²⁸ Shirley Jackson threatened the American portrayal of the nuclear family that Geraldine wished to achieve. She wanted a beautiful debutant to parade around country clubs, but Shirley was intelligent, creative, freethinking and, aesthetically speaking, an endomorph, something of an opposite to the idealised depiction of the high-society family. Leisha Jones, in her writing on the female body in art, remarks on the socially abject body in describing the features that lead to people experiencing social abjection, 'the shape of the culturally abject body always takes the form of "the other", either visible through its marked differences in shape, colour, or stability [...]

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁴²⁶ Shirley Jackson wrote stories and poetry from a young age, disciplining herself to perfect the craft. She was also deeply interested in witches, paranormal activity, and the occult from her early teenage years, which worsened her mother's opinion of her daughter.

⁴²⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 1.

all in comparison to culturally driven norms.⁴²⁹ Shirley's shape did not fit into the idealised depiction of the family Geraldine wanted for her family and was rendered as an 'Other' in her own home. As such, her mother tried relentlessly to enforce her aesthetically driven lifestyle on her, but to no avail. Shirley Jackson remained abject in her obscure difference; she lay, as Kristeva writes of the abject, 'outside, beyond the set' refusing to 'agree to the latter's rules of the game.'⁴³⁰ This obscurity, in physical features, values, and character, would estrange Shirley Jackson from her mother throughout her life, who made no attempt to connect with her daughter's interests and ideals. She was forever branded, for Geraldine, as an outside threat to her wholesome and uncontaminated family values.

Geraldine's desire for her daughter to be shaped, both literally and figuratively, in the way that high-society ladies expected their daughters to be, was not the first cause of rejection for Shirley Jackson. The first point of rejection was at the moment of conception. Geraldine, young and attractive, had only been married for a short amount of time before falling pregnant with Shirley at age twenty. She was disinterested entirely in the notion of childrearing, viewing it as a disappointing interruption to the parties and social engagements that she valued above all else. For Geraldine, pregnancy was an abject experience, much as it was for Annie Ernaux, as her body became the 'most precious non-objects; [...] no longer seen in [its] own right but forfeited, abject.'⁴³¹ In a letter sent to her daughter Geraldine once wrote, '[i]sn't contraception a wonderful thing [...] and weren't the Catholics silly to oppose it? "I only wish I'd had it back then."⁴³² This statement is further corroborated by Shirley who informed her own daughter, Joanne, that her mother had once told her that she was the result of an unsuccessful abortion.⁴³³ Having such a statement asserted by your mother is enough to haunt any child, but particularly so in the case of Shirley Jackson, who continued to suffer from feeling abject by the very fact of her existence. She was a living reminder of what Geraldine wished to expel and terminate, and in so being, represented the 'death infecting life'⁴³⁴ of utmost abjection. Shirley Jackson, in recognising the rejection she experienced from her mother, reflected this back towards Geraldine and was continually caught between the unconditional love many people have for their mothers and the hatred that stemmed from feeling rejected and abject in her mother's eyes. The relationship remained in an ambiguous state for them

⁴²⁹ Leisha Jones, "Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art," *Visual Culture & Gender* 2 (2007): 64-65.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴³² Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

both until Shirley Jackson died. Both feeling the contradictory nature of the abject in their experience of equal parts familial love and horror.

Beyond the contempt Geraldine had for her unsuccessful abortion, the feelings of abjection were heightened by Shirley Jackson's physical body being a key source of disgust and revulsion for her mother. Oppenheimer notes, '[y]ears after Shirley had left home, married, and given birth to her own children, her mother still sent her corsets in the mail, trying foolishly but persistently to rein in the overgrown creature she had somehow, unbelievably produced.'⁴³⁵ Shirley Jackson's weight gain was a slow and steady inclination into severe obesity throughout her life, only at one point slimming down in college when she met her to-be husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Whilst Jackson seemed confident that her intellectual capability surpassed any need for imposed cultural notions of bodily worth, it was an aspect of her life with which she could not avoid feeling frustrated. She wrote in her diary multiple times that she intended to start a diet to lose weight and wanted to stop her gluttonous food habits, but without success. Oppenheimer remarks that one of the final tipping points for Shirley's mental decline came at a letter from her mother regarding a photograph taken of her in a magazine to promote her latest work. Quoting Geraldine's letter, Oppenheimer writes;

"“Why oh why do you allow the magazines to print such awful pictures of you?” she beseeched in her large sloppy handwriting. “I am sure your daughters at school are proud to show off your picture and say ‘this is my mother.’ I would sue them for libel. Your children love you for your achievements but they also want you to be worth looking at too. If you don't care what you look like or care about your appearance why don't you do something about it for your children's sake and your husband's [...] I have been so sad all morning about what you have allowed yourself to look like. We are proud of your works, but why do you have to have such a dreadful picture.”⁴³⁶

Despite the comment Geraldine makes about her pride in Shirley Jackson's writing, this scalding remark was a culmination of Jackson's ultimate feelings of motherly rejection. As Oppenheimer remarks, 'it is hard to believe [Geraldine] was not at least partially conscious of her own viciousness. She attacked her daughter in the one area where she held all the cards – personal appearance.'⁴³⁷ She had never been the daughter Geraldine wanted and, even as a grown woman, she remained a physically abject 'overgrown creature' who needed to 'get down to a normal weight.'⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 245-246.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

Oppenheimer suspects this letter was one of the main elements that lead to Jackson's final mental disintegration.⁴³⁹ Shirley Jackson never put much stock into aesthetic beauty, as she recognised the fleeting and trivial nature of such appearance-focused values. She did, however, recognise that her obesity, her matted hair, and her rotting teeth - from too many sugary foods - had left her with few physical attributes upon which people could positively comment. Her mother knew this but continued throughout her life to strike her in this particular wound repetitively. The letter also mentions her husband's inability to be proud of her appearance, which also touched the raw nerve endings of jealousy for her husband's continued infidelity with young, attractive, students at the local college. In her physical existence, Shirley Jackson was the abject 'overgrown creature' that her mother, her husband and, as Geraldine comments, her children, could not feel proud to call their own.

The continuous feeling of motherly rejection haunted Jackson, but as did her own ambiguous feelings towards her mother. She felt in equal parts pulled towards and pushed away from her mother, as Oppenheimer writes, '[n]o matter how strained the relationship, it was also true that a confused, hopeless love existed between them throughout their lives, right along with the anger. Pain, hatred, and lack of forgiveness.'⁴⁴⁰ In her letters throughout her life she would continue to seek her mother's approval through ensuring they glossed over or painted particular aspects of her life in brighter shades, in an ambiguous effort to at once appease her mother and also to spite her. This sense of being drawn towards and at the same time pushed away from her mother is representative of the ego's abject desire to return to a state of oneness with the mother, but equally horrified at the potential for losing their individual subjectivity. This is highly reflective of the attitude Shirley Jackson took towards her own mother, as she at once tried to please her through doing what she thought were the right things to impress her, which, incidentally, were the things that made her more like her mother, but equally fearful that such a concession would lose the very uniqueness that set her apart from other people and made her special. There is a sense in Jackson's biography that the powerful threat of the mother as a person, but more so as a symbol, haunted Shirley and remained an ambiguous feature throughout her life, as Oppenheimer remarks, 'she would carry her mother within her, unexorcised for the rest of her life.'⁴⁴¹ The maternal rejection and loss that is key to Jackson's relationship with her mother, mirrors the rejection and loss that

⁴³⁹ Oppenheimer remarks, 'No one incident causes anyone to collapse emotionally; if anything, it is a slow increment of thousands of unknowable "incidents," beads on a long chain. Shirley was already hovering close to the danger line early that fall, when she received a blow which tore brutally into what was left of her shaky equilibrium. It may have had nothing to do with her final collapse, or it may have had a great deal. It came in the form of a letter from her oldest enemy.' Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 245.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

embodies the psychoanalytic understanding of abjection. It is something to be removed, that cannot be removed; it remains unexorcised in the subject. Shirley Jackson's fictional works provide some insight into this sense of the unexorcised mother figure and her trouble with the ambiguous nature to her feelings of abjection. This is most prominent in her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, which this thesis will now turn to explore to uncover a biographical understanding and emphasise the centrality of the abject nature of this text. It will highlight the importance of the mother in psychoanalytic terms to the character of Eleanor and by extension some of Jackson's own feelings towards her mother.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson and *The Haunting of Hill House*

Shirley Jackson's 1959 gothic novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (*Hill House*) was a success from its release⁴⁴² and has maintained its eminent status in contemporary literary culture. Oppenheimer writes, *Hill House* 'has been called by no less an authority than Stephen King one of the greatest horror novels of all time'.⁴⁴³ It has been made into two films, a play and a recent television series on Netflix. The strength *Hill House* continues to have as a text in popular culture is due to the fact that there is something, although it is unclear exactly what, deeply uncomfortable and at the same time alarmingly appealing about this text. John G. Parks describes the affective connection *Hill House* has with the reader, he states, 'Shirley Jackson's gothic fiction is an effective mode for her exploration of the human self – the aching loneliness, the unendurable guilt, the dissolution and disintegrations, the sinking into madness, the violence and lovelessness'.⁴⁴⁴ Parks' assertion is evident within the text, but what is more is that it can also be seen to be an exploration of Shirley Jackson herself in relation to these feelings and experiences. *Hill House* works to unpick the psyche of the reader through situating them in the third-person limited narration of Eleanor Vance; the victim, if she can so be called, of this narrative. It is this character in particular that *Hill House* most deeply affects, and it is this character upon which this section will focus, in order to better understand the connection between this fictional narrative and the after-abjection psyche and experiences of the author Shirley Jackson. Just as Oppenheimer remarks of the text as having effects that are, 'offstage, indirect, unexplained, elusive'⁴⁴⁵, so too are the feelings stirred up by the abject angst laced throughout the

⁴⁴² 'The book was immensely popular, became a modest best-seller, and earned, with reprint rights and a \$67,000 movie sale, a tidy fortune' Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 228.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁴⁴ John G. Parks, "Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson's Use of the Gothic," *Twentieth Century Literature* 30 (1984): 25.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

text. It is the connection this text has with the abject experience that makes its links with Shirley Jackson's own life-narrative known. This section will highlight the abject significance of *The Haunting of Hill House*, in order to shed new critical light on a well-known and widely researched text, whilst simultaneously highlighting how writing this narrative works as an act through which Shirley could repeat, in a diluted and entirely fictional mode, some of her own feelings of abjection.

The Haunting of Hill House makes known from the start the centrality of the mother figure in Eleanor Vance's psyche. To explore the relationship Jackson's biography has with *Hill House* this section will position Eleanor's disintegration as a slow, tempting, but corrosive call from the maternal abject, before turning back to Jackson's biography and exploring the connections with her own experiences. The narrative of Eleanor Vance as being presented as having a strange, alarming, relationship with her mother, and how this is representative of Hill House itself, has been explored in previous scholarship. Notably, Roberta Rubenstein, who explores the role of the mother in many of Shirley Jackson's novels, picking up on some of the key themes in this thesis such as, 'the central character's troubled identification with her good/bad/dead/mad mother, whom she ambivalently seeks to kill/ merge with'⁴⁴⁶ and the house as a metaphor for the mother-daughter relationship that is equal parts 'seductive and threatening'.⁴⁴⁷ Claire Kahane draws on a similar vein in her discussion of the gothic genre more broadly, commenting on the gothic's depiction of the mother, whether explicitly or implicitly, as being presented as 'both our habitat and our prison',⁴⁴⁸ a space in which the subject feels a comforting familiarity and terrifying entrapment. However, where this thesis differentiates from the above in its analysis, and provides an advancement on this understanding, is through connecting this relationship explicitly with Kristeva's theory of abjection and Jackson's biography within this theoretical framework. Building on previous scholarship, this section will situate the role of Hill House in Shirley Jackson's novel as being a metaphorical representation of the abject abyss of being fused once again with the mother in the semiotic stage of development. This moves the understanding of Hill House forward in its representation of the mother, to better understand Eleanor's development and deterioration in line with the abject jouissance, the joyful oblivion, as described by Julia Kristeva.

The proposed framing of the novel through Kristeva's theory as a story of the desire to return to being one with the pre-abject mother will form a new understanding of the house-mother, mother-daughter, relationship in this text which builds on and moves beyond the previous analysis

⁴⁴⁶ Roberta Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15 (1996): 312.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁴⁸ Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," In *The (M)other tongue: essays in feminist psychoanalytic interpretation*, eds. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 337.

and situates the relationship more effectively within the psychoanalytic discourse of abjection. The application of this theoretical underpinning to the novel will lead to a better understanding of the sense of jouissance, the yearning and desire for the 'Other' mixed with a suffering that is underpinned by dread and repulsion, which characterises Eleanor's experience throughout her time within the house. It is through this theoretical framing of the novel that this thesis is able to offer a unique understanding of the relationship between Eleanor, her mother and Hill House, pinpointing the underlying struggle and in particular the sense of ambivalence that is core to the theory of abjection. To effectively provide an analysis of this text using the theory of abjection to frame the understanding, this section will follow the narrative of the text chronologically so as to highlight the slow decay of Eleanor's psyche, which is, as discussed previously, much in line with that of Jackson herself. It will also explore these narrative shifts thematically through different aspects of the abject in a similar manner to the primary sources previously analysed in this thesis. This section will begin with a discussion of the 'unclean' aspects of Hill House and Eleanor's initial repulsion. Thereafter, it will follow Eleanor succumbing to the abject as it draws her in and finds its way inside her subjectivity. Finally, this section will continue to explore Eleanor's destructive behaviour as she loses the borders of her subjectivity and becomes one with the house as mother representative.

The immediate and most notable response to an encounter with the abject is horror and repulsion, as it is rejected by the superego as something improper and unclean. Hill House is made up of rooms that make no comprehensible sense. It is a house that has disturbing memories kept within its walls – though the specifics of this are only ever made in moments of thin dialogue and allusions – however, there is nothing aesthetically displeasing about it, no decaying structure nor poor presentation. John G. Parks states, 'it is this house which welcomes home the utterly guilt-ridden, lonely, and loveless protagonist, Eleanor Vance, who surrenders willingly to its dark embraces, her own fragile self dissolving and fusing with the substance of Hill House.'⁴⁴⁹ It is Parks' description of 'fusing' that holds particular relevance to this reading of the text, as it is with the fusion of psyche that Eleanor enters the abject abyss. The dark embrace of Hill House welcomes Eleanor into its abject, unclean and improper, embrace. There is a sense that the unclean aspect is solely metaphysical in Hill House, as the housekeeper, who is equally repelled by the house and spends only limited time within its confines, is commented upon as having kept it in good order. Upon approaching the house, the voice inside Eleanor's head, which can be understood to be the voice of the superego, immediately commands, 'Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once.'⁴⁵⁰ She nevertheless ignores this directive and enters the house, reminding herself of the

⁴⁴⁹ John G. Parks, "Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson's Use of the Gothic," *Twentieth Century Literature* 30 (1984): 25.

⁴⁵⁰ Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 33.

promise, 'journeys end in lovers meeting.'⁴⁵¹ Once inside again Eleanor, '[hears] the sick voice inside her which whispered, *Get away from here, get away.*'⁴⁵² Unable to ignore the pull Eleanor feels towards Hill House she chooses to stay, despite the mounting feelings of repulsion. Kristeva suggests, '[t]he sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.'⁴⁵³ Eleanor's superego commands her to remove herself from Hill House, but the abject misleads and corrupts Eleanor, pulling her into its hold. Once inside Hill House, Eleanor falls more deeply into the abject space. Dr Montague, a man of scientific character and the reason Eleanor and her peers are visiting Hill House, reinforces this figuration of the house as unclean. He states, "'I need not remind you, I think, that the concept of certain houses as unclean or forbidden- perhaps sacred- is as old as the mind of man.'"⁴⁵⁴ He frames the house within the context of the unclean and forbidden, which mirrors that of the language used to describe the abject of which Julia Kristeva speaks. A house, traditionally thought of as a warm, safe, enclosed space, becomes that which is contaminated and something with which to avoid contact. This could be seen to be similar, in Kristevan terms, to that of the space of the abject mother; the womb of pre-existence, once warm and safe, becomes that which is unclean and abject. The pre-symbolic oneness with the mother is that which is coveted and at the same time equally seen to be improper. Kristeva states, '[o]nce upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness. But the ashes of oblivion now serve as a screen and reflect aversion, repugnance. The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination to shame.'⁴⁵⁵ This sense of the clean and proper becoming filthy is shown in Dr Montague's assessment of Hill House as being one of many houses that have become unclean. What is key to Eleanor's relationship with Hill House, however, is that as the story develops Eleanor's sense of the 'sought-after' and her 'fascination' with Hill House becomes more prominent and her feelings of aversion, repugnance and shame start to fade.

The sense that Eleanor is drawn towards Hill House as an abject space is reinforced throughout the novel. If one is to understand Hill House to be representative of her yearning for psychological fusion once again with the mother, Eleanor's repetition of the refrain 'journeys end in lovers meeting'⁴⁵⁶ throughout the novel takes on a new and sinister poignancy. Kristeva notes of the

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 35.

⁴⁵³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁴⁵⁴ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 70.

⁴⁵⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁴⁵⁶ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 36.

abject as having the subject '[d]rawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.'⁴⁵⁷ The narrator notes on Eleanor's arrival that Hill House gives 'the vivid feeling that it was waiting for her, evil, but patient. Journeys end in lovers meeting.'⁴⁵⁸ The eerie personification of the house as being described as waiting for Eleanor, followed by this repetition of the meeting of lovers, foreshadows Eleanor's succumbing to the abject. It is this feeling of being involuntarily pulled towards the abject that Eleanor is particularly poised to be receptive, as on her journey to the house she begins another repetitive refrain that persists throughout the novel. Ostensibly, the 'cup of stars' references an incident with a young girl and a glass of milk at the beginning of her journey, but through framing it in Kristeva's theory it can be seen to be alluding to the rejection of the mother's milk which initially formed her subjectivity. She witnesses a young girl demanding her cup of stars for her milk in a diner and whilst her parents try to dissuade her from her tantrum, Eleanor thinks 'once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don't do it'.⁴⁵⁹ This comment can be understood to be the psychological archaic wholeness for which she now yearns. The two lines are repeated throughout the novel, emphasising how the abject does not yield in its drawing her towards its condemning temptation and how readily she will fall into it.

The house, understood to be a symbol of the mother, waits patiently for her, continually seeking ways to draw her 'toward the place where meaning collapses'⁴⁶⁰ and satisfy the yearning evidenced in the above refrains. The sense that Eleanor is being drawn towards the abject space of fusion with the house as mother representative, is further reinforced through the scene in the novel where written large on the walls in chalk are the words 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME'.⁴⁶¹ There is an ambiguity to this sentence which can be read in multiple ways. However, through positioning the house in Kristevan theory, this scene can be understood to be a physical manifestation of the abject drawing Eleanor back towards the home of pre-abjection-subjectivity in fusion with the mother. Kristeva states, '[i]t lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.'⁴⁶² The house throughout the novel does not cease challenging Eleanor to be drawn towards it. She initially finds it abhorrent and vile, positioning it in a place of banishment, but soon begins to lose this repugnance. The house furthers its quest to draw Eleanor towards it by knocking on the borders of her subjectivity. Being awoken one night with a fright, she notes that she hears her mother's voice, "'Eleanor? In here" "Coming." No time for the light; she kicked a table out of the

⁴⁵⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁴⁵⁸ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 36.

⁴⁵⁹ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 22.

⁴⁶⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁴⁶¹ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 146.

⁴⁶² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

way, wondering at the noise of it, and struggled briefly with the door of the connecting bathroom. That is not the table falling, she thought; my mother is knocking on the wall.'⁴⁶³ In this strange supernatural scene, Eleanor realizes the knocking on the doors of the rooms in Hill House is not her mother per se, but it is suspiciously similar to the frame of reference Eleanor has as being associated with her experience with her mother when she was alive. The house knocks for her, it asks her to return home, and it draws her in and seeks her out. The house manifests these desires in supernatural forces, but equally these forces can be understood to be manifestations of Eleanor's psyche that is pulling her towards the pre-object fusion with the mother, beseeching her to return. The mother-figure bangs on the walls of her very subjectivity, searching for a way to help her 'come home'.

These external manifestations of the abject are also felt internally in Eleanor's reaction to these scenes of supernatural horror. The knocking on the walls her subjectivity eventually breaks through and she feels 'cold chills going up and down [her] back'⁴⁶⁴, she describes them as 'not pleasant; it starts in your stomach and goes in waves around and up and down like something alive. Like something alive. Yes. Like something alive.'⁴⁶⁵ This experience echoes the feelings Kristeva notes of the experience of encountering the abject, 'I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up in the body'.⁴⁶⁶ Eleanor feels the spasms in her stomach, she describes this as being like something alive inside of her. This description again reinforces the notion that the borders of Eleanor's subjectivity have been infiltrated, something else has crossed the boundaries and is inside of her. She becomes infected from this moment on, her psyche begins to slip.

Eleanor displays a self-sacrificial willingness to succumb to the abject after she notes feeling its presence inside of her body. She finds in the moments of dread and terror that she unexpectedly giggles,⁴⁶⁷ which reflects Kristeva's assertion that, 'laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection'.⁴⁶⁸ The involuntary giggles Eleanor produces during these scenes are harshly juxtaposed with the terror shown by other characters and in these moments, they hang awkwardly in the air of the oppressive atmosphere of Hill House. Eleanor seems to be the most deeply affected in these scenes, but often not in the ways one would anticipate given the circumstances. Kristeva states, '[t]he abject confronts, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks

⁴⁶³ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 127.

⁴⁶⁴ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 128.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

⁴⁶⁷ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 128.

⁴⁶⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

to the autonomy of language. It is violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.⁴⁶⁹ The physical effects of Hill House on Eleanor and her attempts to break away from such moments feel clumsy. Her exclamation for what is attempting to get to her to “go away!”⁴⁷⁰ take on a self-sacrificial form, as she later admonishes herself, ‘[n]ow I’ve done it; it was looking for the room with someone inside.’⁴⁷¹ As is later witnessed, the clumsy breaking away puts her at risk of falling back under the secure, but stifling, power of the abject unity of being one with the mother.

The appeal of being back in the secure borderless unity with the symbolic mother is strong and the sense of affiliation Eleanor has toward the house grows, nurtured by her sense of guilt at the loss and separation with her physical mother. Kristeva states, ‘[o]ne does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion. [...] One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones.’⁴⁷² Eleanor begins to feel the passionate joy of Hill House and the violence of this passion is her foreshadowed end. Contrasting from the initial repulsion Eleanor displayed upon arrival, she later comments of Hill House, ‘[i]t’s charming, Eleanor thought, surprised at herself [...] she found herself at the same time unable to account for the excitement she felt’.⁴⁷³ The surprise Eleanor feels alludes to her being still somewhat cautious of any positivity felt towards the house, however, it is in these moments that Eleanor shows signs of her bonding with the house and welcoming its abject embrace.

Toward the end of the novel Eleanor’s joy at being back within the maternal embrace of the mother is truly felt, ‘Eleanor thought, It is my second morning in Hill House, and I am unbelievably happy. Journeys end in lovers meeting [...] I have been frightened half out of my foolish wits, but I have somehow earned this joy; I have been waiting for it for so long.’⁴⁷⁴ Nicholas Chare, in his writings on the abject, notes the importance of the mother in the subject’s relationship with the abject. He states,

The most archaic experience of abjection is therefore related to the maternal [...] That which is expelled is never wholly voided. The mother never abandons the subject even after their entry into the Imaginary and the Symbolic realms. The abject mother persists as a kind of

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁷⁰ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 129.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 9.

⁴⁷³ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 95.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 136.

constitutive outside to the subject, an outside which simultaneously acts as a guarantor and threat to the inside.⁴⁷⁵

The house as mother persists to fuse with Eleanor and she progressively becomes its willing victim. Kristeva notes of the abject that it 'simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject'⁴⁷⁶ forever attempting to undo the separation that allows the 'I' to exist. Eleanor is tempted and eventually submits to the mother's beseeching. Her joy at being in the house, reunited with the mother, is overwhelming, as she submits to the calls of the mother-figure to fuse with her into the semiotic realm of wholeness. This joy takes hold of Eleanor, '[s]uddenly, without reason, laughter trembled inside Eleanor; she wanted to run to the head of the table and hug the doctor, she wanted to reel, chanting, across the stretches of the lawn, she wanted to sing and to shout and to fling her arms and move in great emphatic, possessing circles around the rooms of Hill House; I am here, I am here, she thought'.⁴⁷⁷ She is 'here' and 'here' is home, back into the maternal embrace and in the process loses her subjectivity in the pleasurable pain and delights of jouissance.

This point at which the 'I' / 'Other' distinction between Eleanor and the house starts to dissolve is hinted at throughout the novel before she finally submits as a willing victim of the abject. Eleanor herself comments, "'I hate seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I'm living in one self, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can't stop it, but I know I'm not really going to be hurt and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if I could only surrender-'"⁴⁷⁸ The other members of the group visiting Hill House are alerted by this statement and query her on her suggestion to surrender, at which point Eleanor cannot recall what she has just said, and the others do not remind her. It is at this point the abject is, as Kristeva describes, 'at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject.'⁴⁷⁹ As the call to return to the unity of the maternal embrace continues Eleanor's fight for her own separate subjectivity wanes; 'I'm disappearing inch by inch into this house, I am going apart a little bit at a time because all this noise is breaking me'.⁴⁸⁰ At this point where the 'I' and 'Other' lose their distinction, Kristeva notes, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away.'⁴⁸¹ Eleanor's borders

⁴⁷⁵ Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation*, (London: I.B Taurus, 2011), 6.

⁴⁷⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴⁷⁷ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 141.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁷⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴⁸⁰ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 202.

⁴⁸¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

of her sense of self are dissolving as the novel progresses, which culminates in the finale of the text in her downfall, where she gives in to the desire to be fused once again with the maternal embrace of Hill House, '[n]o; it is over for me. It is too much, she thought, I will relinquish possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have.'⁴⁸² This is the abject 'edge of non-existence',⁴⁸³ one that if acknowledged 'annihilates'⁴⁸⁴ the subject. Eleanor submits, a willing victim, she feels the potential joy of being returned to the stage of existence of being in one substance with the mother. The temptation is too great, and she concedes, annihilating the 'I' and becomes one with the house as mother.

The final evening Eleanor spends in the house she wanders around it, sneaking past all who lay asleep in search of her mother. She whispers to the house, "'Mother,'" [...] "Mother?" [...] "Mother?" [...] "You're here somewhere"''.⁴⁸⁵ She calls out in search of the lost mother, to be once again back as one substance with her. As she continues to search, she loses herself and becomes one with the house. Kristeva describes this process of abject fusion, '[i]maginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.'⁴⁸⁶ This becomes distinctly clear when Eleanor thinks of herself in third person as she is engulfed by the abject, '[p]oor house, Eleanor thought, I had forgotten Eleanor'.⁴⁸⁷ She is forgotten in the process of fusing with Hill House, it has entered Eleanor's subjectivity and she can 'feel the whole house'.⁴⁸⁸ The joy felt by Eleanor in returning to a fused subjectivity with the mother is welcoming as she loses herself completely, she thinks ecstatically, '[h]ere I am inside. I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wondering at the thought. I am home, I am home'.⁴⁸⁹ The elation from Eleanor at feeling that she has returned home to the mother is palpable. Kristeva asserts, '[t]he abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There's nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.'⁴⁹⁰ In this scene Eleanor seeks to fill this sense of loss Kristeva describes, which works in multiple ways for her character, as she has also mourned the loss of her real mother alongside this 'want' to fill the loss of the symbolic mother. She creeps around the house, evading her peers and moving silently, indicating her intimate

⁴⁸² Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 204.

⁴⁸³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 228.

⁴⁸⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁴⁸⁷ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 229.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁹⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

familiarity with the house, with the ability to avoid creaking wood panels. She has come home to foundations for her own being, but instead of separating to form the 'I', she surrenders this to the house-as-mother and sacrifices her subjectivity.

The others in the house begin to look for her, but she continues to speak in unity with the house. She sneaks about, laughing at their attempts to find her. She continues to hide from them as they call out to her and search frantically; 'Eleanor clung to the door and laughed until tears came into her eyes; what fools they are, she thought; we trick them so easily.'⁴⁹¹ Forgetting her companions with whom she has developed friendship in the house, she disassociates herself from her own subjectivity. Kristeva notes of this experience, 'abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory.'⁴⁹² She has lost herself in the abject, she has detached from the group, her kin, and is no longer remembers herself as the separate subject, Eleanor. Kristeva notes of the encounter with the abject that it 'places the one haunted by it literally beside himself'⁴⁹³ and in this moment Eleanor, the haunted one, dissociates from her subjectivity is placed beside herself as she becomes the 'we' in her fusion with the mother.

The loss of her selfhood is her demise, it is the abject space of 'death infecting life.'⁴⁹⁴ Eleanor as an 'I' is annihilated in her fusion with the mother. The group discover Eleanor having climbed a dangerous height up the precarious stairwell of the tower, Luke ascends to save her, whilst Eleanor begins to remember who they are. She still attempts to escape and climb higher through the trapdoor, but it has been nailed shut. They bring her down, admonish her, calling her an 'imbecile'.⁴⁹⁵ The next day they swiftly make arrangements for her exit of Hill House. Eleanor finds such a notion of her being able to leave humorous, "[b]ut I can't leave," Eleanor said, laughing still because it was so perfectly impossible to explain.'⁴⁹⁶ Eleanor is unable to leave because her subjectivity has become one with the house, but this abject space is also one within which language does not operate, it can therefore be understood that this is the reason she is unable to explain it to the others. Kahane notes, 'Eleanor surrenders to the house, surrenders her illusory new autonomy to remain the child, dependent on the maternal, on Hill House as protector, lover, and destroyer.'⁴⁹⁷ The maternal pull towards the pre-abjectal abyss is too compelling for Eleanor, she succumbs and feels the jouissance of love and protection, but also self-destruction. As Theodora asks Luke to bring

⁴⁹¹ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 230.

⁴⁹² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹⁵ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 236.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁹⁷ Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," In *The (M)other tongue: essays in feminist psychoanalytic interpretation*, eds. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 342.

her car and suitcase to the front of the house, Eleanor says without warning or context, “[w]alled up alive.” Eleanor began to laugh again at their stone faces. “Walled up alive,” she said. “I want to stay here.”⁴⁹⁸ The reference to walls, or borders, emphasizes again here that she wishes the boundaries of her subjectivity to be around her and the house. These sentiments echo the language used to describe the borders of subjectivity of which Kristeva writes, ‘[a] deviser of territories, languages, works the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe [...] A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*.’⁴⁹⁹ The symbolism of the word stray suitably describes Eleanor’s characterisation in the novel, as one who has shown to never feel a sense of belonging – to both people and place – and so builds the walls that constitute her being psychologically around her and the house. Eleanor finds the idea of being able to leave a place with which she considers herself to be one an absurd notion, she wishes to be left here in the house, contained within its walls physically as well as psychically. The final moments of the text allude to Eleanor no longer being in possession of her actions, driving towards a tree at speed. The evocative image of Eleanor crashing into the tree mirrors the language used to describe an encounter with the abject by Kristeva, ‘[a] weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.’⁵⁰⁰ Her inability to leave the house is finalized in this moment as she makes the irrevocable act to remove herself as an ‘I’ altogether, rather than be forced to separate physically from the mother-house, she is physically and psychically crushed under the weight of meaninglessness. This final scene is wracked with confusion and ambivalence, such as that experienced by the victim of the sublime horror of the abject. She asks in her final moments, ‘[w]hy am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don’t they stop me?’⁵⁰¹ suggesting some part of her still recognises that her actions do not correspond to the wishes of Eleanor as a separate subject.

Eleanor’s entry into the abject is a slow and corrosive assault on her subjectivity. The abject never ceases to beseech the subject, to pull the subject towards the temptation that is wholeness with the mother. Eleanor’s guilt and sense of responsibility for her mother’s death has left her vulnerable to such a call for submission. At first, she is repulsed by the house and what it represents, but soon this stubborn resolve slips and her ability to withstand the ‘magnetized pole of covetousness’⁵⁰² that is the abject disappears, along with any sense of repulsion towards it. Eventually she gives way to the sense of joy that being rejoined with the mother, before the birth of ‘I’, that the house represents. She creeps around the house, filled with complete elation at the sense

⁴⁹⁸ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 240.

⁴⁹⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁰¹ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 246.

⁵⁰² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

of returning home to the mother and finds the notion of leaving the house impossible. She loses Eleanor in the process of being welcomed into the abject maternal embrace of Hill House.

This section has uncovered a new reading of *The Haunting of Hill House* through framing it within Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Through exploring the relationship between Eleanor and Hill House through the lens of the abject mother, the text takes on a new significance in psychoanalytic terms. Eleanor's pull towards, and eventual succumbing to, the house as mother representative, takes on an increasingly sinister meaning when considered to be a reflection of the draw towards the abject. This thesis will now use this reading of the text to be informed by, and inform, Shirley Jackson's own biographical experiences as detailed in *Private Demons*.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson's Abject Haunting

The Haunting of Hill House can be seen to indirectly explore some of the abject trauma Shirley Jackson felt for her own mother. That is not to say that this text is an autobiographical narrative, nor is Eleanor a direct reflection of Jackson herself, but it is a fictional means through which Jackson could at once both displace and connect with her experiences of abjection caused by her own mother. She had no overt desires to fuse with the maternal embrace, unlike the protagonist of *Hill House*, but she did experience the hurt and sense of loss at having her mother abject her in several ways, as discussed in the previous sections. Despite Shirley Jackson's efforts to show otherwise, her mother's treatment of her did affect her deeply, and, whilst she made no effort to succumb to her mother's continual berating of her appearance, she never lost the desire to experience some form of acceptance and love. Eleanor equally displays this yearning to feel like she belongs. She tries to find this sense of belonging and acceptance in her Hill House experiment peers, but eventually finds this only in the house-as-mother representative. The same desire to feel acceptance and belonging is true of Jackson, but it was never a desire she would freely admit to herself. Her carefully crafted letters to her mother provide just one example of how her behaviour manifested this longing for acceptance. To try to remove the stain of the abject that marked her as a subject in her mother's eyes, she constructed letters that omitted truths that would cause her mother's disapproval and twisted narratives about her own life to emphasise to her mother how well she was doing in the areas that, to use Kristevan language, would 'agree to the latter's rules of the game.'⁵⁰³ Eleanor equally displays this twisting of narratives to get approval from her peers, but, unlike Jackson, her true self is the subject Hill House accepts.

⁵⁰³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

There is also an important comparison to be made about the house as being presented as both a place of safety, but also a place that ultimately destroys the living subject. This is a theme that is present throughout the novel, but equally the same experience is true for Jackson, whose agoraphobia resulted in her being unable to live completely as an autonomous subject. The house for both Eleanor and Jackson can therefore be seen as the 'land of oblivion'⁵⁰⁴ for their subjectivity. This tension present in this novel exposes the feelings Jackson had about the maternal embrace of acceptance, as it is in Eleanor's sublime embrace with the house-as-mother representative that she meets her end. Jackson recognised that in being considered to be abject by her mother, she also carved out herself as a uniquely separate subject. It would mean removing the very nature of her separate subjectivity to be accepted by her mother. This is not necessarily to the extremes found in Eleanor's demise, but it would mean the demise of what made Jackson her own subject. To remove this, to be accepted, she would lose what made her Shirley Jackson and she would become the debutant clone that her mother truly desired. In order to achieve the fulfilment that the mother represents, it would require a superficial fusion of character for Shirley, rather than the psychological fusion with the house as mother representative for Eleanor, but in assimilating to her mother's desire she would lose that which constituted her own subjectivity.

This text, therefore, can be understood to be a fictional narrative through which Jackson could explore some of the conscious, but also the unconscious, desire for maternal acceptance. It was in her fiction that she could channel these thoughts, through the safety and distance that a fictional text could provide. Her feelings of abjection from her mother were certainly deeply felt, highlighted by the end of her life and the final letter received from her mother, but repressed and not confronted in her conscious mind. Therefore, it can be understood that she projected these feelings onto her fictional creations in order to set the distance between her unconscious emotions and her conscious subjectivity that did not want to confront the feelings of abjection. Positioned in this way, Eleanor becomes a character she created to expose the feelings of abject rejection and the desire to be accepted by the mother. *The Haunting of Hill House* can therefore be understood to be a text that enabled Jackson to repeat and work through some of her experiences of maternal abjection. It provided her with a platform through which she could expose some of her repressed trauma and project her feelings into a narrative that could creatively explore the tensions she was experiencing in being seen to be abject by her mother.

Freud's writing on repetition compulsion offers the perspective that can go some way towards exposing the compulsion to repeat this experience of abjection in her writing. He emphasises that, 'the patient does not remember anything at all of what he has forgotten and

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 8.

repressed, but rather acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it.’⁵⁰⁵ Jackson might have had an inclination that a text which features a dead mother would act to spite her own mother, but there is no sense that she made any connections to her repeating her experiences of maternal abjection. The loss of subjectivity at the end of the novel, in being fused once again with the house as mother representative, speaks volumes for the fear Jackson had for her refusal to succumb to her mother’s desires for her to be more like her and the repressed traumatic experience of the primal experience of abjection. A loss of subjectivity being at the core of both Eleanor and Jackson’s experiences. When viewed within the framework of Kristeva and Freud’s postulations, and as being a repetition of the primal scene of abjection and a loss of subjectivity, the act of writing this text and acting out these fears within the text can be understood in a significant new light. She does not remember why the potential loss of subjectivity haunts her present-day experiences so acutely, but in writing this text she can be understood to be repeating them in a fictional means, acting them out, rather than remembering what sparked this sense of horror. This would fall in line with Freud’s assertions that, ‘he does not properly appreciate the conditions under which his phobia functions, does not listen carefully enough to what his obsessional ideas are saying to him, or does not grasp the real intention of his obsessional impulse.’⁵⁰⁶ When positioned in this way, the text acts as a repetition of her experience of maternal abjection and, therefore, a confrontation with the fear rooted in the primal experience of abjection. It forms the basis for an understanding of Jackson’s writing in this text as being a compulsion to repeat the experience after abjection. She allows Eleanor to fall victim to the compelling nature of the object that the house represents and in so doing acts out the repetitive compulsion.

This compulsion to repeat falls within type two as denoted in Otto Fenichel’s writing on repetition compulsion, in a similar manner to the repetitions discussed previously of Annie Ernaux in her writing. These repetitions are described by Fenichel as being, ‘[r]epetitions due to the tendency of the repressed to find an outlet. [...] What has not been gratified strives for gratification; the same motives that first denied gratification are effective later. [...] But this striving mobilizes anxiety, and the repetition of a painful experience is the objective result.’⁵⁰⁷ As alluded to above, there is a sense that Jackson’s repetitions after abjection are in some ways a manifestation of her need to find an outlet to express her experience. Through understanding this text in this light, it brings forth the significance of the writing as repetition of the experience of abjection caused continuously by her mother’s rejection and horror at her as a separate subject. To release the hold that this experience

⁵⁰⁵ Freud, “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through”, 36.

⁵⁰⁶ Freud, “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through”, 38.

⁵⁰⁷ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 542.

has on her, she attempts to write the experience in her fiction and find an outlet, a gratification, for the anxiety and pain caused by the abject. This results in experiencing the pain felt at the primary moment of abjection and also brings to the fore the subsequent feelings of continual rejection by her mother. After abjection Jackson seeks to find an outlet for the experience through repeating and channelling these encounters with the maternal abject in her writing. To further explore Jackson's experiences of abjection, this thesis will now turn to explore the ways in which society and its cruel hypocrisy played a significant role in her life, alongside her biography and her fictional narrative *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson, Society, and *Private Demons*

Shirley Jackson's experience of the world around her was shaped by her ability to see through the polished surface of society and into the rotten core lurking beneath. This awareness of what lay beneath the skin of society, and mankind more broadly, was a cognizance she had from a surprisingly young age. Living in the beautiful suburban setting of Burlingame, California, Jackson watched as neighbours smiled to greet their friends as they walked past white picket fences, to then observe them moments later become vicious when their backs were turned, in the manner of 'a friend who stabs you',⁵⁰⁸ to quote Kristeva. This unsettling perceptive ability in such a young child, which was finessed to a fine art throughout the rest of her life, was a highly influential contributing theme to many of her later works, in which characters are often informed by this portrayal of society as being duplicitous and conniving. As Oppenheimer notes, '[t]he recurring theme in all [Jackson] wrote, she said, was an "insistence on the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human behaviour.'⁵⁰⁹ It is to this conscious perception of the fragile inner workings of societal order and human nature that this thesis will now turn, to discuss further Shirley Jackson's experience of the abject. It will explore this notion through separating the interwoven features of her experience of societal abjection, through first discussing Jackson's awareness of the fragility of social order and mankind's capacity for wickedness. It will thereafter turn to consider the notion of borders and rejection, under the framework of societal abjection, to uncover the duality of this particular experience for Shirley, as being both the rejected figure from society and her own rejection of that society, which culminated ultimately in her slipping into madness, as experienced through crippling phobias, verging on the edge of psychosis, and severe depression.

The often-overwhelming perception Jackson had of the world around her as containing, as her husband Stanley once phrased in describing her greatest fear, "'[a]ll the borderline evil and darkness in the world'"⁵¹⁰ was the reality in which she lived. Given this context of fear, it is perhaps unsurprising that Shirley Jackson felt compelled to cut through the superficial veneer in her writing and reveal the darkness beneath. She saw, experienced, and depicted damningly the 'hypocrisy and evil that had been just below the bland suburban setting.'⁵¹¹ She was drawn towards and horrified by the potential for evil that lay at the fringes of society. As such, she often focused on characters who lay at the edge of social groups, either geographically or mentally, and characters that seem not to abide by social expectations. These characters are often, to quote Kristeva, 'outside, beyond the

⁵⁰⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁰⁹ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 125.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

set, and [do] not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game.'⁵¹² For example, the previous section focused on Eleanor, a character who positions herself as an outsider before being submerged into the abject and excluded entirely. Jackson gave prominence to such characters that are teetering at the edge of abjection; however, it is often the reaction from the collective social groupings that tip the scale to the text being a greater display of social abjection. The other characters in *Hill House*, for example, exacerbate Eleanor's original feelings of rejection and lead her further down the path to self-destruction. For the protagonist in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, it is also the townspeople's reaction that shows the abject animalistic nature of mankind and the fragility of social order and the law.

The animal-in-human lies as an undercurrent theme to many of Jackson's works that explore social abjection. Just as the previous chapter related the experience of maternal abjection to Annie Ernaux's writing, it is equally prevalent to recognise the connection that this chapter has with another previous case study. Jackson's ability to peel back the surface to highlight the darkness beneath is also a key feature of Francis Bacon's artistic works. Both artists produce work with an uncanny ability to cut through the society that is presented at face value and reveal the abject nature of the society below the surface; one of disorder, disfunction, and animalism. The notion of the animal-in-human plays a central figure in many of Bacon's artworks, he sought to bring to the forefront these abject instinctive elements of human nature and psyche. This also features in Jackson's writing, but through more discreet undertones in characterisation and theme, with narratives that often end in uncivilised barbaric conduct. In *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma* Peppiatt states, 'Bacon retained a strong awareness of the animal in man. The more he moved in sophisticated social circles, the more aware he was of the raw, uncivilised impulses that govern human conduct. Like the mouth, with its disarming exterior, society would periodically crack open to show the savagery beneath.'⁵¹³ It is this notion of the cracking open of societal order to reveal the savagery beneath that also captured Jackson. She looked for the cracks and described with poetic precision the potential for uncivilised behaviour that lurks at the fragile borders of human society. Both artists portrayed an abject state of existence, searching for and depicting that which, as Kristeva describes, 'disturbs identity, system, order'.⁵¹⁴ They portray the uncontrolled human nature, a nature that does not abide by the culturally formed systems and order. A nature that, for both artists, is frequently displayed as an animalistic scene in which the characters, or subjects, are able to complete violent acts in states of heightened raw physical expressions. We see this in Jackson's infamous short story 'The Lottery', which Oppenheimer describes as being, 'the purest, most direct

⁵¹² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁵¹³ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: An Anatomy of an Enigma*, 74.

⁵¹⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

expression she would ever give to that knowledge of human evil she had carried with her since childhood'.⁵¹⁵ This also features in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as this chapter will later discuss in depth. The 'human evil' that Jackson was aware of can be likened to the description Kristeva gives to the manifestations of the abject in society; '[t]he traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.'⁵¹⁶ These descriptions can be aligned with many of Jackson's characters, but also her own biographical experiences, as will be later discussed. It is these expressions of abjection that are manifest in the behaviours of characters in many of her fictional texts and these features work to highlight that culture, law and morality are fragile notions on which social order is maintained.

When exploring the notion of the animal-in-human in relation to Jackson and the abject, it is pertinent to discuss the notion of culture as being described by Kristeva as acting as a safeguard from this abject state of being. In this context it is understood to be that which distinguishes the human from the animal. Kristeva describes this need for demarcation as protecting us from, 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal'.⁵¹⁷ She continues, '[t]hus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.'⁵¹⁸ What both Bacon and Jackson effectively portray is that this threatening world lies in wait, kept in check by way of abjection, until drawn out and the human cracks open and shows the savagery beneath. Where Bacon expresses this violence in the medium of paint its assault on the viewer is immediate and instant, however, in Jackson's writing it is often slow and, to use Kristeva's words describing the abject, 'sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles'.⁵¹⁹ According to Kristeva, it is culture that acts as the safeguard from this abject animalism. The social expectations of mankind are guided by the culturally formed concepts of acceptable behaviour and what both artists sought to expose was the moments in which these boundaries are broken and therefore highlight the fragility of these cultural boundaries. It is the process of abjection that keeps the societal order intact, as Kristeva notes, '[t]here, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.'⁵²⁰ It can be understood, therefore, that it is culture that Jackson seeks to undermine and transgress in her writing. She identifies the cracks in the borders of

⁵¹⁵ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 131.

⁵¹⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

social identity and highlights the abject potential lurking below the surface, and, in turn, emphasises the frail nature of cultural boundaries, which can be broken with ease by the characters in her texts.

Shirley Jackson found herself encountering and experiencing social abjection in its many manifestations throughout her life. Oppenheimer writes, '[s]he who had seen the face of evil in sunny California, in staid Rochester, in Syracuse, in New York City, would now find it in that most traditional American setting – a tiny picturesque New England village, the very village, in fact, depicted in the work of Grandma Moses.'⁵²¹ The village of North Bennington would be Jackson's home for the largest portion of her life and this social setting fed into many of her fictional works. It would also be the setting for her own downfall, like a tragic hero, her ability to see the cracks in the façade of society would ultimately lead to her crippling agoraphobia, depression, and later, almost as a by-product, her death. Her sense of the rotten core of humanity hidden behind the polished surface smiles of the people she encountered was channelled mostly through her writing. *The Road Through the Wall* was her first novel to strike this chord, as Oppenheimer notes, '[t]here is no question that Shirley saw her first novel as an exploration of wickedness; although it was perhaps the most naturalistic book she ever wrote, the one most grounded in reality, she herself felt it arose directly from her own conscious awareness of much darker forces.'⁵²² Shirley Jackson was acutely aware of this sense of social and cultural fragility and expressed this through many of her fictional texts. Her experiences of different types of social abjection feature in her writing and are expressed through characters and narratives that centre on isolation, rejection, clashes of culture and values, and legal instability and hypocrisy. These themes are directly taken from her own encounters with these experiences in different forms throughout her life and in the different locations she lived.

In the picturesque village of North Bennington, she could see the potential for it to be that which 'disturbs identity, system, order.'⁵²³ Her conscious awareness of North Bennington as being a setting for abject hypocrisy through its commitment to identity and tradition, provoked her to write one of her most influential texts. Jackson's short story 'The Lottery' works to disturb and undermine the traditional American understanding of identity and order; particularly the identity associated with small-town, rural life. 'The Lottery' directly strikes a chord with the falsity of the façade present in society, which masks the horror lurking beneath the surface. That which tradition, culture and laws demarcate as behaviour that is improper and abject. This short story brings to the surface the reality of those structural guiding principles as being both fragile and malleable; the values at the core of what is deemed to be civilised society as being not far removed from those of the animal. The societal order in this short story mirrors that of the traditional American village setting on the

⁵²¹ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 112.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵²³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

surface, but it later foregrounds the abject horror lurking behind the smiles and pleasantries. It is the potential for this horror in society that captivated Jackson's writing. Jackson herself experienced this sense of village tradition and history at the expense of injustice and hypocrisy much later after publishing this short story, however it is telling that she had this perception of the village before experiencing it directly for herself. This experience would also be one of the causes of her final withdrawal from the outside world. In third grade, Sally, one of Jackson's daughters, was one of several other children to be abused by their teacher. Oppenheimer notes, 'Sally and four of five others in the class had been slapped in the face, hit with a yardstick, forced to stand with clothespins fastened to their ears and continually humiliated before the class.'⁵²⁴ When Jackson finally managed to get Sally to confess as to why she was no longer eating or sleeping properly, Shirley Jackson stormed to the schoolboard and put herself up against the school and the villagers, who defended the teacher with similar lines to those used by the villagers in 'The Lottery' when presented with a contest to tradition.⁵²⁵ This was her abject tale in another guise in reality, as Oppenheimer notes, 'to the town it was tradition versus change, local versus stranger, and thus no contest at all.'⁵²⁶ The fragility of social order made manifest in the villagers' steadfast adherence to tribal instincts and tradition at the cost of child abuse. Kristeva asserts that, '[a]n unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside, Religion, Morality, Law.'⁵²⁷ On this occasion the villagers' denial and pack instinct to defend their own, brought to the surface the frailty of the systems of law and morality. The abject seeps through and taints what would otherwise appear to have been on the surface as the perfect American 'family-values' driven village. This was the 'latent sense of evil'⁵²⁸ that Jackson was all too aware of in society. She saw the fragility of social order and the potential for the abject to show itself.

This juncture in Shirley Jackson's life in North Bennington would be the final blow to her stability and the point at which she would reject, and also be rejected by, the people of the village. As Oppenheimer notes, Jackson was 'acutely sensitive to the dark forces in people's minds that led them to reject the outsider, the stranger, she discovered in North Bennington an almost perfect microcosm in which to study the very process of alienation itself'.⁵²⁹ Jackson was to be the victim of that very experience and radically excluded from the village community. Although aware of the

⁵²⁴ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 213.

⁵²⁵ References in 'The Lottery' include writing such as, 'but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box' and the dialogue, "'Some places have already quit lotteries,'" Mrs. Adams said. "Nothing but trouble in that," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools.'" Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery," *The New Yorker*, 19 June 1948. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1948/06/26/the-lottery>.

⁵²⁶ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 214.

⁵²⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 16.

⁵²⁸ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 126.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

potential for the abject in communities such as North Bennington, the incident with Sally at the local school would be the point at which Jackson became the abject figure to be removed from the otherwise “uncontaminated” village. In discussing the abject notions of impurity and identity, Robbie Duschinsky asserts, ‘that in Western societies, impurity characterises by degrees all phenomena that deviate from what is imputed as their *self-identity*: their internal homogeneity and their correspondence with essence.’⁵³⁰ For the villagers of North Bennington, Jackson and her family were the threats to the self-identity of the town, a town that held its homogeneity to be representative of small-town America’s essence. Jackson was an impurity, an abject creature once again, a disturbance and a deviation from the town’s identity. At the same time this was also the point at which she also marked the people of the village as being abject. Jackson was, for the community of North Bennington, that which, as Kristeva notes, ‘disturbs identity, system, order’,⁵³¹ however, for Jackson, the community became that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules.’⁵³² A complexity in experience whereby the community renders her abject, to be excluded, and in turn she also jettisons the abject community from her existence, cutting herself off from them entirely. For the people of North Bennington Shirley was thereafter positioned as, as Oppenheimer remarks, ‘[a] stranger who had overstepped her bounds, who could not be trusted. A stranger, in other words, who looked more like an enemy’.⁵³³ This made Shirley something that must be removed from society, as she was seen to be, to quote Kristeva, ‘a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.’⁵³⁴ Shirley Jackson’s accusations towards the schoolteacher signified an unthinkable impurity in the community. This marked her out as being the intolerable threat to the wholesome values of North Bennington and, therefore, saw her excluded from the social body. Kristeva notes, ‘A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it.’⁵³⁵ Rather than consider the possibility that the schoolteacher was abusive to children, they would rather posit the stranger as an enemy, fulfilling the process of abjection through seeking to remove that which threatens the proud purity of the community. To consider the teacher as being shameful, they would be forced to confront the potential for improper and unclean behaviour as being part of the community body, whereas Shirley, as an outsider to that body, is more easily positioned as being the threat and is therefore excluded.

⁵³⁰ Robbie Duschinsky, “Abjection and self-identity: towards a revised account of purity and impurity,” *The Sociological Review* 61 (2013): 717.

⁵³¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵³² *Ibid.*

⁵³³ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 215.

⁵³⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*

In the same moment of being excluded from the community, Shirley also abjects the townspeople as being a threat to her world and removes them from her life, but with far more detrimental effects. Jackson had always seen herself as being above her local community, she had, as Oppenheimer notes, '[a] sense of superiority that was as aristocratic as it was intellectual. [Her friend] Helen Feeley heard her refer to the locals as "peasants"'.⁵³⁶ However, despite this potentially unconscious attempt at self-preservation from feelings of alienation through positioning herself as superior, she suffered a deep psychological blow in removing herself from the community at the same time as they rejected her. It became for Jackson, 'an oppressive weight, which grew heavier and heavier every day',⁵³⁷ and, growing in intensity, it would eventually crush her completely. By the Thanksgiving celebrations of 1962, Jackson had become a complete recluse. Oppenheimer writes, '[h]er safety boundaries, which had grown tighter and tighter over the past months, had suddenly narrowed even further, down to almost nothing. She was unable to leave the house; she was unable, for much of the time, even to leave her bedroom.'⁵³⁸ Trying desperately to separate herself from the community that she now considered to be abject, she formed new borders of safety and became entrenched in the fixed mind that they would keep her from the horrors of the world around her. Kristeva notes, '[a] deviser of territories, language, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.'⁵³⁹ The boundaries that made her feel safe grew smaller over time and the demarcation of the inside versus the outside went from the parameters of her property, to inside the house, to eventually being stuck inside the confines of her bedroom. At this point in her life, she felt psychologically porous, without the boundaries to protect her from the abject community, which she now felt had almost entirely engulfed her universe. She therefore added these layers of physical borders to more distinctly demarcate her world. Inside multiple layers of physical walls to keep her from the perverse abject community that was ever seeking to transgress her borders and threaten her world.

Just as her writing had previously reflected her experiences of the abject and perverse world as she saw it, so too did her writing reflect it at this time. Jackson started working on *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a means through which she could explore and expose the sinister reality in which she lived. Of this text Oppenheimer remarks, '[n]o book had ever been closer to mirroring her own fears, and no book would be as ultimately damaging'.⁵⁴⁰ Just as it can be

⁵³⁶ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 143.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁵³⁹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁵⁴⁰ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 236.

understood that she had written *Hill House* in an attempt to work through the abject experience of her mother, this book can be seen to present a direct confrontation with her daily oppressive fears of the outside world. This was an all-consuming experience that she was confronted with consciously every day. Oppenheimer notes, '[t]he project would in some ways be closer to the bone than any she had tried before; she would be going deeper into her own fears, and perhaps something in her wanted to discourage the journey, sensing perhaps, that it could be dangerous.'⁵⁴¹ This journey into the abject horrors she was living through would be at once both a repeating of this horror, a daily reminder of it, and at the same time an act through which she could attempt to confront and work through this lived experience. In writing this text, Oppenheimer asserts, 'life and art became inextricably intertwined for Shirley and the line between the two worlds dissolved.'⁵⁴² It is the collision of these two worlds for Shirley that made this text so difficult for her to write and what ultimately made the text so palpably real and therefore successful.

Shirley Jackson exposed the raw nerve endings of her deepest fears in this fictional text, so that she might attempt to master the pain and overcome it. This thesis will now turn to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, in an approach that mirrors that of the previous analysis of *Hill House*, in order to explore the abject content within the text in light of Kristeva's theorisations. It will explore the text without making overt connections to Jackson's biography in the literary analysis, as this is a distinctly fictional text, despite the overtones of the text being so directly interwoven with her own fears. Following the literary analysis, it will discuss the text, as illuminated by Kristevan theory, with reference to Jackson's biographical experience more broadly to discuss her writing and this encounter with the abject in the guise of community rejection, cunning murder, and hypocrisy.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 232.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 236.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

The abject presents itself in two interwoven, seemingly contradictory, experiences within *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The difficulty when reading this narrative lies with attempting to both distinguish and align oneself with the 'clean and proper', as both subsets of characters, the Blackwood sisters and the townsfolk, are equally abject and abominable. Through being situated in the first-person limited narration of Mary Katherine Blackwood (hereinafter referred to as Merricat), one is positioned to see the world through her eyes, but her dark and sinister thoughts are frequently objectionable. However, as will be highlighted in this section, so, too, are the actions of the townspeople. This text merges boundaries and ambiguously situates no one character as being the one with which to identify. The boundaries between who and what is 'inside', and therefore considered to be clean, and who and what is 'outside' and to be removed, is difficult to demarcate. This is a fundamental tenant of the abject, as Kristeva describes it to be, 'a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside',⁵⁴³ which further works to exacerbate the abject nature of this text as the outside(r) and inside(r) are indistinguishable. Both are deserving of being 'ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable'.⁵⁴⁴ The success of this text, in a similar manner to that of *Hill House*, is precisely this tension and complexity, which makes it a rich text for discussion in light of Kristevan theorisations. It is in reading this text through this theoretical framework that the significance of the narrative shifts and new understandings of the disturbing nature of the text can be unveiled.

To untangle the abject features of this text, the analysis will be thematically constructed so as to provide a more holistic view of the text alongside the theory of abjection. A key theme to this text that pulls the overall narrative together is the notion of the threatening outsider. As outlined above, this operates from the perspective of both the Blackwoods and the people of the town, as both perceive each other as the 'Other' to be removed. This underpinning narrative device works to emphasise the abject nature of both parties. To explore this further, the following analysis will approach both subsets of characters in turn, framed by Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* to understand better the sinister nature of the abject discomfort experienced in reading this text. Following this, the emphasis on borders and boundaries will be considered in light of the theory of abjection to bring to the fore this key element to the text and the repetitive concerns Merricat has with protection from the outside threats. These features will illuminate the abject significance of the text

⁵⁴³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

and particularly draw attention to the connections this has with Jackson's own experiences. However, in order to ensure the text is not over laden with biographical reflections, the considerations for Jackson's biography will follow separately to the literary analysis. This section will first turn to explore Merricat and Constance Blackwood before considering the townspeople, to give focus to the abject nature of both character groups. It will thereafter follow with a focus on the emphasis throughout the text on borders and boundaries to appreciate the import of this narrative device in light of the theory of abjection.

The abruptness of the remorseless and cruel characterisation of the narrator, Merricat, is a feature that is present from the first page of the text. As she walks to the store to buy her supplies from the village, she notes, 'I always thought about rot when I came toward the row of stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village.'⁵⁴⁵ The imagery created by Merricat in this description of her desire to see the villagers decaying with black rot that consumes them from the inside, immediately strikes the abject depiction of decay that Kristeva describes, '[a] wound with blood or pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay [...] *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.'⁵⁴⁶ It is at this point that, Kristeva asserts, '[m]y body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.'⁵⁴⁷ In Merricat's fantasies one is presented with an abject image of rotting flesh, which continues to assault the senses in its stark description and references to a burning pain. Furthermore, the rot is specifically one that corrodes from within the subject, '[i]t is death infecting life',⁵⁴⁸ as Kristeva describes. In the image Merricat projects, the borders of the subjects have been infiltrated with the painful burning rot and have been transgressed with the abject. In line with this, Merricat muses, '[p]erhaps someday soon Jim Donell would die; perhaps there was already a rot growing inside him that was going to kill him.'⁵⁴⁹ The specificity of the rot being located within a named character further works to reinforce the image of the corporeality of human bodies. In reading these passages, Merricat's description entangles the reader with experiencing the abject nature of this fantasy through highlighting the body as being able to be transgressed and infected.

Merricat's thoughts are shared through first person limited narration and so the inner monologue of her cruelty viciously seeps through the pages as one is forced to see the world through her perspective. References to murder and death are apparent in every chapter and particularly stem from Merricat's fantasies for those who threaten the stability of her world. Whilst

⁵⁴⁵ Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 6.

⁵⁴⁶ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴⁹ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 12.

the murder of her family, for which she is guilty, hangs over the text as something of a dramatic irony in relation to the villager's condemnation of Constance, it is the detailed sinister imaginings of Merricat that continue to pervade the text. The threatening fantasies are directed towards the villagers and her cousin Charles, who breaks through the boundaries of what she considers to be her secure fortress. On the note of the rot that she wished on the villagers, she thinks of them, 'rotting away and curling in pain and crying out loud; I wanted them doubled up and crying on the ground in front of me.'⁵⁵⁰ She continues, '[t]heir tongues will burn, I thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their throats will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel torment hotter than a thousand fires.'⁵⁵¹ For her cousin, Charles, she considers, 'I could turn him into a fly and drop him into a spider's web and watch him tangled and helpless and struggling, shut into the body of a dying buzzing fly; I could wish him dead until he died. I could fasten him to a tree and keep him there until he grew into the trunk and bark grew over his mouth.'⁵⁵² The thoughts are disturbing in their specificity and have a child-like destructive imagination. Merricat, however, is eighteen years old, which makes their threatening nature deliberate, conscious, and all the more unnerving. It is the considered approach Merricat takes with the thoughts of killing others, the detail with which she expresses her desire, that heightens their disturbing nature. Kristeva notes, '[a]bjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles [...]'⁵⁵³ In this sinister behaviour Merricat becomes abject. She is a subject that cannot be assimilated and is therefore in need of being ejected. However, as the protagonist, with first person narration, the reader is subject to her scheming immorality throughout the novel. After noting that she would like to 'step on [Charles] after he was dead'⁵⁵⁴ she highlights that she makes her 'mind charitable towards Charles'⁵⁵⁵ in order to be able to smile and speak kindly to him despite her hatred. She epitomises the abject scheming character, one who does multiple callous acts to attempt to remove Charles from the house, including eventually burning the house almost to ruin, but is also capable of smiling sweetly when required.

Merricat introduces herself in the first lines of the novel in a manner that epitomises her sinister characterisation. Just as she smiles sweetly for Charles, despite planning his death in multiple ways, she introduces herself initially pleasantly, but ends jarringly with hinting towards her callous capability, 'I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and

⁵⁵⁰ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 16.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁵³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁵⁴ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 80.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom.⁵⁵⁶ This understanding of her character as being one tainted with sinister thoughts is furthered by her later actions which highlight her immorality, including the admission that she is the culprit for her family's murder. Moving beyond her dark descriptive imaginings, as discussed above, into reality, she manifests this abject behaviour in being 'a terror that dissembles'⁵⁵⁷ when in a short scene she narrates, 'I found a nest of baby snakes near the creek and killed them all; I dislike snakes and Constance had never asked me not to.'⁵⁵⁸ Merricat's moral compass appears non-existent in her thoughts and actions. She makes the decision to kill the baby snakes based on her instinct to end those creatures that she dislikes, her family included. The childlike thought processes show a glimmer into the mindset of a character that cannot understand her acts in light of morality, empathy, and consequence, rendering her a sinister abject figure. In addition to this, she is fully aware that Constance is the person attributed to the murder of her family, despite being acquitted at the trial, and allows her to take the blame continuously, whilst suffering the wrath of the village.

Toward the end of the novel Merricat asserts "I am going to put death in all [the villagers] food and watch them die."⁵⁵⁹ To which Constance replies, "[t]he way you did before?"⁵⁶⁰ In this scene Constance's admission of her awareness of Merricat's crimes makes her equally culpable, which is only furthered by her acknowledgement of Merricat's murderous premeditation in the later exchange, when she states;

"I put it in the sugar."

"I know. I knew then."

"You never used sugar."

"No."

"So I put it in the sugar."⁵⁶¹

In these final scenes the admission of the murder is only made more abject through Constance's complicity. Furthermore, Constance admits to being the person who taught Merricat all the information on poisonous plants,⁵⁶² suggesting that despite her supposedly kind, selfless and

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁵⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁵⁸ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 53.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁶² 'I had made sure of what to say to him before I came to the table. "The *Amanita phalloides*," I said to him, "holds three different poisons. There is amanitin, which works slowly and is most potent. There is phalloidin, which acts at once, and there is phallin, which dissolves red corpuscles, although it is the least potent. The first symptoms do not appear until seven to twelve hours after eating, in some cases not before twenty-four or even forty hours. The symptoms begin with violent stomach pains, cold sweat, vomiting-" [...] Constance was laughing. "Oh, Merricat," she said, laughing through the words, "you *are* silly. I taught her," she told Charles,

motherly characterisation, there is a sinister capability lurking beneath the surface of her, too. The abject is, as Kristeva notes, '[t]he traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior [...] premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.'⁵⁶³ Merricat's criminality is cunning and clearly well-considered to ensure Constance did not suffer the consequences of her murderous ambitions. In this admission one is presented with a daughter, or potentially two daughters, that could knowingly and willingly murder their family with such precision, so as to effect only those that Merricat had determined deserving. This crime works to destabilise the fragile notions of the social construct of the family, which, in turn, emphasises the abject qualities lying at the fringes of all social constructs, including the law and community values. It is in this sinister immorality that the abject seeps into the text and unsettles the foundations on which society is based. It conflates two notions, the presupposed loyalty of family with the scheming premeditation of murder, leaving an ambiguity that emphasises not only the fragility of social constructs, but the ease with which what is considered to be pure can become contaminated. The ease with which 'identity, system, order'⁵⁶⁴ can be undone. The collision of two contrasting associations is made iconic in the motif of the sugar. Something perceived to be pure and sweet to ingest is rendered abject and contaminated, like the image of the internal rot Merricat wishes on the village. There is a sense that the text is purposefully drawing attention to the abject as it lays at the fringes of society and can remain hidden in that which on the surface appears familiar and safe is proven to be otherwise, as Kristeva notes, 'it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.'⁵⁶⁵

The performative role of food and consumption has an important function in the text and is frequently described with evocative sensory precision. Every meal is meticulously planned and performed with exacting specification, for example, for Helen Clarke's weekly visits, 'Constance had set the table as usual, with the lovely thin rose-coloured cups our mother had always used, and two silver dishes, one with small sandwiches and one with the very special rum cakes.'⁵⁶⁶ One way to understand better the import of this motif is an understanding of the primary experience of abjection, in which the child forms their own subjectivity at the refusal of the mother's milk (food). This moment is the point at which the subject becomes an 'I' at the expense of their own death, which is subsequently experienced in moments where one encounters the abject. Refusal of the mother's milk is parodied to some extent in this text, whereby Merricat is frequently sent to bed

"there are mushrooms by the creek and in the fields and I made her learn the deadly ones. Oh, Merricat."
Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 73.

⁵⁶³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 24.

without food for misbehaving. It is this pattern of Merricat's frequent misbehaviour and resultant punishment that the text alludes to being the cause of her murderous actions. In the primary experience of abjection, it is the child's refusal of the parent's food that separates the subject from their parents as they are rendered abject. However, it is in this later experience for Merricat, the withholding of food that the parents would otherwise offer, that she makes her final separation from her parents and in the process renders not them, but herself, as abject. For Merricat, the act of poisoning the food can be understood to be symbolic of her initial separations, as Kristeva describes, "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it. "I" expel it [...] I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*."⁵⁶⁷ In murdering her parents, Merricat establishes herself as a separate subject, no longer connected, or reliant on them, on any terms. Symbolically Merricat is 'in the process of becoming an other at the expense of [her] own death',⁵⁶⁸ particularly in relation to the death of her moral humanity and in so doing becoming an abject figure. At the expense of her parent's physical death and her symbolic death, she severs any parental connection but beyond the scope of primary abjection and ends their lives.

Alongside the abject characterisation of the Blackwoods, there are the equally disturbing actions of the villagers that will now be considered. Both of these subsets of characters work as opposing forces in the text, each finding the other abominable but each displaying actions of sinister capability. For the villagers, the Blackwood sisters represent ultimate immorality, particularly Constance who is in receipt of their contempt for their assumptions that she poisoned her family. The threatening capability of the villagers is initially perceived through Merricat's description, however, as an unreliable narrator, her perception is tinged with hyperboles that suggest it might be wrongfully placed. She imagines, 'that there were plenty of rotting hearts in the village',⁵⁶⁹ however, as discussed above, this is alongside her wish for the villagers to be burning inside with painful rot, which points towards this being part of a wider fantasy. She furthers her consideration of the villagers as being internally corrupted when she wonders, 'what would happen if I stepped down from the curb onto the road; would there be a quick, almost unintended swerve toward me?'⁵⁷⁰ These thoughts initially appear fuelled by her own anxieties and the truth behind their accusations are unfounded. However, as she continues her journey through the village to get groceries, the

⁵⁶⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁶⁹ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 7.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

evidence that these concerns are more than the anxious perception of a self-conscious person with an overactive and dark imagination mounts.

Merricat's perception of the rotting hearts of the village proves to be accurate as the novel progresses, however in the opening scene the capability for cruelty lurks below the surface and is only revealed indirectly. Villagers Jim Donell and Joe Dunham provide an insight into this when they confront Merricat about a 'rumour' that she and her sister are soon to be moving away. The manner in which Jim directs himself toward Merricat, in both his threatening body language and insincerity of tone, suggests that this is less of a rumour and more of request that the town would like them to leave. He remarks, "[y]ou just say the word, Miss Mary Katherine, and we'll all come out and help you pack. Just you say the word, Merricat."⁵⁷¹ Although the server in the diner, Stella, half-heartedly asks Jim and Joe to stop, once Merricat has exited the building she notes, 'by the time I got outside all I could hear was the laughter, the two of them and Stella.'⁵⁷² The bullying of Merricat by Jim and Joe displays the contempt the people of the town have for the Blackwood family, but what makes this scene more effective in its abject poignancy is the laughter following it by Stella. She is the abject 'friend who stabs you' with a 'hatred that smiles'.⁵⁷³ Her performance of friendship and smiles being undermined by her laughter before Merricat is out of earshot, heightens the painfully abject nature of the townspeople, who in this scene foreshadow their capability for cruelty.

The multiple unpleasant, but not necessarily outwardly cruel, interactions Merricat has with the people of the town builds towards the crescendo of the novel and the villagers' final display of sinister immorality. The Blackwood home is burning down, and Cousin Charles goes to the town to plea for help in putting the fire out.⁵⁷⁴ Soon the townspeople are swarming around the house watching in eager anticipation as the house burns. Merricat notes, 'everyone in the village was there, looking up and watching',⁵⁷⁵ and, later, 'looking up and laughing at the fire'.⁵⁷⁶ The laughter echoes that of Stella in the opening chapter, but this is en masse, a whole town is looking at their family home burning down and laughing at the destruction. The town firemen come and start to put the fire out, however, in hiding, Merricat overhears the distinct pleas of a woman in the crowd;

"Why not let it burn?" a woman's voice came loudly, laughing [...] "Why not let it burn?" the woman called insistently, and one of the dark men going in and out of our front door turned

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁷⁴ It is important to note that the fire was caused by Merricat, in her final attempt to remove Charles from the house through making it unrecognisable to him, and Charles' concern is for the assets contained within the house, not for the Blackwood family.

⁵⁷⁵ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 103.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 104.

and waved and grinned. "We're the firemen," he called back, "we got to put it out." "Let it burn," the woman called.⁵⁷⁷

It is the same abject wickedness that plagues the characterisation of Merricat in this respect. It is the flagrant disregard for socially acceptable behaviour. As Kristeva states, '[a]ny crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.'⁵⁷⁸ This scene in particular touches on the note of hypocritical revenge, as the crowd seemingly justify their actions by believing that what they are doing is punishing the sisters for the murder of the family, but in so doing, exclaim, "'[s]hould have burned it down years ago" [...] "and them in it."⁵⁷⁹ The destructive hypocrisy of their following actions further work to solidify the abject nature of the characters in this scene. Once the fire is extinguished the fragile nature of law and societal order is exposed, as the chief fireman, 'bent down, searching thoughtfully, and finally, while everyone watched, he took up a rock. In complete silence he turned slowly and then raised his arms and smashed the rock through one of the great tall windows of our mother's drawing room.'⁵⁸⁰ Following this, '[a] wall of laughter rose and grew behind him [as] they moved like a wave at our house.'⁵⁸¹ It is in this moment that the fragility of the foundation on which society is built is revealed. The chief fireman, who should otherwise be representative of system and order, exemplifies the ease with which the abject nature of human society can be unleashed. This scene displays the hypocritical revenge and callousness that lurks at the borders of society, which are kept in check by way of abjection manifesting in the law. Once the figurehead, the symbol, of the law is compromised, the 'immoral, sinister, scheming and shady'⁵⁸² aspects of human nature can be unleashed.

In line with this discussion is the imagery portrayed in this scene of the mob acting out in animalistic exultation. Framing this animalistic behaviour in abjection, Kristeva notes;

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.⁵⁸³

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁷⁹ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 105.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 12-13.

In this scene the threatening world of animalism breaches the cultural boundaries that protect social order. The townspeople form a pack of destructive creatures, positioning the house as symbolic of the Blackwood family, and moving in on the house like a predator that has seized its prey. Merricat describes, '[t]he other of the drawing-room windows crashed, this time from the inside, and I saw that it had been shattered by the lamp [...] I heard Constance's harp go over with a musical cry.'⁵⁸⁴ The destruction of the harp as being symbolic of cultural appreciation amplifies the animal-esque behaviour of the villagers. Kristeva notes, '[t]here, the abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.'⁵⁸⁵ This highlights the need for abjection of such behaviour in order to re-establish the cultural boundaries that safeguard societal order. The villagers continue to smash all items belonging to the family and break all the windows in the house and stop only at the potential of turning away from destroying a symbol of the Blackwood family and toward their true target, Merricat and Constance Blackwood. Having encircled the women, Merricat narrates, 'they were all around us, pushing and laughing and trying to get close [...] pressed together by the feeling of people all around us', as a nameless figure in the group calls out, "'[p]ut them back in the house and start the fire all over again.'"⁵⁸⁶ The behaviour in this scene is akin to that of pack-animals hunting their prey and moving in for the kill. Merricat seizes her opportunity at a break in the circle and holds Constance's hand as they run for cover in the trees. The behaviour of the villagers is symbolic of the abject destructive nature that can be understood to be at the 'rotting' core of human society, kept only in check by law and order. If these structures were to crumble, as suggested in this scene, the threatening world of animals and animalism would be unleashed.

Through exploring the Blackwood sisters and the villagers consecutively in light of Kristeva's theorisations, the similarities between their behaviour and the ways in which they speak to the abject have been foregrounded. They both manifest Kristeva's theoretical writing and mirror similar attributes, despite being set out as being opposed to one another in the text itself. There is no one subset of characters in this text that might be considered to be clean and proper, in the Kristevan sense, both are in need of abjection. Both Merricat and the people of the village position each other as an 'Other' to be removed, but they are both proven to be capable of exposing the fragility of the law through their sinister and scheming behaviour. It is this ambiguous quality that resonates as being the conflicting element within the text that operates to make it an uncomfortable reading experience, as Kristeva notes, 'abjection is above all ambiguity'.⁵⁸⁷ This tension is recognised as

⁵⁸⁴ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 106.

⁵⁸⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁵⁸⁶ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 108.

⁵⁸⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 9.

being a key feature of abject literature as described by Kristeva. She notes, '[o]ne might thus say that with such literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality.'⁵⁸⁸ All characters in this text have crossed over these dichotomous categories; they are impure with rotting hearts and sinful in their crimes. This text is a compelling source of abject characters whose thoughts and actions function to emphasise the instability of social order and confront the reader with the ambiguous nature of human experience, which is tinged with impurity and sin, as human beings are essentially borderless subjects with the capacity to behave and think as the characters do.

Building on this notion of borders, the final consideration for this thesis when framing *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as an abject text, is the recurrent motif of boundaries. This feature is repetitively described, demarcated, checked, and reinforced throughout the text. Merricat in particular plays detailed attention to boundaries and sees them as being a protective shield against the intrusion of the contamination that lies 'outside'. The literal and figurative borders referenced throughout the narrative are regarded highly by Merricat who considers anything outside of these borders as being 'vulnerable and exposed'.⁵⁸⁹ These references feature as a continual reminder that what is outside is a threatening 'Other' against which the Blackwood sisters must be safeguarded. Merricat consider the villagers as an abject contamination that seeks to infiltrate the body of their property, reflecting Kristeva's description of the abject; '[i]t lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.'⁵⁹⁰ However, it is important to note Kristeva's distinction that the abject is 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.'⁵⁹¹ For the purposes of this reading, positioning the villagers as being representative symbolically of the abject, as has been discussed above, is key to unlocking an understanding of the text that is illuminated with abject significance. The physical borders in this text thus become symbolic of the socially constructed borders, i.e. rules, system, order, cleanliness, which safeguard against the abject behaviour the villagers represent.

It is important to reemphasise, however, that the abject is also present within the actions of the Blackwood sisters and it can be understood that it is precisely this ambiguity that burdens Merricat and causes her to reinforce the separations, as the 'rotting hearts' of the villagers are also present within herself and Constance, as Kristeva describes, 'weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject.' Merricat's separation from the villagers

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸⁹ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 5.

⁵⁹⁰ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 4.

as being representatives of the abject, are unconsciously reflective of herself within them and, as such, it is herself, too, from which she seeks to separate. She ejects the villagers from the 'scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable', but her contempt for their evils are to be found also within herself and her actions. However, as the perspective of the narrative is that of Merricat, the following analysis shall be positioned from her logic insofar as she considers Constance and herself to be on the 'inside' and uncontaminated by the abject 'rot' at the heart of the villagers.

Merricat references consistently the borders of the Blackwood estate, which act as the thin veil that separates the family from the villagers. They are materially constructed, but flimsy in strength, as only a wire fence separates the village from the estate. Merricat notes the sign on the fence, 'PRIVATE NO TRESPASSING' and remarks, 'no one could go past that.'⁵⁹² On entering the gate to the driveway, she asserts, '[o]nce the padlock was securely fastened behind me I was safe.'⁵⁹³ Whilst this features in the text to emphasise the value Merricat places on clearly demarcated borders, it can also be understood to be a representation of the subject's need to see their body as whole and impermissible to the outside. The subject of abjection continuously seeks to relocate their being as separate from the abject, searching for the means with which they can protect themselves from being compromised, as Kristeva contends, 'braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own'.⁵⁹⁴ Merricat keeps the borders of the estate, representative here of her subjectivity, in check to devise the territory that is separate from that of the contaminating people of the village. Merricat notes, '[a]lways on Wednesday morning I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken and the gates were securely locked [...] it was a pleasure to know, every Wednesday morning, that we were safe for another week.'⁵⁹⁵ Adding to her Wednesday checks of the parameters of the fence line, she equally creates magical talismans to protect her from the abject forces that lay beyond the boundaries, such as a book nailed to a tree and coins buried underground. It is this continuous striving for protective layers that keep her and her sister safe within the borders of the estate that provides a key focus for Merricat's attention. Kristeva writes of the abject, '[a] deviser of territories [...] the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines [...] constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.'⁵⁹⁶ It is with the knowledge that these wires could be easily clipped or climbed over, that Merricat recognises the

⁵⁹² Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 18.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁹⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 10.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

fluidity, or rather the frailty, of the protective borders. She routinely checks and reinforces them through magical objects to devise her territory and demarcate her universe as separate.

On the note of the talismans that protect Merricat and Constance it is interesting to note the role that religious practices and doctrines play in abjection and how these ideas can be understood as manifesting in the text. The Blackwood sister's ritualistic behaviours such as repetitive daily cleaning of the home and Merricat's belief in objects and words holding magical powers are akin to those associated with religious practices. Kristeva recognises that religion has conditioned certain behaviours in culture to be taboo, abject, and associated with the defilement of the self. She states, '[a]bjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution [...] It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up.'⁵⁹⁷ Merricat's belief that anyone outside the remaining Blackwood family contaminates the body of the estate leads her to seek ways to purify the defilement and strengthen the magic that keeps their world clean and sacred. Sensing a threatening invasion, Merricat narrates;

I decided that I would choose three powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come. I wrote the first word –*melody*– in the apricot jam on my toast with the handle of a spoon and then put the toast in my mouth and ate it very quickly. I was one-third safe.⁵⁹⁸

Each word in turn is followed with a ritualised behaviour that enhances its strength and confirms its use for protection. Following the magic word '*melody*', she determines the sacred nature of both the words '*Gloucester*'⁵⁹⁹ and '*Pegasus*'.⁶⁰⁰ In religious practices the abject is, Kristeva asserts, 'a threatening otherness - but always nameable, always totalizable.'⁶⁰¹ For Merricat, the abject is perceived as being any person that falls outside the lands of the Blackwood estate, they are a threatening otherness against which her rituals protect. She purifies the land with her powerful objects, burying materially valuable objects in the ground or nailing things to trees to ensure the land is not permissible and the borders of their existence are reinforced. This behaviour can be understood as being like the religious practices that are 'means of *purifying* the abject', as Kristeva describes, ensuring the body (here, the Blackwood estate) is bordered, uncontaminated and cleansed, through magical rituals and the incessant need to lock and relock doors and padlocks.

⁵⁹⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁵⁹⁸ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 44.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁰¹ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 17.

Her ritualised practice, however, proves to be in vain. Cousin Charles' arrival foreshadows future invasion, and Merricat thinks, '[i]t was because the book had fallen from the tree; I had neglected to replace it at once and our wall of safety had cracked.'⁶⁰² The crack in her magical border reinforcement proves fatal and contamination from the outside floods in by the end of the novel. The villagers storm the estate to watch the house burn and once the fire is extinguished, they further flood into the house. Merricat and Constance hide from the villagers as Merricat watches, 'the great feet of the men stepping across our doorsill, dragging their hoses, bringing filth and confusion and danger into our house.'⁶⁰³ The village firemen, despite their initial valiant efforts to extinguish the fire are perceived by Merricat as a threat to be removed. Seen in this light, she can be understood to be sensing the danger of permitting the abject to cross the borders and senses the danger that is to unfold as a result; the total collapse of their boundaries as the house is destroyed by the villagers. At this point in abjection, Kristeva notes, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away'⁶⁰⁴ as the subject is 'at the border of [their] condition as a living being'.⁶⁰⁵ Merricat, the 'tireless builder',⁶⁰⁶ has worked to demarcate and reinforce the borders of their universe, but it has proven futile in opposing the abject, which seeps in destructively. The breaking down of their world places them at the borders of their condition as separate beings.

The desolation of the abject leaves their subjectivity in ruins. They must start again to mark out the territories of themselves as bordered and contained subjects. Kristeva asserts that it is at this point, "'subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject.'⁶⁰⁷ Merricat takes note of the destruction after the fire and vandalism, '[t]wo of the chairs had been smashed, and the floor was horrible with broken dishes and glasses and broken boxes [...] Jars of jam and syrup and catsup had been shattered against the walls.'⁶⁰⁸ The description continues at length, considering each object in turn. They stand in horror at the wake of the devastation, perceiving their home to be contaminated and condemned. Responding to this, instinctively, Merricat and Constance begin their ritualised cleaning behaviours and reinforce the boundaries of their home through using wood planks to nail the broken windows in the kitchen shut. The immediate response of cleaning can be understood to be signifying the process of abjection, removing defilement and filth, reconstituting the inside as purified and whole. In this same action, as the rest of the home is now

⁶⁰² Ibid, 58.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁰⁴ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 114.

open, all windows broken, the upstairs in ashes, they devise new boundaries for their home and relocate their existence to the kitchen, which is structurally the only room in the house to have survived. However, despite all the windows being broken, Merricat says to Constance mechanically, “I will go and make sure that the front door is locked”⁶⁰⁹ as though this acts now as a talisman that will secure the open wounds of their home.

The abject pervades this text and operates in multiple discomfoting ways. As in many of Jackson’s texts, there are no subjects that are without fault, but in this text in particular the characters’ thoughts and actions render them as abject. It is an unnerving text that speaks to the sinister capabilities of society and situates the ‘rotting hearts’ of humankind as key to understanding this. The text is overladen with references to borders but highlights the ease with which these are dismantled and the ‘inside’ is contaminated, which speaks to the experience of abjection, the fragility of social order and the ever-present knowledge of the borderless condition of human beings. To fully understand this text as one reflective of experience, this thesis will now turn to Shirley Jackson and her experiences of the forms of abjection present within the novel, to illuminate the text with greater significance as a process of repetition compulsion and working through after abjection.

Haunting Abjection: Shirley Jackson’s Abject Borders

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a text that spoke directly to Shirley Jackson’s own fears during the time of her mental decline in the latter part of her life. Whilst, as Oppenheimer notes, ‘her writing had always reflected her experience, what she saw’,⁶¹⁰ this text tore through the fabric of her world and lay bare her terror for the sinister nature of humanity, which she had been able to perceive since a young age. She, too, was made to feel that the threatening world and people around her, in particular the villagers of North Bennington, were seeking a way into her home to destroy her. Whilst this text is not to be considered to be autobiographical, there is a distinct sense that during the time of writing this text, she lived in constant crippling fear of her boundaries of safety collapsing and her world being infiltrated by the outside, which links the experience of the Blackwood sisters acutely with her own. This text can therefore be positioned as one that cut through reality and comingled the threatening imaginings of Jackson, her true fears, with her fictional writing. Building on this notion, the boundaries between reality and fiction can be further understood to be dissolved through the two main characters being so reflective of Shirley Jackson

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁶¹⁰ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 75.

herself; she lived in the characters and connected with their experiences as the boundaries between life and art dissolved. Oppenheimer asserts, '*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, would reflect the final refinement of the process: two women characters, one an explorer, a challenger, the other a contented domestic homebody – the yin and yang of Shirley's own inner self [...]'⁶¹¹ Merricat and Constance can therefore be seen to reflect the two sides of Jackson, but both live with the same fears and ultimately meet the same end in being imprisoned within their homes at the hands of the sinister capabilities of the outside world. There is a sense that through these characters Jackson could satisfy her own fantasies of annihilation through the abject invasion of the outside, which will be discussed further below. In this respect, the text can be understood as being a chance for Jackson to repeat her fears through her writing and work through this experience more closely than she had been able to in any of her previous texts. This section will explore the writing of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a text that enabled Jackson to repeat her fears of abject contamination in her fiction, living out the horror through the characters, in order to attempt to work through them.

During the time of Jackson's mental decline, she initially found writing to be an impossible task. She was a prolific writer of fiction and could generate ideas from the smallest inspiration, but the deeply rooted anxiety and depression clouded her vision for seeing narratives come to life in her writing. She kept a journal during this time in her attempts to sit at her typewriter to produce something of publishable quality. She would write streams of consciousness, trying to work through her angst. Oppenheimer quotes one of these passages.

"We are afraid of being someone else and doing the things someone else wants us to do and of being taken and used by someone else, some other guilt-ridden conscience that lives on and on in our minds, something we build ourselves and never recognize, but this is fear, not a named sin. Then it is fear itself, fear of self that I am writing about . . . fear and guilt and their destruction of identity . . . Why am I so afraid?"⁶¹²

This passage is laden with significance for this thesis' postulations. When appreciated through the theorisations of Kristeva's writing on abjection, the experiences Jackson describes here reflect that of encountering the abject. She writes explicitly here of fear; a fear of losing herself, fear of being a (separate) self, fear of the identity she has constructed being destroyed. These fears are those present within the experience of abjection, as the subject is separated from the abject 'at the expense of [their] own death.'⁶¹³ The subject is brought to the edge of their existence and confronts

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 125.

⁶¹² Ibid., 233.

⁶¹³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

a terror that disassembles the fabric of their being, annihilating the construction of identity. She notes that these fears reside in her 'guilt-ridden conscience', which could be understood to be that of the superego, which acts to protect the subject from the contamination of the abject and admonishes the guilt-ridden subject in the process of excluding the abject. For Jackson, the threatening world of the abject outside leaves her feeling exposed to 'someone else', a threat that she cannot name but recognises it would take her and use her to the point of her destruction.

Writing became the process through which she could expose these fears. On her typewriter she repeats like a mantra, "[w]riting is the way out writing is the way out writing is the way out".⁶¹⁴ Positioned in this light, she can be understood to be unconsciously recognising the need to write in order to free herself of the abject fears that were closing in on her. It is here that she embarks upon the text that entangles her subjectivity more so than any text preceding it, cutting closer to the bone of her own fears. It breeches the borders between self and character, life and art, in a way that positions her dangerously close to the edge of reality. Unlike other texts present in this thesis, this text was written at the verge of mental collapse and a point at which reality was losing any distinguishing quality to that of imagination. In this text and in her life, Jackson was imprisoned in the home, a place that became the physical walls of safety that separated her from the contaminating world around her. Key to understanding this as an experience of abjection is her fear of the loss of 'self' should she open the borders that contain her subjectivity. This manifests literally in the physical walls of her home, but psychologically it can be understood that these are representative of the borders that contain her subjectivity. To open them to the 'outside' would result in the loss of herself as a separate and contained subject. This forms the basis of the fear present at the primary moment of abjection in which the subject separates themselves from the mother and becomes an 'I'. In making this link, it can be understood that Jackson's psyche, desperate to remain contained, projects these fears into the physical walls that contain her body. This is an important consideration for the thesis and one that marks this text out as being a 'live' abject experience during the process of writing, rather than one that can be repeated at a chronological distance.

For Peppiatt, Ernaux, and even to a greater extent early Jackson in writing the *Haunting of Hill House*, repeating the experience of abjection in order to work through it was a confrontation with a past abject trauma. For Jackson in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the abject trauma was a present threat, existing in her reality while she was attempting to work through it. Discussing abject literature Kristeva asserts, 'such texts call for a softening of the superego. Writing them implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only

⁶¹⁴ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, 258.

by means of the displacements of verbal play.⁶¹⁵ This is an action we see in the writing of Peppiatt, Ernaux and early Jackson. In writing these texts they soften the power of the superego, which would otherwise pull them away from the trauma of the abject experiences they have endured. In so doing, they are able to put themselves in these psychological spaces to repeat and encounter once again the horror of the abject through displacing it into their writing and attempt to work through it in the process. However, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* this process is not so distinct. Jackson is indeed able to see herself in the place of this text, but the difficulty lies with the ability to thrust aside the experience through verbal play. She can be considered to be, as Oppenheimer has outlined above, present in the characters and living through the horror of the abject as she is writing the text, unable to thrust it aside as verbal play. She also does not have the perspective of time afforded to the previous case studies, whereby they could see the episode of trauma after abjection that they could go back to and repeat in their writing. In this case, Jackson is still operating within the dense fog of meaninglessness in the abject and attempting to navigate her way through it, holding steadfast to the knowledge that 'writing is the way out' of this experience.

This is an important distinction for this thesis and one that adds to the complexity of the understanding of the experience after abjection. If the subject is firmly situated within the clutches of the abject, it is significant to consider to what extent the subject can repeat in order to work through the experience, if it is live and active. Freud's writing on repetition compulsion in 'Repeating, Remembering and Working Through', concerns the repetition of a past event, one that the patient does not remember but acts out in their present experience in some form. However, as with the previous case studies, the compulsion to repeat encounters with the abject is rooted in the primary experience of abjection, rather than the later experience itself exclusively. Understood in this light, it is this which forms the repressed past traumatic event that one is subsequently presented with at the point of encountering the abject in later life and feels compelled to repeat. In affirming this distinction, it works towards explaining the repetition compulsion of the previous three case studies and also Jackson's present compulsion whilst writing *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. In the previous case studies, the subjects repeat their memories of experiencing abjection - horrifying artwork, abortion, maternal fears – to encounter the trauma of the later abject experience which is attached to the primary experience of abjection in an attempt to work through it. In this case study, Jackson, whilst not repeating a past trauma to encounter the abject as she is living through it at the time of writing, can be understood to be using this text as a means through which she can engage with the fears present in her current experience of the abject, in order to confront and repeat the fears rooted in primary abjection; a borderless subjectivity and the annihilation of

⁶¹⁵ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 16.

the self. To quote Kristeva, '[she] is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding.'⁶¹⁶ Jackson is in the darkness of the night and attempting to use writing as a means through which she can confront the trauma that haunts her present existence to attempt to work through the fears associated with primary abjection. These fears form the foundation of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and in writing the characters of Merricat and Constance, Jackson can be understood to be driving the parts of herself haunted by the terrors of the abject to their ends in order to work through this experience.

Freud recognises this drive to meet the end as being a key part of the compulsion to repeat, as he begins his work towards understanding drives beyond pleasure. He notes, 'this compulsion appears to us to be more primal, more elemental, more deeply instinctual than the pleasure principle, which it simply thrusts aside.'⁶¹⁷ This text, then, can be understood to be forming part of the deeply instinctual process of a compulsion to confront the trauma of the abject in order to attempt to reach the point where she could feel that the experience is firmly located in the past. It is a repetition of the primary experience of abjection in its recounting of the present abject experience in her fictional writing, to attempt to work through it and get beyond its hold. In this sense, Jackson can be understood to be writing this text to conclude the experience, seeking the end of the journey that will pull her out of the 'vortex of summons and repulsions'⁶¹⁸ that constitute the abject. Thrusting aside the pleasure principle, Merricat and Constance act as symbols for her own annihilation, as the villagers in the text watch the Blackwood's home burn and destroy the remaining items in the house. In writing this text, Jackson lives out the primal death-wish fantasy, as she is 'drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned',⁶¹⁹ removing the borders and allowing the 'outside' to contaminate the 'inside'.

This text becomes part of the process through which she can confront the trauma of the abject directly. She seeks to find the conclusion to her fears of a borderless subjectivity and allow herself to find the way out of her present experience. Freud generates a useful understanding of Jackson's experience in writing this text. He states, 'the child also repeats unpleasurable experiences, because by thus being active he gains far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experiences than was possible when he was merely its passive recipient. Each new repetition seems to add to the sense of command that the child strives for and in the case of pleasurable experiences, too, the child never tires of repeating them.'⁶²⁰ This notion of repeating in

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁶¹⁷ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 61.

⁶¹⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 75.

order to gain control over the experience speaks to Jackson's assertions that 'writing is the way out', as for her, repeating and reflecting her fears of the borderless subjectivity of abjection can be understood to be the process through which she can control the experience. Building on this notion of controlling the experience, Otto Fenichel outlines this in his writing on repetition compulsion, in particular type three of compulsions to repeat, referring to this act as one that attempts to achieve 'belated mastery'⁶²¹ of the event. Of this type, he writes, '[t]he ego's attitude toward the repetition is a very ambivalent one. The repetition is desired to relieve a painful tension; but because the repetition itself is also painful, the person is afraid of it and tends to avoid it. [...] At other times, the wish for repetition is more conscious, and the patients long for one dramatic experience, to end their misfortunes once and for all.'⁶²² The compulsion Jackson experiences in writing this novel can be understood to be the conscious longing for one dramatic experience to end her continuous painful experiences of the trauma of the abject. She seeks to alleviate this tension through writing a narrative in which the subject's borders are breached, the subject is exposed and the 'outside' contaminates the 'inside'. This is in the hope that repeating the experience in her fiction, and allowing it to conclude, will end her misfortunes of imprisonment within her own home. Importantly, the two characters come out of this experience alive, but with an almost entirely destroyed home. This experience does not mark the "end" of the characters per se, who thereafter rebuild and reconstitute their borders. Jackson concludes the narrative with life, potentially giving hope for an existence after abjection, even if it is one that must be rebuilt.

This text can therefore be understood to be the process through which Jackson consciously sought to work through her experience of the abject and end her misfortunes of daily repeating her fears. Jackson's fears of a borderless subjectivity harken back to the primary experience of abjection and manifest in this fear of the outside invading her physical walls of safety. She confronts this fear in writing *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* to attempt to allow the compulsion to feel satiated in its desire to expose the wound of trauma located in the primary experience of abjection. She fears a loss of contained self and the text can therefore be positioned as a means through which she allows the borders that contain the self to be annihilated. In familiarising herself with this fear, and allowing it to manifest in her writing, she could therefore use this in the narrative as a means through which she could work through the present trauma of the abject. In writing this text Jackson, in essence, can be understood to be confronting the present experience of abjection through her characters, in order to forcibly conclude, and work through, the experience to reach the point after abjection.

⁶²¹ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, 541

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 543.

Chapter Six

Communication After Abjection: Repetition Compulsion and Working Through

The subject matter of the primary sources explored within this thesis have shown to be connected through the experience of abjection, the resultant compulsion to repeat, and the efforts to work through the experience in their writing. The subjects of this thesis have indicated through their writing that they are to some extent haunted by the abject traumatic experiences they have encountered, and this unresolved trauma has been linked to the compulsion to repeat encounters with the abject. The writing of these texts has been connected with forming part of the author's compulsion to repeat, however, the act of writing also forms part of the process of working through, which this section will now explore further. The experience of abjection 'is something rejected from which one does not part',⁶²³ to quote Kristeva, and it remains as a repressed event within the psyche in need of further attention. It is important to reiterate here that, as has been outlined in chapter one, this thesis does not propose that the biographical writings are devoid of any fictionalisation, nor that the 'I' uttered in the text is the author themselves, however, what has been highlighted within this thesis is the relationship the author has with the act of writing their experience and what this process has been for them after abjection. This thesis positions the act of writing as a process through which the subjects could repeat the experience of abjection, at the distance afforded to them through literary creation, to work through it. Freud's detailing of the process of working through is limited in the essay dedicated to repetition compulsion and working through, however, he notes that part of the process is giving 'the patient time to familiarize himself with the resistance now that he is aware of it, to work his way through it.'⁶²⁴ Writing the experience can therefore be understood as providing the opportunity for the subject to familiarise themselves with their experience intricately, taking note of every detail or, as in Jackson's experience, creating the experience that accurately conveys the specific sense of abject feeling. This process allows the subject to locate their trauma, engage with it in detail, and familiarise themselves with it, as Freud notes, 'one cannot destroy an enemy if he is absent or out of range.'⁶²⁵ Seen as a process of working

⁶²³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁶²⁴ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 41.

⁶²⁵ Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 39.

through, the texts have shown to be something of a cathartic process for the writers, who seek to 'physically bond with',⁶²⁶ to use Ernaux's description, the abject trauma they have experienced.

To understand better how the writing process forms part of the subject's experience of working through, this chapter will explore the multiple ways communication can function after abjection. Communication is referred to here to encapsulate the multiple means through which one can convey experience, which includes written texts, but also other means, such as speech, movement, and artistic works more broadly. However, as the primary texts within this thesis are literary works, this will provide the focus for this chapter on communication. This section will first consider the role of communication as being a means through which one can re-establish the 'I' lost in the encounter with the abject. It will then focus on communication as a feature after abjection as being one that works to validate the experience for the subject, before turning to consider communication as a process through which one can better understand their experience. These aforementioned functions will provide evidence to further discussions on the role of communication as being an act through which one attempts to release the hold that the trauma of abjection has on the subject in the process of working through. The degree to which the subjects could successfully work through the trauma of abjection in their writing will be considered alongside Jean-François Lyotard's considerations in *The Inhuman*, before this chapter turns finally to consider working through in conjunction with the role of *jouissance* in the experience of abjection and how this impinges upon the subject's ability to conclude the process of working through.

In all three case studies the authors have grappled with a common theme in their writing which is the sense of a lost, confused, or uncertain subjectivity. This recurrent feature in the texts is key to the experience of abjection, as it is an experience that shatters the subject's sense of self and positions them in an ambiguous state between 'I' and 'Other'. At the point of primary abjection, one establishes their subjectivity as separate and contained, but in subsequent encounters with the abject one is brought back to the state of pre-abjection, before the birth of the 'I'. Kristeva describes this moment of encountering the abject as being, 'at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.'⁶²⁷ Communication can be understood as offering a means through which the author's subjectivity can be extricated from this state at the border of abject ambiguity. Through communicating these experiences in writing, the authors can be understood to be working through it by purposefully positioning themselves as separate from the 'I' that is experiencing the trauma in the text and therefore bond with the memory more intimately. The 'I' in the text becomes a character that the author can omnisciently describe as experiencing the

⁶²⁶ Ernaux, *Happening*, 19.

⁶²⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 3.

abject trauma that continues to pervade their psyche and with this sense of removal, they are afforded the opportunity to consider the events in greater detail. For the memoirs within this thesis, the 'I' in the text acts as something of a mediating party between their memories and experiences, and themselves writing the text. For Jackson, the distance between the characters and herself is more clearly established, as the texts are entirely fictional, not biographical, so the events are not reflective of her life exactly as the author. However, as has been outlined in the previous chapter, this does not mean that the repressed abject trauma does not feature in a displaced, fictionalised form, so that she may attempt to work through it. Jackson's writing of abject narratives are far removed from her subjectivity through fictional depictions, so it works to permit the exploration of the trauma and at the same time helps to further separate herself from her own repressed encounter with the abject. Seen in this light, the subject can be understood to be re-establishing the 'I' through communication that, to quote Kristeva, 'marks out a territory that I can call my own'.⁶²⁸ Communication, therefore, is positioned here as a means through which one can reconstitute their subjectivity as separate from the experience or encounter with the abject. In this respect, writing becomes an outlet for the subject detailing the experience, connecting here with Fenichel's postulations concerning the compulsion to repeat, which positions the 'I' uttered in the text as something of a vessel for the experience. Through this framing of the role of communication after abjection, it can be understood as being the process of working through, as it provides the subject with an ability to demarcate their territory as a separate living being to the one experiencing the abject in their writing and firmly situate it as something of the past. This goes some way towards understanding these texts as attempts to exorcise the abject event they have been haunted by, 'a sort of discarded gift',⁶²⁹ as Ernaux describes.

The subject can further attempt to work through the experience of abjection through communication in a way that not only helps them to demarcate their subjectivity as separate to the trauma, but also in a way that validates their experience as being true to themselves. It is important to note this is in the sense of a personal truth, as the abject trauma need not be externally verifiable by others also experiencing the same event, as trauma is personally experienced and triggered individually. This is particularly true of Peppiatt's experiences of Francis Bacon's artworks and Jackson's experience of social abjection, as her agoraphobia was triggered by a reality personal to her own psyche. For the authors discussed within this thesis, writing these experiences and carefully crafting their language can be understood as enabling the subjects to affirm the trauma as being a legitimate experience through taking care to convey the oppressive psychological atmosphere within

⁶²⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 10.

⁶²⁹ Ernaux, *Happening*, 74.

their texts, so that others might understand, perhaps even connect with, their experiences. Annie Ernaux describes this sense of needing to convey her experience for others directly in her memoir, she writes, '[m]aybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing, in other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to merge into the lives and heads of other people.'⁶³⁰ For the authors studied within this thesis, it enables them to position the reader as the 'I' in the text, placing them in the role of the subject experiencing this event, as existences merge together, in an attempt to transport them into the experience. The author can therefore use this communicative device as a process for them to place others in their experience and show how the event felt for them. Understood in this light, communication works to affirm the experience for the authors, who can attempt to work through it by sharing the experience with others as they seek to validate their trauma to some extent.

The role of communication after abjection to a greater extent also forces the subject to try to understand the experience so that they can describe its affects in their writing. To be able to describe to others the horror of the trauma, a meaning-making process must be attempted to be gleaned from the state of meaninglessness that constitutes the abject. The lack of success of this venture can also be linked to the unresolvable frustration that causes the repetition, as described in Fenichel's category concerning mastering the experience. However, in writing their experience, and working through it in this way, communication becomes a means through which an attempt at some level of understanding of the experience can be constructed. It addresses the trauma in a way that seeks to comprehend the experience and its affects in an attempt for the author to have mastery over the event through better understanding it. In Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* this process of working through is undertaken so that she can attempt to understand her own inner conflicts at the heart of her experience of fear and social abjection. In some ways the narrative justifies her anxiety, in others, it seeks to challenge the fear and undermine its suffocating grip on her life. For Peppiatt, it is through writing that he attempts to construct meaning from his experiences, as he notes, '[w]riting things down and getting them into some kind of order or perspective really helps me deal with everyday misunderstanding and disappointments as well as my own contradictions [...] one also writes to survive the "slings and arrows" and to give some sense to the persistent confusion in which we, or at least I, live.'⁶³¹ Communicating experiences, particularly those that shake the foundations of one's being, such as the abject traumatic experiences described within this thesis, enables the subject to go some way towards working through the 'persistent confusion' that surrounds the trauma of the abject.

⁶³⁰ Ernaux, *Happening*, 74-5.

⁶³¹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 284.

The role of communication after abjection offers multiple ways that the subject can attempt to separate themselves from the trauma and both validate and better understand their experiences. Writing can therefore be positioned as providing the ‘playground’⁶³² Freud describes as being necessary for the subject to familiarise themselves with their trauma to begin the processes of working through it. As Freud highlights, “‘I can picture’ helps to convey that precise moment when I feel I have bonded with my former life, a past life that is lost forever’.⁶³³ This chapter will now turn from the role of communication after abjection to focus on working through more specifically and how this can be seen to feature in the written works and biographies of the authors at the centre of this thesis. This will be considered alongside Jean-François Lyotard’s writing on working through as it offers greater clarity on the process than Freud’s original essay, as will be highlighted below.

Communication After Abjection: Writing as Working Through

The communicative efforts discussed above are enacted in an attempt to work through the trauma after abjection to release its hold on the subject’s psyche. This section will now consider the role of working through alongside Jean-François Lyotard’s postulations in *The Inhuman*, and specifically his thoughts on ‘Rewriting Modernity’. His essay offers a useful illumination on Freud’s processes of repeating, remembering and working through, which has been related to the task undertaken by the authors of this thesis. Freud’s writing on working through remains an underdeveloped concept in his own writing and one that Lyotard expands upon and provides a greater understanding. Lyotard’s work enables this thesis to consider the role of communication as a process of working through in a more informed approach and one that is better understood in light of his writing on the subject. He describes the Freudian psychoanalytic process of working through as being, ‘[l]ike in a detective novel, the case is examined, witnesses called, information gathered. And so, what I would call a second-order plot is woven, which deploys its own story above the plot in which destiny is fulfilled, and whose aim is to remedy that destiny.’⁶³⁴ Through communication, whether in the psychoanalytic setting Lyotard refers to here, or in another capacity, the subject seeks to uncover their story in the spirit of a detective novel. This connects with the above discussion concerning the subject’s desire to seek an understanding of their experience, affirm its affects, and locate and separate from the ‘I’ in the text. However, as Lyotard continues, in writing one’s story – figuratively here, but literally in the

⁶³² Freud, “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through”, 40.

⁶³³ Ibid., 41.

⁶³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman* trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 27.

discussion of this thesis – ‘the hero becomes the culprit’,⁶³⁵ as ‘one cannot fail to perpetuate the crime, and perpetrate it anew instead of putting an end to it.’⁶³⁶ In writing these texts, the authors are in some ways subjugating themselves to the experience of abjection in repeating the trauma in their writing and, as such, rather than a hero, this places them as the culprit of perpetuating the experience of abjection in their writing. This reflects the discussion offered so far in this thesis which has suggested that the act of writing their abject experiences in equal parts forms part of the repetition and part of the attempts at working through.

These efforts, as has been outlined above, are made in attempts to seek a way to release the hold of the abject traumatic experience that has led to the repetition in their daily lives but also in their writing. The writing of the text functions two-fold, both as a repetition, a perpetuation of the crime, and as a means through which the authors seek to work through the experience and ‘remedy that destiny’. Lyotard suggests that in rewriting, ‘[o]ne wants to get hold of the past, grasp what has gone away, master, exhibit the initial crime; the lost crime of the origin, show it as such as though it could be disentangled from its affective context’.⁶³⁷ As has been discussed in terms of the drive to communicate the abject traumatic experience, the subjects seek to find a way to disentangle the event from its affective context through understanding it and setting it at a distance from themselves through narrativizing it. However, the ‘idea of an origin’ is what continues to evade the subjects who seek to comprehend and release the affective context, as the root of the experience lies within the deeply repressed experience of primary abjection. Unable to firmly grasp this, they repeat and re-present the later abject events in writing to, as Lyotard describes, exhibit the “initial” crime as they perceive it to be. With this in mind, Kristeva’s description of the subject being ‘on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding’⁶³⁸ is echoed by Lyotard in his description of working through. He writes, ‘working through would be defined as a work without end and therefore without will’,⁶³⁹ later, he continues, ‘[t]his end is of course not knowledge, but the approach to a ‘truth’ or a ‘real’ which is ungraspable [...] this state sustains that same suffering in a repetitive way.’⁶⁴⁰ This returns the line of inquiry to the notion of ‘truth’, as was discussed at the outset of this thesis. Lyotard here argues that an inability to locate that which is ungraspable – for this thesis, the primary trauma from which all subsequent experiences of abjection stem - sustains the repetitions and therefore the suffering. This would suggest that the attempt to work through the

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁶³⁸ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁶³⁹ Lyotard, *op. cit.*, 30.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

abject traumatic experiences the authors describe in their writing are to some extent futile in their endeavour as it is the journey with an end that will keep receding, an ungraspable truth.

However, whilst it is not the place of this thesis to determine the success of writing as a means of working through per se, both for the authors here discussed or invariably as a proclamation for all subjects processing after abjection, in the instances of the texts provided, separate from the author themselves, the 'I' as uttered in the text and the biographical details gives an indication of the results. For Peppiatt, his writing multiple texts on Bacon and his artwork would indicate that the process of communicating in order to work through has been somewhat successful in releasing the hold the abject artwork has had on him, as he writes, 'I don't get the same intense rush of excitement – that particular mixture of dread and pleasure – which seeing a number of Bacons together has always given me so far.'⁶⁴¹ This would suggest that Peppiatt has to some extent achieved the sense of mastery he desired in repeating his experience in his writing. There is a sense in this passage that he has removed the intensity of the images – the mixture of dread and pleasure - in his working through his experience of abjection in his writing. That is not to say that Peppiatt has worked through his primary experience of abjection, but rather that the images of Bacon, which formerly affected him in such a way as to connect with the primary moment of abjection, seem no longer to affect him to quite the same degree of intensity, 'Bloodless Bacon',⁶⁴² as he describes it. However, despite this, Peppiatt still continues to write about Bacon's artworks, which might also suggest that he continues to repeat the cycle after abjection of being subsequently drawn towards the abject. It would seem, therefore, that whilst the 'rush of excitement' – noting the positive linguistic association here, which will be returned to in the next section – is not as concentrated as it once was for Peppiatt in his initial exposure to the artworks, they still feature as a key subject, a fixation and point of intrigue for him in his writing.

The depleted intensity of the experience and memories seems to differ for the second two authors discussed in this thesis. For Shirley Jackson, the process of writing her experience after abjection does not appear to aid her in her attempts to remove the trauma of her mother's abject behaviour towards her. From the information presented in her biography, these experiences seem to remain a key source for her eventual psychological breakdown later in life. Her mother's insidiously abusive behaviour continues to affect her deeply, as highlighted by the letter that is suggested to be one of the final crushing blows that result in the collapse of her psychological state. The role of the mother is revisited in her final completed novel, but it is a mother character that has been poisoned by her daughter, which can be understood as perhaps speaking volumes to her

⁶⁴¹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*, 342.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 367.

feelings towards her own mother. However, this could also be read as a further attempt to exorcise the mother that she was unable to achieve in *The Haunting of Hill House*. These speculations are inconclusive, but following *Hill House*, Jackson still felt the overpowering nature of her mother's tormenting words. As for Jackson's crippling agoraphobia, this was lessened through a concoction of therapy, over-use of multiple prescription drugs and, potentially, her writing, though this connection is conjectural in that her ability to leave her home once again followed her publication, but not without the work of the former two factors. Ultimately, she remained bound by her abjection of the world around her, as she continued to see the world and its inhabitants as something contaminating and from which she should be removed. The answer to the difficulty Jackson faces in working through the trauma after abjection through her fiction, perhaps lies within Kristeva's essay, in which she remarks that literature of the abject, 'maintains a distance where the abject is concerned.'⁶⁴³ She asserts that this genre of literature 'takes advantage of [these experiences], gets round them, and makes sport of them.'⁶⁴⁴ However, as particularly relevant to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, she is not getting around, nor making sport of, this experience. She was living through it, suffering its affects, and suffocating under the weight of its oppression. Perhaps this might answer why her fiction could not fully exorcise the trauma, as it was too real and present in her life at the point of writing the text for her to maintain a distance and take advantage of the experience, as Kristeva describes.

For Annie Ernaux, this is equally complex. Whilst it is not the role of this thesis to determine the outcome with certainty, one can offer speculations based on the texts studied within this thesis, biographical details and further published works. In the spirit of Fenichel's theorisations concerning finding an outlet for the trauma, Ernaux writes, 'I had rid myself of the only feeling of guilt in connection with this event'.⁶⁴⁵ However, she later notes that she revisited the area of Paris in which she had undertaken her abortion. She visits the flat, the church and finally the café that she had been to on that day. In the café she highlights that she is unable to read the student essays that she had brought, as she 'kept telling myself that I had to check out the bathroom',⁶⁴⁶ which is the final space she was in before exiting to the abortionist's flat. This action seems to suggest that she is completing a further repetition of the event, but it could also be in an attempt to test the effect of the space on her psyche, in a similar manner to Peppiatt who seeks Bacon's images to see whether he gets 'the same intense rush of excitement – that particular mixture of dread and pleasure' he had once experienced. However, similarly to Peppiatt, for Ernaux there does not seem to be the

⁶⁴³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 16.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁵ Ernaux, *Happening*, 74.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

anticipated 'rush of excitement' Peppiatt describes, as she does not express any sense that these spaces had affected her on her return. On this note, Ernaux writes, '[s]tanding on the platform of Malesherbes Métro station, I realized that I had gone back to the Passage Cardinet in the hope that something might happen to me.'⁶⁴⁷ In this passage in the text, nothing seems to materialise from this visit in terms of connecting her to the rush of dread and pleasure associated with the abject experience. Concerning her wider writings, references are made to the trauma of her abortion following the publication of *Happening*, but without specific details or a sense that it affects her in the way described in this memoir. However, her recent publication *Simple Passion* does feature this desire to return to the Passage Cardinet, which could suggest that whilst there might not be a conscious 'rush of excitement' there is still an aspect of this location that connects her with the abject experience. This will be returned to in the next section.

It is important to reiterate that the overall success of the efforts made by the authors to work through their encounters with the abject cannot be determined by this thesis. Instead, what can be suggested as evidenced throughout this thesis is that the authors have experienced a compulsion to repeat after abjection and that, as shown in this chapter, the writing becomes a means through which the authors attempt to work through these experiences. They are, as Lyotard suggests, operating 'like in a detective novel'⁶⁴⁸ that aims 'to remedy that destiny'⁶⁴⁹ of the compulsion to repeat. In doing so they 'perpetuate the crime',⁶⁵⁰ however, as suggested above in some respects this could be understood as having led the subject to fruitful results in their processing of the event through communication, even if this is at the level of the removal of guilt associated with the trauma or a dissipation of the intensity of the dread and pleasure once associated with the encounter. The subject's aim is to 'disentangled [the event] from its affective context',⁶⁵¹ and in so doing free themselves from the powerful grip the abject experience has on their compulsive repetitive behaviour. Communication has been positioned here as being a means through which the subjects attempt to work through and disentangle the abject traumatic event described in these texts from its affective context. This has aided their efforts in trying to understand their experience, validate its affect and attempt to separate themselves, as an 'I', from it. However, this has shown to be difficult for some authors, particularly in the case of Jackson, whose latter fictional text was written in the throes of the abject experience and, as such, the chronological distance afforded to Peppiatt and Ernaux could not be granted. What has also been highlighted in

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Lyotard, *op. cit.*, 27.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 29.

this section is the sense that the writing of the texts as a process of working through seems not to have had a final or conclusive result regarding Freud's aim of designating the abject trauma as something belonging solely to the past and able to move beyond the repetitions through having worked through the event. To understand this better, the next section will consider the role of abject jouissance in working through, as a means to re-examine the role of working through after abjection.

Communication After Abjection: Jouissance and Working Through

As has been previously explored, the authors present within this thesis show instances of their repetitions remaining present within their writing and/or actions following the communication of their abject-traumatic experience in their texts. These traumatic fixations continue to be a part of their writing and actions, even when approaching different subject matter following the publication of the texts here discussed; for Jackson the abject experiences pervade her fictional texts in new guises, for Ernaux she remains connected to communicating this experience in her later works, for Peppiatt, Bacon remains the figure around which his writing continues to orbit. If one is to see these texts as the means through which the abject-traumatic experience can be worked through, then one might expect the subject to be free of their compulsion to repeat the experiences in their writing. To understand this better, this thesis proposes to reframe the understanding of working through to being a continuous process from which one does not part, nor complete. This thesis suggests a better method to approach understanding the role of communication in the process of working through after abjection is to reconsider the aim of the process itself. Rather than positioning working through as an attempt to reach an end point, as Freud originally suggests of the process, '[o]ne has to give the patient time to familiarize himself with the resistance now that he is aware of it, to *work his way through it*, to overcome it by defying it',⁶⁵² using the future-perfect tense, *id est*, to have worked through and overcome the abject trauma in their writing, one is instead to consider situating the role of working through as an ongoing, continuous process ever remaining within the present tense. This repositioning of the role of working through aids the understanding of the texts as being part of the ongoing process of working through for the subjects. The aim of the text, therefore, shifts from being positioned as the communication that is the point at which they have thereby worked through their experiences, and is instead considered to be forming part of the continuous process of working through after abjection.

⁶⁵² Freud, "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through", 41.

In framing working through as a continual process one must therefore consider the motivation for the subjects who remain gripped by these traumatic fixations. This can be understood more clearly in relation to the role of *jouissance* in the abject and, therefore, the process of working through after abjection. Kristeva highlights the importance of *jouissance* in the experience of abjection, she asserts, ‘*jouissance* causes the abject to exist [...] one joys in it’.⁶⁵³ The pleasure of *jouissance* is one that is no longer in the best interests of the subject, instead it splits the subject into the erotics of the negative which seeks to unravel their sense of a coherent subjectivity. *Jouissance*, a suffering tainted with a pleasure that inflames the subjectivity, enables the process of working through to remain ever-present in the subject’s communication of the trauma. The ‘fascinated victims’⁶⁵⁴ bound by the ‘land of oblivion’,⁶⁵⁵ to quote Kristeva, endure the ever-present working through of their abject traumatic experience because it is an enjoyment that stretches them towards the outer fringes of suffering and towards pleasure. This is the abject experience and, as Kristeva outlines above, *jouissance* underpins the existence of the abject. Therefore, one can understand how the process of working through after abjection remains a continual process, as it seeks no end and forgoes the future perfect tense of having worked through, to remain ever bound by the ongoing process of working through. Néstor Braunstein describes this in his essay on *jouissance* and desire, he notes that the drive towards *jouissance*; ‘does not aim at a visible, sensitive goal, but at the effect produced in its return, after having missed and gone around the target, after confronting the real, that is, the impossibility of full satisfaction.’⁶⁵⁶ This speaks to Kristeva’s description of the abject as being ‘like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsions’.⁶⁵⁷ Part of the drive towards repeating the encounter with the abject is the ceaseless pull towards the experience of *jouissance* and the resulting boomerang effect produced by the return. The subject is repelled away from the experience but also follows this by being again drawn towards it and the impossibility of full satisfaction. The subject therefore continues working through the experience, ceaselessly, drawn towards the painful pleasure of *jouissance*, but caught in a vortex of summons and repulsions the experience remains in the present tense and in the state of working through.

One can better understand both Freud and Kristeva in relation to each other when considering the role of *jouissance* in the process of working through after abjection. This focus on the relationship between the three theories enables a greater understanding of working through by positioning it as a process without end and as one that is governed by the pull towards the

⁶⁵³ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 9.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁵⁶ Néstor Braunstein, “Desire and *jouissance* in the teachings of Lacan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

⁶⁵⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 1.

pleasurable suffering of jouissance. As Braunstein notes, ‘Lacan ridicules the idea that the aim of the drive is to reach a goal and be satisfied’,⁶⁵⁸ which supports this thesis’ postulation that the subject remains bound by the abject experience and unable to release themselves from the repetitions that continue the process of working through. After abjection the subject is repeating the experience, through both action and communication, as part of the continual process of working through in what appears to be attempts to satiate the appetite for the jouissance of the abject, however fruitless and discomforting the endeavour ultimately remains. This unlocks a more considered approach to the texts studied within this thesis. Rather than attempting to ascertain any notions of the success of their texts as having ‘worked through’ their abject-traumatic experience, one can understand them to be part of the continuous process of working through, one that is driven by the jouissance associated with the abject.

Understanding the libidinal quality of this phenomenon posits a more fruitful interpretation of the subject’s actions and fixations following the publication of the texts here discussed. This includes a text in which Ernaux describes, again, revisiting the site of her abortion. *Simple Passion* follows Ernaux’s experience of having a physical relationship with a married man for two years. At the termination of the relationship, Ernaux is left in crushing despair. At the depths of her heartbreak, she writes, ‘[o]ne day I felt an overriding urge to go to the Passage Cardinet, in the 17th arrondissement, to the place where I had a clandestine abortion twenty years ago. I felt it was imperative that I return to see the street, the building, and go up to the flat where the events had taken place. As if hoping that this past trauma would cancel my present grief.’⁶⁵⁹ Whilst she notes that, ‘this episode had altered nothing’⁶⁶⁰ concerning her present situation, she asserts, ‘I was glad to have taken the initiative and revived an act of despoilment also caused by a man.’⁶⁶¹ The overriding urge to return to the location of her abortion to revive the affectations associated with the act of despoilment by a man, suggests that there is something deeply psychological compelling her to return to this place of suffering that will help her in her working through of her present despair. One might find this behaviour contradictory in nature – to revisit a space associated with despair and grief when presently in the same psychological state – however, through considering the role of jouissance after abjection and situating working through as a continuous process, Ernaux’s actions are understood in a new light. Framed by this thesis’ proposal, she can be understood as revisiting the place of previous abject suffering in attempts to inflame her subjectivity once more, to

⁶⁵⁸ Néstor Braunstein, “Desire and jouissance in the teachings of Lacan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106.

⁶⁵⁹ Annie Ernaux, *Simple Passion*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), 40.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*

reignite the *jouissance* associated with her trauma of abjection. She leaves the scene glad to have been and, whilst nothing has changed in her present relationship, the drive for *jouissance* in the ongoing process of working through after abjection has left her glad that she yielded to the overriding urge to visit the location.

Shirley Jackson's life following publication of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was short; three years after the book was published Jackson died at home in her bed. However, as Kristeva notes, '[i]t is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject.'⁶⁶² Jackson continued to be plagued by her fears and only lessened their effects through taking large quantities of prescription drugs and drinking heavily. She was only freed from this ongoing suffering, being continually situated at the outer fringes of horror and beauty, through her death. It is difficult to reflect on the extent to which *jouissance* continued to inflame the processes of working through following publication, and whether she would have eventually freed herself from yielding to the draw of the abject and writing about the experience of abjection without a longer period of time to consider. For Peppiatt, however, the proposal to view working through after abjection as a continuous process driven by *jouissance* supports the understanding of his continued critical works. He has recently released a further two books dedicated to Francis Bacon. One of which explores themes similar to the previous discussions in Chapter Two concerning Bacon's work in relation to the animal in human and the abject, entitled *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast*. The second text presents a fictional dialogue between Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti. Following years of research, a lifelong friendship with Bacon, and writing about the works of both artists, he writes, 'I began to feel I could actually hear them talking'⁶⁶³ with a dialogue that has been 'turning slowly in [his] mind'⁶⁶⁴ since Giacometti's 1965 retrospective at the Tate. Peppiatt finishes the introduction to his text by stating, 'while this "Dialogue" remains a fiction, it is a fiction deeply rooted in fact.'⁶⁶⁵ The facts relate to phrases he had heard Bacon repeatedly say, and both their views on art and life. While there is nothing overtly present within this introductory preface that connects with the experience of abjection discussed in the autobiographical memoir published three years earlier, there is the sense that in producing this text there is still a draw for Peppiatt to Bacon, one that binds him to his repetitive fixations. It is in this unrelenting, magnetising, pull towards continually writing about this subject matter that this thesis can offer further illumination. In attempting to embody Bacon, to speak for him, this text can be understood as being a further means through which he can endeavour to understand the artwork of Bacon, and therefore his own

⁶⁶² Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 16.

⁶⁶³ Michael Peppiatt, *Bacon/ Giacometti: A Dialogue* (London: ERIS Press, 2020), unpaginated.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

experience of that work. It is therefore positioned here as being part of the communicative efforts associated with the continual process of working through, one that connects him again with the jouissance of the abject experience described in *Francis Bacon in Your Blood*.

Jouissance, as an underpinning feature of the experience of abjection, plays a prominent role in driving the continuation of the process of working through abject trauma. It is here positioned as the feature that draws the subject back to communicating the experience of abjection in repetitive behaviours or in distilled, disguised, forms. As the subject is aware in writing their texts of the powerful effects of the trauma of the experience, though not necessarily why it affected them so deeply, the repetitions now form part of the continuous process of working through and in so doing they continue to revisit the topic of their abject trauma through communication. Communication through writing is therefore positioned as offering a means through which the authors can repeat in an attempt to understand and connect with the trauma, but one that also revives the jouissance of the experience, which, in turn, perpetuates the continuation of the process of working through after abjection.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored what happens to a subject after an experience of abjection. To achieve this, it has provided three case studies and four primary texts alongside Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection and Sigmund Freud's theory of repetition compulsion and working through. It has supported this exploration further with Otto Fenichel's later development of repetition compulsion, and Jacques Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, to develop a greater understanding of the subject and their compulsion to repeat after abjection. It has argued for a refocusing of the theories of both Kristeva and Freud in light of the other to combine them to understand the relationship between the subject and their experiences after abjection. It has shown that the application of both theories in conjunction with each other can provide a new understanding to both the chronology of abjection and the process of working through.

This thesis began the discussion through first discussing the methodological underpinning to the analysis. It opened by addressing the complexities of focusing on life writing as a means to develop psychoanalytic theory. It positioned autobiography as a narrative device through which the authors offer a reflection of themselves as subjects that remain in process. It highlighted the unresolvable undecidability of the nature of autobiographical writing in relation to notions of 'truth' and highlighted its contribution to explore sociological and psychoanalytic phenomena. It asserted that through being mindful of the distinction between the author and the 'I' presented within the text, the literary analysis could support the understanding of the author's experience of abjection. Furthermore, this chapter also stressed the claim that the production of the text itself formed part of both the compulsion to repeat and the draw towards the *jouissance* of the object.

To frame the later discussion of Michael Peppiatt's memoir *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* this thesis explored a number of Bacon's artworks as being pictorial manifestations of the object and/or experience of abjection. This situating of Bacon's works in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory permitted a better informed discussion of *Francis Bacon in Your Blood* as having features of Peppiatt's experience of abjection. It began the discussion of Peppiatt's memoir through first focusing on the experiences of encountering Bacon's works as described in the text that are illuminated with significance when framed by the experience of abjection. The described confused and uncertain sense of self, mixed with the horror, repulsion and attraction towards the images were better understood in light of Kristeva's postulations. However, despite the discomfort, the author describes going back to these images and feeling unable to control his draw towards Bacon and his works. This after abjection effect required further understanding. To achieve this, the thesis thereafter turned to Freud's theory of repetition compulsion and working through alongside Kristeva's description of abjection to provide new understandings of both theories and, through this

combination, provide a methodological approach to apply to the following primary literary texts. This combination of theories was furthered by outlining Fenichel's contribution to understanding the drive towards the compulsion to repeat in light of this thesis' focus on after abjection. Turning back to Peppiatt's memoir, this thesis re-examined the text alongside the newly developed relationship between the compulsion to repeat after abjection and supported this claim with Fenichel's assertion that Peppiatt's compulsion could be being ignited due to his desire to achieve a belated mastery of the experience.

Having established and applied the methodological approach to the first case study, this thesis determined to test its applicability to another autobiographical memoir of an entirely different focus. Annie Ernaux's *Happening* provided an account of the numerous ways she experienced abjection in her unwanted pregnancy and her resulting abortion. In this text, Ernaux was presented as having experienced abjection through being positioned as being the 'Other' in need of being removed, which was evidenced through the treatment of her by other people. Ernaux was shown to have equally experienced the abject in her own abjection of the self, as her sense of 'I' was felt to have been infiltrated by a contaminating 'Other' that infected her preserved, clean, and living self. Following the analysis of the text the thesis explored the repetitive behaviours of Ernaux, who felt drawn towards revisiting the space of her clandestine abortion and wrote about the experience in many of her texts. Following this analysis, the thesis explored the compulsion to repeat through the categories of repetitions outlined by Fenichel. It was argued that the second category for repetitions, the subject's desire for the repressed to find an outlet, provided the best understanding to Ernaux's after abjection experience.

To shift the methodological approach forward into a new genre, this thesis turned to its final case study through the fictional writing of Shirley Jackson, alongside Judy Oppenheimer's biography *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. It first established Jackson's experiences of abjection as detailed in Oppenheimer's writing and the primary sources consulted within that text, such as diaries and letters. Using this evidence it framed Jackson's experiences of abjection into two distinct themes; one relating to the mother and the other to the experience of social abjection. These themes guided the engagement with the following fictional texts to understand how these texts could be understood as forming part of the compulsion to repeat abjection. *The Haunting of Hill House* was positioned as a text that centred on Jackson's relationship with her mother and her fear of the loss of her subjectivity, which harkened back to both the primary moment of abjection and her mother's continuous attempts to fit her into the mould of a thin debutant, void of her personality and unique flare. Following this, it was argued that Jackson's experience of abjection in relation to the outside world culminated in her crippling agoraphobia. She both rejected and was

rejected by the local community in which she lived, in a similar manner to that of the female protagonists in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. This chapter explored these fictional texts in relation to Jackson's own experiences, without being overlaid with biographical references in the analysis of the literature in order to assert the need to distinguish the fictional from the autobiographical. However, as was highlighted in this chapter, the narratives, when positioned in the frame of repetition compulsion after abjection, present a unique window into the writing of these texts as forming part of Jackson's compulsion to repeat the experience of abjection. Fenichel's categories for repetition compulsion equally provided insight into the production of these two texts as *The Haunting of Hill House* was argued to have provided an opportunity for Jackson to find an outlet for her experience of maternal abjection and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* presented the lived experience of Jackson's ongoing agoraphobia and fear of object contamination. It was asserted that she wrote the latter in order to master the experience through fictional displacement.

Reflecting on the analysis of all three case studies, this thesis turned finally to explore the role of communication after abjection. It positioned communication as fulfilling several needs for the subject, the first was described as being the reestablishment of the 'I' through separating themselves from the 'I' in the text, as this enabled the authors to jettison their experiences into the experiences of a narrator of a text. This narrative separation also functioned to permit an exploration of their experiences that allowed them to understand better the abject event(s). The writing of the text enabled them to dissect the experience and break it into its component parts to try to understand it. In communicating their abject experience, the authors were also working to validate their experience as being a true and meaningful experience through positioning others in their perception of an experience – fictional though that may be for Jackson. The role of communication was thereafter explored in relation to the second feature of Freud's essay; the process of working through. This is a relatively underdeveloped concept in Freud's writing, so Jean-François Lyotard's essay on this subject guided the discussion. It describes the subject as being something of a detective in a novel, attempting to locate a source to their repetitions. However, as was outlined in the previous chapter, the location of the source is not to be fully determined as at the heart of all subsequent experiences of abjection is the deeply repressed primary experience of abjection. Following on from this, this thesis concluded that alongside this sense that the 'detective' cannot find the source of their repetitions is the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. This key component to the experience of abjection entices the subject to continue to repeat encounters with the abject and forgo a sense of conclusion, as they remain ever in the process of working through due to the compelling but somewhat masochistic nature of *jouissance*.

Through the chapters summarised above and the evidence of the case studies therein, this thesis has provided an argument for the understanding of after abjection as being followed by repetition compulsion, which is understood as being fuelled by the *jouissance* of the abject. This hitherto unexplored area of abjection has provided a chronological shift in focus for the theory to enable an exploration of texts that centre on an experience of abjection. To achieve this, it has provided a unique combination of Kristeva's theory of abjection with Freud's theory of repetition compulsion and working through to present a methodological approach to understand the after abjection experience and the desire to communicate this experience. The application of this methodological approach has brought to light new readings of the primary sources within this thesis that generate a rich understanding of both the authors and their writing. The significance of this development provides further opportunities to explore texts through the methodological approach here described and presents a foundation on which to build future studies into after abjection.

As was outlined in the first chapter through the writing of Jeremy Biles, '[a]bjection has no cohesive narrative, no plot, no clear beginning, no destiny or destination, no sense of an ending.'⁶⁶⁶ This thesis has corroborated with this statement in its assertion that *jouissance* fuels the abject repetitions. In line with this, this thesis does not conclude with an ending to the repetitions, nor suggest that the repetitions have reached a destination. Instead, this thesis offers a continuation of the journey, 'the end of which keeps receding',⁶⁶⁷ to quote Kristeva, into new potential texts to apply the methodological approach, but also to explore further the economy of the abject through the communication of the experience. Just as with after abjection, after this thesis there is no sense of an ending, but there is a possibility to repeat and further explore other narratives of the experience of abjection as exhibits of the self as temporal productions.

⁶⁶⁶ Biles, *op. cit.*, 111.

⁶⁶⁷ Kristeva, *op. cit.*, 8.

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