

Reviving the Vanishing Subject:

The Subject as Abject in Postmodern Memoir

by

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation contemplates rhetorical and ontological problems of self-representation in twentieth century postmodern memoir. Many postmodernists contend the self merely deteriorates amid the fallibility of memory, instabilities of ‘truth’, a Lacanian notion of language as inexpressible of the self, and a subjectivity so multiplicitous and constructed that it is impossible to write. Yet Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic notion of abjection – a dialectical process that simultaneously dismantles and reinforces the self – illuminates postmodern autobiographical subjectivity as ultimately revived through literary self-alienation. As such a process of abjection, postmodern autobiography thus involves *reconstruction* amid *deconstruction* – wherein a “weight of meaninglessness . . . crushes me” (Kristeva *Powers* 2) while also ensuring “that ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 9). This approach resituates the genre as an ethical form of heteroglossic self-renewal, wherein the recognition of self-as-other facilitates an ethical engagement with community in an increasingly pluralistic world. Postmodern autobiography is thus revealed as a relevant, productive space of renewal despite its own claims of futility. I focus on five exemplars of postmodern autobiography – texts written by Lucy Grealy, Suniti Namjoshi, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Kroetsch, and Michael Ondaatje – to demonstrate how a view of postmodern autobiography as abject translates across such diverse social constructs as nation, gender, diaspora, physicality, memory, class, and the family.

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DEDICATION

For Jim,
without whose wisdom, patience,
love, good humour, and support of every variety,
this project would never have been
more than a fleeting wish

Chapter I: Introduction

Prevalent in the mid to late twentieth century, the postmodern movement significantly altered the literary landscape. Heavily influenced by what Paul Ricoeur considered a “hermeneutics . . . of suspicion” (30), writers of the postmodern era were skeptical of literary and social presuppositions – of dominant master narratives preserving traditional ideas about such things as class, race, gender, the family, and even language itself. Postmodernists thus unsettled and ‘deconstructed’ conventional ideas of literature in order to invite new interpretations of being, for example by calling into question ideas of ‘truth’ and knowledge, and by favouring uncertainty over conviction (Bertens 142). As Linda Hutcheon explains, “postmodern art asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity” (*Poetics* 5). Such a subversion of literary convention is often characterized in postmodernism through:

[an] absence of closure, the question of identity (cast into doubt by doublings, parallels, disappearances), the problematic nature of language, the artificiality of representation, the deconstruction of binary oppositions . . . and the *intertextual nature* of texts . . . which not only sets up echoes in literary history, but can effectively show us the blind spots of earlier texts. (Bertens 142 – emphasis original)

In upsetting traditional expectations of literary fidelity, postmodern autobiography¹ is of particular interest, since the genre of autobiography is largely expected to be factual. As Roy Pascal explains, “autobiography [i]s the account of the truth of a life” (viii). Though postmodern thought is deeply concerned with ideas of self²— since “postmodernism . . . takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (Hutcheon 1) – autobiographical authenticity is nevertheless undermined by the movement. Such skepticism about the ‘truth’ of a written self thus raises the question as to whether postmodern autobiography is even possible. Moreover, today’s ‘post-truth’ world suggests a detrimental consequence of postmodernist ideals as less revolutionary than apocalyptic, such that the postmodern autobiographical self may be seen as naively narcissistic or as deconstructed to the point of meaninglessness.

To explore and challenge ideas of the postmodern written self, I focus on five exemplars of postmodern autobiography – texts written by Lucy Grealy, Suniti Namjoshi, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Kroetsch, and Michael Ondaatje – each of whom offers ideas about the autobiographical self from such differing perspectives as the body, the family, postcolonialism, gender, and class. These authors also represent two

¹ Throughout my dissertation, I use the terms “memoir” and “autobiography” interchangeably, although they denote different forms of life writing. This is done strictly for ease of reading, since most of the theory upon which I rely refers to postmodern “autobiography” rather than exclusively to “memoir”. Consequently, while my dissertation focuses on works that would be considered “memoir,” I to refer to them often instead as postmodern “autobiography” for the sake of textual fluidity.

² I use the terms “self” and “subject” interchangeably when referring to autobiographical identity. While philosophical works often differentiate between the terms “self” and “subject” as representational and reflexive aspects of identity (Kockelman 1) – often characterizing the ‘subject’ as an organizing wholeness that encompasses the ‘self’ (A. Watson 1-2) – my dissertation investigates the written self as a textual ‘subject’ (or topic). Specifically, the “I” of autobiography is both the subject of the text and also a written form of the author’s self or personal subjectivity. Consequently, I use the terms “self” and “subject” interchangeably as denoting a written representation of the author.

different periods of the postmodern movement. Specifically, Nabokov represents a very early form of postmodernism, with his autobiography influencing many subsequent writers of the postmodern era. In fact, Max Saunders goes so far as to say that “the first major postmodern autobiography was arguably Vladimir Nabokov’s . . . *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*” (489). Consequently, Nabokov may be seen as setting, rather than following, many postmodern tenets. Indeed, writing at the end of modernism, the author was largely unaware of a nascent postmodern movement, since, “Nabokov was only marginally a contemporary of the postmodernists; he knew little or nothing about them, whereas they knew much about him and often were afraid of being eclipsed by him” (Couturier “Land” 253-4). In fact, *Speak, Memory*’s postmodern features – such as authorial absence and the constructive nature of language – actually predate such seminal postmodern works as Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author” and Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. As such, Christian Moraru observes that:

Nabokov’s work forebodes an impending paradigm shift. Alongside Beckett, Borges, and Joyce before them, the Russian-American writer had a unique insight into a future culture and its fictions. . . . Nabokov is the belated modernist who gave us a foretaste of the postmodern.

(*Memorius* 40)

Indeed, Nabokov’s work prefigures many later postmodern ideas, such as the self as multiplicitous, time as plastic, autobiography as fiction, memory as both fallible and mutable, as well as the autobiographer as absent – writing an autobiography in which “he did not exist . . . at all” (Nabokov 19) – a position emulated in Robert

Kroetsch's and Michael Ondaatje's autobiographical works, both of which I discuss in later chapters. As Moraru states of Nabokov's formative postmodern ideas:

Many of [postmodernism's] basic premises are here [in *Speak, Memory*]: acutely cosmopolitan, cross- if not multicultural outlook and identity politics where sex, gender, and ethnic fables take center stage; heterogenous, 'high-brow' -cum- 'low-brow' texture; linguistic prowess, jocular-ironic style, and self-conscious narrative sophistication; encyclopedic and mock-encyclopedic intertextuality, to name just a few" (*Memorius* 40)

Nabokov also evidences what is now deemed a postmodern idea of the self – as various and inconsistent rather than as uniform and cohesive – in saying, "I see myself as a hundred different men" (240). Similarly, the author eschews a linear concept of time in favour of "the free world of timelessness" (20), one that overlaps and often travels backward in this nostalgic work – moving toward, reviving, and "recomposing my past" (Nabokov 240). Nabokov thus also takes a highly fictional, postmodern approach to the otherwise non-fiction genre of autobiography.

By contrast, the other four authors upon whose autobiographical work I focus – Lucy Grealy, Suniti Namjoshi, Robert Kroetsch, and Michael Ondaatje – represent a later form of the postmodern movement, nearing its end. Specifically, these authors write after the publication of – and are greatly influenced by – such seminal texts as Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. Both of these texts contributed significantly to the inauguration of the postmodern movement by, among other things, arguing the unreliable nature of

language and of metanarratives shaping and preserving historic social ideas or 'norms'. Indeed, Lyotard is credited with coining the term "postmodern", writing:

I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe [the] condition.

. . . of our culture following . . . transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. . . in the context of the crisis of narratives.

(xxiii)

Among other things, Lyotard notes the 'postmodern condition' as one characterized by disparity rather than unity, saying, "we have become alert to difference, diversity, the incompatibility of our aspirations, beliefs and desires." Due to such uncertainty, Lyotard felt there was no longer a place for grand narratives, such that, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). He includes language as just such a 'metanarrative,' an unreliable structure with which to communicate.

Consequently, he calls for an undermining of language, inviting:

language games. . . [where] every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game . . . [since] to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing . . . Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language . . . an agonistics of language. (10)

Similarly, Derrida undermines the efficacy of language, contending that words contain such a variety of *different* meaning, something complicated by similar phonemes and morphemes in words with very different meaning, such that they only serve to *defer* meaning – a condition of language he thus refers to as

“differance” (*Grammatology* 84). Consequently, for Derrida, language is an inadequate means of expression, since it undermines meaning as soon as it is asserted. It is thus constantly, as Derrida puts it, “under erasure” (*Grammatology* 88). While Grealy, Namjoshi, Kroetsch, and Ondaatje reflect much of the same postmodern characteristics as Nabokov, then – exhibiting ideas of the self as multiplicitous, while undermining notions of ‘truth’ and the accuracy of memory – they nevertheless focus more rigorously on the inconstant nature of language and how it constructs the self, something more characteristic of late postmodernism.

Despite coming from different eras of the postmodern movement, each of the writers upon which I focus in my dissertation nevertheless upholds a postmodern contention that autobiography is futile, since the written self merely deteriorates amid lapses of memory and of ‘truth’ about an identity so constructed by others that it is impossible to comprehend. For instance, in his own autobiography, Vladimir Nabokov describes “the anomalies of a memory, whose possessor and victim should never have tried to become an autobiographer” (13). Suniti Namjoshi, in turn, undermines expectations of facticity in life writing, saying, “it’s not the truth. And it’s not my life” (146). To complicate matters, words themselves are portrayed as a hindrance in autobiography, with language seen as a Lacanian system that predates the self and that can thus never adequately express the self – since “it was certainly the Word that was . . . in the beginning, and we live in its creation” (Lacan *Ecrits* 225). As Lucy Grealy states in her autobiography, “language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler levels of meaning, but does that imply language *gives* meaning, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things?” (44 – emphasis original) Sharing such a view of

language, Michael Ondaatje says, “I am writing this [autobiography] . . . at a time when I am least sure about words” (152). Since autobiography cannot offer a ‘truth’ of the self – and language only undermines attempts at self-expression – many postmodernists argue that identity only deteriorates in autobiography, as Susanna Egan contends in saying that “life writing [i]s a death sentence” (Egan 12). Indeed, Robert Kroetsch feels entirely consumed by autobiography, saying, “by borrowing fragments / of other lives I borrow an / autobiography of my / own. *I disappear*” (118 – my emphasis).

When considered via Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic notion of abjection, the postmodern autobiographical self may be seen not merely as impossibly *deconstructed*, but also as *reconstructed*. Specifically – though many postmodernists tend to consider the written self as elusive amid much skepticism about language, truth, memory and traditional ideas of self – abjection situates autobiography as a dialectical process of death and rebirth, where “a weight of meaninglessness . . . which crushes me” (*Powers* 2) is also a “repulsive gift . . . that [ensures] ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (*Powers* 9). Such an investigation is aimed at contributing toward the limited existing scholarship on postmodern autobiography, particularly from a psychoanalytic Kristevan perspective.³ Thus relying upon Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, I work through Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*, Suniti Namjoshi’s *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, Robert Kroetsch’s *An Unlikely Story*, and Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* to situate postmodern autobiography as a dialectical process of abjection through which

³ There exists only a modest amount of scholarship regarding postmodern autobiography from a Kristevan perspective, something unlikely to grow given that the postmodern era has arguably ended. As Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters contend, “postmodernism’s potential as a critical method is on the historical move” (4).

the written self is both negated and renewed, something I consider from postcolonial, familial, bodily, and class perspectives.

To situate postmodern autobiography as abject, I will first delineate how postmodernism uniquely approaches autobiography and thus breaks with convention. Traditionally, autobiography is viewed as a truthful account of one's life, with Georges Gusdorf going so far as to contend that autobiography should parallel historical facticity, saying that:

the man who sets about writing his memoirs imagines, in all good faith, that he is writing as a historian and that any difficulties he may discover can be overcome through exercise of critical objectivity and impartiality. The portrait will be exact . . . No doubt it will be necessary to struggle against failures of memory and temptations to fudge the truth, but a sufficient strict moral alertness and a basic good faith will make it possible to reestablish the factual truth. (40)

Philippe Lejeune adds that the autobiographical subject must be guaranteed to represent the autobiographer herself – as opposed to a fictional or other subject – in what Lejeune deems to be an “autobiographical pact” with the reader. Consequently, autobiography has traditionally been regarded as authentic and factual, as a “biography of a person written by himself . . . [where] the narrator and the hero of the narration will be revealed in the work . . . [and] in which the narrator takes his own past as theme” (Starobinski 73-4).

Nevertheless, many non-postmodernist theorists allow for some inaccuracy in autobiography. For instance, G. Thomas Couser argues that, while autobiography is

considered to be nonfiction, its accuracy is questionable due to the fallibility of memory and to the socially constructed nature of the self. Couser writes:

It is not always—or perhaps ever—easy to say exactly how the obligation to the truth needs to be fulfilled. The memoirist’s dilemma is as follows. On the one hand, the memoirist is obliged to tell the truth, or at least not to lie—because the genre resides in the realm of nonfiction. On the other, as its name suggests, memoir relies primarily on an inherently fallible faculty, human memory. (*Memoir* 80)

Michael Ondaatje offers up just such a view of memory in his autobiography, *Running in the Family*, noting the instability of “frail memory dragged up out of the past” (111) and how “people [are] . . . always remembering the past in a sentimental way” (87). In order to accommodate the unreliability of memory, Lejeune adds a “referential pact” to his “autobiographical pact”, thereby allowing for lapses in one’s ability to recall the past correctly. He writes:

The referential pact . . . is in general coextensive with the autobiographical pact . . . The formula for it would not be, ‘I, the undersigned’ . . . but ‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’ . . . the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know it . . . making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc. (*On Autobiography* 22)

Consequently, while the traditional ideal is to offer an exact and true account of one’s life in autobiography, allowances are nevertheless made for occasional – largely unwitting – inaccuracies.

Conversely, postmodern autobiography *overtly* refutes notions of authenticity or 'truth', contending that inconsistencies are not only acceptable in autobiography, but that 'lies' are essential, since embellishments can reveal much about an author. As Timothy Dow Adams contends, "lying . . . is a highly strategic decision, especially on the part of literary autobiographers . . . [because] narrative truth and personal myth are more telling than literal fidelity" (x). Robert Kroetsch typifies such 'lying', claiming that his autobiography is comprised of "just plain outright lies" (73). He goes on to argue that exaggeration is unavoidable due to the literary nature of autobiography, saying:

We are tempted to write a history, with all its claims to authenticity, to validation by research, to generalizations that assert themselves as truths. But against all that we know . . . the temptation to tell a story.

We know the impulse to exaggerate. (70)

Ondaatje seemingly supports such a view of autobiography as "story" and as 'exaggeration' in characterizing his own autobiography as "fictional", thus offering a view of the genre as only an impression, rather than a reproduction, of the past. He writes:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture.' And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (176)

Suniti Namjoshi is similarly prone to autobiographical impressionism, cautioning against notions of 'truth' in the very title of her autobiography, *Goja: An Autobiographical 'Myth'* (my emphasis). She writes:

This account is autobiographical in that my experience is all I have. It's fictional since any version manipulates facts. And it's mythical, because it's by making patterns that I make sense of all I have. (ix)

As such, when struggling to depict the sexual molestation she suffered as a child, Namjoshi resorts to telling it in the form of “a fairy tale, as a long and impossibly tall story” (22). Such a repackaging of ‘truth’ has Roy Pascal contend that autobiography is not so much a factual account of the past, but rather that “autobiography is a *shaping* of the past” (9 – my emphasis) – something Nabokov exhibits in “recomposing my past” (240) and “reconstruct[ing] the summer of 1914 . . . perhaps a little more perfect” (215). Consequently, the postmodern autobiographical self may be as much fiction as fact, since “autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact” (Smith and Watson *Reading* 17).

Many postmodernists contend that the impossibility of autobiographical authenticity is due to the socially constructed nature of identity. As Judith Butler argues, “the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (*Gender* 23). Suniti Namjoshi presents just such an idea of the constructed self. As a woman of colour, an immigrant and a lesbian, she feels socially labelled by those in the west, saying, “In their eyes . . . I had on a white garment which had written on it in large black letters: FOREIGN / EXOTIC / THIRD WORLD / NEEDY—whichever word their mind’s eye was able to read” (71). Such social construction leads Butler to contend that one cannot accurately write autobiographically, since, “my account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story” (*Giving* 40). She adds, “the

narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story" (*Giving* 37). As such, many postmodern autobiographers are uncertain of the self they attempt to write and the self that has already been 'written' for them through social construction, a frustration Namjoshi seems to express in her autobiography when saying, "Be! Be what? Be heterosexual! Be Christian! Be American! Be! Be like them?" (43). While Namjoshi acknowledges the socially constructed self in saying, "we are all composites . . . we are all parts of each other" (41) – she likewise argues a diluting effect of such construction, something she characterizes as "Horrible! Someone else's nose stuck in my face. A medley of different bodies, of different personalities . . . a mishmash" (41). Egan concurs with such a notion of the constructed self comprised by many, saying that "we co-author ourselves with others in our social role" (10). As such, she argues that the self is only visible in autobiography as reflected by one's socially constructive community – particularly though what she considers "mirror talk" (25), which "is more constructive than reflective of the self. It foregrounds interaction between people, among genres, and between writer and readers of autobiography" (12). Such "mirror talk" is evident when Grealy writes:

spending as much time as I did looking in the mirror, I thought I knew
what I looked like . . . I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror
opposite . . . the reversed image of myself was the true image, the
way other people saw me. (184-5)

In saying this, Grealy not only gestures toward Egan's 'mirror talk' – suggesting an inherent tension between how one perceives oneself as how one is perceived by others

– but also a sense that autobiographical self-perception is false, since the constructed self – “the reversed image” – is “the true image”. Grealy thus proposes an inevitable unravelling of the autobiographical self as ever undermined or “reversed” by exterior social forces. Ondaatje echoes such a view. He acknowledges a highly constructed self in saying that his autobiography is “a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people. . . This is their book as much as mine” (175 – emphasis original). Yet, he rarely appears in his own autobiography, focusing almost entirely on others instead. Consequently, Ondaatje also suggests a view of the autobiographical self as unravelling under contemplation of one’s own social construction. In deeming identity as highly constructed by others, postmodernists thus suggest a social aspect of self that complicates and even erodes autobiographical identity.

Postmodern writers often further argue that the autobiographical self is not only manifold because of social construction, but also because identity is intrinsically multiplicitous. Traditionally, however, the autobiographical self is considered to be cohesive and linear, as Georges Gusdorf contends in saying, “autobiography assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (37). Yet, contemporary theorists dispute the ability of autobiography to offer a cohesive representation of the self, since:

in the making of the story, I create myself in a new form, instituting a narrative ‘I’ that is superadded to the ‘I’ whose past life I seek to tell.
The narrative ‘I’ effectively adds to the story every time it tries to speak. (Butler *Giving* 39)

As a consequence, one's written and writing selves differ, with the writing self positing a new form of identity that will contribute to the autobiography. As such, an autobiographer "[is] always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling" (Butler "Giving" 27). Egan goes on to say that such shifting personal identities hinder autobiography by obstructing a view of the self, thus posing an "impossibility of seeing the self" (12). James Olney supports such a stance, arguing that the 'impossibility' of seeing one's autobiographical self is due to the presence not only of written and writing selves, but also of various past and present selves. He writes:

The very fact of memory and its peculiar operation, bringing back some things, neglecting other things and other times entirely, seems to argue that selfhood is not continuous; for it brings up one self here and another self there, and they are not the same as one another.

(*Metaphors* 24)

Olney goes on to say that, because of the multiplicitous nature of identity, autobiographers can only hope to express the self obliquely at best, by way of metaphor. He writes:

Metaphor supplies a connection . . . that knowledge they had before to include the new, connected item or experience *and* the relation between old and new. . . . [it] extends the possibilities of meaning and pattern in himself, which in turn may be taken, as it were, for a metaphor of his self. (*Metaphors* 31 – emphasis original)

An example of such autobiographical metaphor may be seen when Grealy vacillates between “old and new” selves when enduring facial cancer at a young age, “from that time now indelibly labeled *Before* . . . [and] *After* [cancer]” (129 – emphasis original). She identifies variously as “Lucy” (31) and “Lucinda” (31) in the text, “slipp[ing] in and out of my various personae with great ease” (38). Similarly, Suniti Namjoshi depicts competing past and present selves from a postcolonial perspective in her immigrant autobiography, noting “the two halves of my experience . . . I belong to India and to the West” (67). Kroetsch, in turn, acknowledges an autobiographical self that is split between writing and written selves, something Egan considers unavoidable in autobiography – a “split between subject and object, between writing and written selves” (11). Accordingly, Kroetsch contends that his autobiography is “concerned with the writing life, not with the personal life, of the writer” (217). The author thus often confuses himself with his fictional creations, such as when he asks, “Did [the character] Rita write these exquisite lines, or did I?” (185). Postmodern thought thus suggests that the self is too fluid and various to be adequately expressed in writing, such that autobiography is depicted as a sort of confinement or inhibition of identity.

Language, too, is seen as constricting the autobiographical self. Specifically, postmodernists often adopt a Derridean view of language, which is deemed an external system into which one is born and to which one must unavoidably adapt. Consequently, language is seen as manipulating an author, rather than as a tool that is manipulated *by* an author. As Jacques Derrida contends:

the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses

them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. (*Grammatology* 158 – emphasis original)

An example of the socially constructive nature of language may be seen when Kroetsch asks, “Did the author write the text or did the text write the author?” (16) Similarly, Ondaatje observes “the *self-portrait* of language” (69 – my emphasis), seemingly alluding to Jacques Lacan’s argument that language is socially constructive of the self – that “speech confers a meaning on the functions of the individual” (*Ecrits* 214). Adhering to such a view, Kroetsch notes “the limits of all words” (50) in his autobiography, writing that, “what I have to say from here on is impossible to say” (Kroetsch 14). The autobiographical self is thus undermined by the very words used to express it.

With language deemed an inadequate form of expression, identity as too constructed for self-portrayal, and memory as unreliable, the postmodern autobiographical subject may be seen as merely dissolved rather than expressed in writing. Olney describes the apparent negation of the autobiographical self in saying:

the [autobiographical] text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life . . . having dissolved the self into a text. (*Autobiography* 22)

The self thus becomes *other* in the autobiographical process, as Winfried Siemerling argues in saying “the image of the other appears as metaphor of an aspect of the [autobiographical] self” (137).

Yet, contemporary scholars criticize such postmodern positions as nihilistic to the point of meaninglessness, victimhood and even oblivion – as “postmodern nihilism” (Slocombe 77) – where one’s identity is merely “broken up in disparate units, without any essence to him, man as malleable putty” (D’haen 323). An example of such nihilism is when Kroetsch claims to “disappear” (118) in an autobiography he nevertheless argues does not exist, saying, “it is not possible to write / an autobiography” (117) – “this is (not) an autobiography” (217). As such, postmodernist authors often depict autobiography as a negative space in which the self merely dissolves in supposed literary impossibility.

Yet, Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory of abjection illuminates postmodern autobiography as a process not only of negation, but also of creation. Kristeva is well-suited for an analysis of the postmodern autobiographical self since her work focuses intensely on personal identity from what is considered by many to be a postmodern perspective. Kristeva’s approach differs from most other postmodernists, however, in offering an expansive, rather than an elusive, view of the self. Specifically, Kristeva’s work may be seen as beginning at the point where many other postmodernists conclude – on the note that self can never be fully known. In this sense, Kristeva invites and explores such an unknowable self – as a expansive ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’ whom one might grow into. She asserts that we are inherently ‘strangers to ourselves’ – the very title of one of her texts – such that, “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity” (*Strangers* 1). Rather than merely confounding the self, however, she deems such strangeness as foundational, saying:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container . . . I lose my composure. I feel 'lost,' 'indistinct,' 'hazy.' The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy. (*Strangers* 187)

In saying this, Kristeva offers a postmodern idea of self as expansive, wherein becoming 'other' to oneself allows for variations of being. As Winifred Whelan contends, Kristeva's approach to the self:

arises from the heart of postmodernism, representing a deep desire to learn about and appreciate, not to fear, the other. Underneath this desire is consciousness that in order for the world to have more unity, there is a need to be at ease with the stranger, including the stranger in ourselves. (297-8)

Consequently, Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories are uniquely situated to locate a postmodern self otherwise seemingly obliterated by "postmodern nihilism" (Slocombe 77).

Kristeva's notion of abjection is particularly illuminating of the postmodern autobiographical self. She explains abjection as a defamiliarizing process of self-alienation, in which one becomes unrecognizably other, as:

a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as

radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing,
either. (*Powers 2*)

As such, many postmodern autobiographers may be seen as abject – as “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either” – in writing autobiographies that nevertheless erode ideas of self. For instance, abjection is seemingly apparent when Grealy fails to recognize herself in the ‘mirror’ of autobiography – saying, “Was that really me?” (175) – and when Kroetsch and Ondaatje ‘disappear’ in their work. They are thus abject, since “the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (Kristeva *Powers 1* – emphasis original). Similarly, just as Egan notes the “complex double-voicedness” (13) inherent in autobiography’s so-called “mirror talk”, Kristeva explains that “the time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion” (*Powers 8*) that “places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva *Powers 1*). As such, Kroetsch may be seen as abject when split into defamiliarizing writing and written selves, asking, “Did [the fictional character] Rita write these exquisite lines, or did I?” (185)

Yet, Kristeva goes on to explain that the self is not merely lost in abjection, but also recuperated there. Specifically, she describes abjection as a type of expansiveness, “of veiled infinity . . . when revelation bursts forth” (*Powers 8*). For instance, Grealy is both deteriorated and enhanced by illness, saying after a particularly difficult chemotherapy treatment that:

suddenly my perception of the world shifted. . . . My sense of space and self lengthened and transformed, extended itself out the door and down the corridor, while at the same time staying present with me . . . [in] profound discovery. (86)

Grealy subsequently moves from victim to “hero” (62) in abject illness, just as “this abjection of self” (Kristeva *Powers* 5) leads to “a state of life, of new significance” (Kristeva *Powers* 15). Abjection is thus simultaneously destructive and constructive, as Kristeva explains in saying:

the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject [who]
 . . . 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” (*Powers* 5 – emphasis
 original)

Grealy seems just so abjectly eradicated and reestablished. Though she writes of her abject loss of identity due to her ever-changing, diseased face – saying, “I couldn’t make what I saw in the mirror correspond to the person I thought I was. . . . The person in the mirror was an imposter” (219-220) – it is precisely such self-alienating abjection that ultimately defines her. As Grealy writes:

there was only the fact of me, my face, my ugliness. This singularity
 of meaning – I was my face, I was ugliness . . . Everything led to it,
 everything receded from it – my face as personal vanishing point. (7
 – emphasis original)

As such, Grealy is both eradicated and defined by her abject illness. She deteriorates into abject “ugliness,” something that then anchors her identity, giving her “this singularity of meaning – I was my face.”

Namjoshi, too, may be seen as simultaneously dissolved and renewed in abjection. Specifically, she is concurrently overrun and constituted by the many members of her social group. She writes:

The body is infested. The Goja-monster, the Raja-monster, the Goldfish-monster, the Mummy-monster, the Daddy-monster, everyone I've ever known takes root, grubs for sustenance, even the servant who molested me. . . . All these people are jostling one another, entering into me, living with me. I am an ark. All these people I repudiate are part of me. *They are me*. (31 – emphasis original)

Consequently, while Namjoshi's social circle overtakes her – “jostling one another, entering into me” – they also comprise her – “*They are me*”. Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories thus help locate the self-othering nature of postmodern autobiography as not merely one of negation, but also of abject renewal, wherein, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (*Powers 3* – emphasis original).

Kristeva's theory of abjection helps illuminate each of my chosen texts as abjectly deconstructing and reconstructing the autobiographical self from such differing perspectives as the body, the family, postcolonialism, and class station. My second chapter on Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, for instance, presents a bodily perspective of the autobiographical self as both lost and found in abjection. The text recounts the endless treatments and reconstructive surgeries she bears well into her thirties in the hope of “fixing . . . my face” (Grealy “Mirrorings” n.p.), eventually becoming

addicted to – and fatally overdosing on – prescription painkillers. Grealy's autobiographical self may be seen as abjectly depleted and reinforced through bodily illness, such that the author "grew weaker and weaker" (57) from a cancer that simultaneously reinscribed her as "special, singled out" (21). Kristeva's psychoanalytic writings thus situate Grealy as both lost and found in abjection, wavering in illness "on the edge of non-existence" (Kristeva *Powers* 2) and yet also constituted there – as abject: "there was only the fact of me, my face, my ugliness" (Grealy 7).

My third chapter examines autobiographical subjectivity from diasporic, cultural, familial, and class perspectives by turning to Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*. Leaving her homeland of India and her position as a privileged member of the aristocracy there, Namjoshi transitions from an advantaged "someone" (64) in the east to abjectly "less than nothing" (16) in the west. Depicting a life of Bhabhian "hybridity" (Namjoshi 56) in the "third space" (Bhabha 98) between "the Fabulous West [and] the Mysterious East" (Namjoshi 88), Namjoshi presents an abjectly split self comprised of a "mishmash" (41) of identities, as "a woman, a lesbian, and an Indian, I am an alien three times over" (97). Though her identity is thus fragmented, Namjoshi nevertheless becomes a centering force in her text through abject "ghost writing" (Karpinski 233), wherein the author appropriates the voices of deceased mother figures in an attempt to cohere the self. Namjoshi may thus be seen as resurrecting identity through abjection, as redefining the self as abject, as a monstrous corpse-like figure that houses the dead.

My fourth chapter examines the (dis)function of memory and of desire in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. In his autobiography, Nabokov may be seen as abjectly

eradicating a present self in favour of a fictive past one, as expressing a type of Freudian death drive. Specifically, Nabokov abjects his present self in favour of an idealized past one. He "reconstruct[s my past] . . . perhaps a little more perfect" (215), thereby becoming a fictionalized other, who abjects reality in favour of fantasy. In doing this, Nabokov may be seen as achieving a kind of abject "infinity" (Kristeva *Powers* 8) through what may be deemed literary 'suicide' – such that "nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (Nabokov 76).

My fifth chapter focuses on Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story* to explore the use of prosopopoeia as a means of expressing a self made strange in autobiography. In largely speaking through other characters, such as Albert Johnson, Morag Gunn, Aunt Rose and Rita Kleinhart, Kroetsch abjectly writes himself out of and then into subjectivity, negating and reinstating the autobiographical self by abjecting his own identity onto another: "by borrowing fragments / of other lives I borrow an / autobiography of my / own. I disappear" (118). As such, Kroetsch may be seen as using prosopopoeia - as speaking through another person, character, or object (Ramazani et al 1121) – to negotiate an abject demise and reincarnation of the autobiographical self.

My sixth and final chapter examines postmodern autobiographical subjectivity from postcolonial, diasporic, cultural, and familial perspectives in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje's text may be seen as both an attempt to learn what runs *in* the family and how to run *from* it, since much of the family history he explores is abject – "shameful . . . condemned . . . twisted" (Kristeva *Powers* 1) – with its "casual tragedies" (31) and "hideous scandal" (19). Because Ondaatje is largely absent from

his autobiography – with the self seemingly eclipsed by a family so socially constructive that it overtakes him – the author may be seen as abjected in the text, as “the jettisoned object . . . radically excluded” (Kristeva *Powers* 2). Consequently, his “I” most often represents various family members, rather than the self. I thus argue that *Running in the Family* depicts the autobiographical self as so highly constructed by family as to risk abject erasure.

Many postmodernists suggest that, due to the unreliability of memory, the limits of language, and the fluid and constructed nature of identity, “it is not possible to write / an autobiography” (Kroetsch 117). As a consequence, the postmodern autobiographical self is often criticized as deconstructed to the point of meaninglessness (Slocombe, D’Haen) – thereby suggesting that its representation contributes little to the contemporary literary and social world. My hope is to help salvage the postmodern autobiographical subject from the idea that it is merely deconstructed to the point of obscurity, situating it rather as also *reconstructed* – as founded in what Julia Kristeva considers abjection, just as “the one by whom the abject exists . . . the more he strays, the more he is saved” (Kristeva *Powers* 8). My goal is thus an attempt to refute claims that postmodern autobiography merely stagnates in reductive intellectual exercises of delayed signification – a stance that devalues the genre as simply “apolitical and evasive . . . too self-absorbed, too preoccupied with form and formal tricks, and too ironic” (Bertens 143). Rather, my goal is to illuminate postmodern autobiography as a constitutive space of renewal, insight and relevance, where the self is made so strange as to be established anew – thus ushering a better understanding, and even a welcoming, of the ‘stranger’ or foreigner in others.

Chapter II: The Sign of Cancer: Bodily Identity in Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*

Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (originally published in 1994) overtly questions the ability of language to autobiographically articulate a self that both loses and finds subjectivity in a face made unrecognizable by disease, a process illuminated by Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic notion of abjection. Writing in the postmodern era, Grealy adopts a Derridean view of language that questions the tenability of the written autobiographical self, saying, "language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler levels of meaning, but does that imply language *gives* meaning, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things?" (43-44 – emphasis original). Grealy is thus highly self-conscious of her illness narrative, which chronicles an increasing identification with the body as she suffers from facial cancer and the side effects of chemotherapy. She writes, "I just wanted to lie there [in sickness], becoming ever more intimate with my body" (57). In so turning inward, Grealy depicts disease as less a *threat* to subjectivity than a *redefinition* of it, since she is seemingly reborn through a potentially terminal cancer, something suggested when she writes, "Not one person ever said the word *cancer* to me . . . it was as if the earth were without form until those words were uttered" (43 – emphasis original). Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic writings illuminate Grealy's autobiographical journey as one of abjection, wherein a subject is revived by an otherwise destructive force, in which "the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject . . . [who] finds that . . . it *is* none other than the abject" (Kristeva *Powers* 5 – italics original). From this perspective, Grealy both loses and gains identity

in the abjection of her facial cancer, such that, “there was only the fact of me, my face, my ugliness. This singularity of meaning – I was my face, I was ugliness” (7 – emphasis original). Grealy thus comes to identify as the very abjection that threatens her. In this chapter, I argue that Grealy’s mutating face both destabilizes and reinforces the self through a dialectic process of abjection, something suggested by the text’s motif of masks and by the self as a type of living cadaver.

In *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy adopts the postmodern position that language, and thus autobiography, can offer no definitive ideas of self. Specifically, many postmodern writers contend that language is a system into which one is born and to which one must conform, such that words can never adequately or authentically express the self. Language is thus viewed as socially constructive *of*, not constructed *by*, the self. As Jacques Derrida contends:

the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. (*Grammatology* 158 – emphasis original)

As such, language is depicted as hindering self-expression, since one “cannot dominate absolutely” (158) the pre-existing, regulatory system of language into which one is born. Judith Butler adds that autobiographical writing is particularly stymied by language, arguing that:

the constitutive identifications of an autobiographical narrative are always partially fabricated in the telling. Lacan claims that we can never

tell the story of our origins, precisely because the language bars the speaking subject from the . . . origins of its speech. (*Gender* 91)

In saying this, Butler elaborates upon Derrida's notion of language as a rigid system to which writers must adapt, rather than as a pliable instrument that writers might manipulate. Specifically, in conjuring Lacan, Butler depicts language as always already foreign to oneself, because language predates the self, thus "bar[ring] the speaking subject from the . . . origins of its speech" (*Gender* 91). Butler notes that this is particularly troublesome for autobiography – which must then be "always partially fabricated in the telling" (*Gender* 91) – since the genre has an inherent expectation of authenticity. As Paul John Eakin contends, "telling the truth—this is surely the most familiar of the rules we associate with autobiographical discourse" (34). Many postmodern theorists thus argue that autobiography is impossible, because language cannot adequately express the self.

Grealy seems to adhere to the postmodern idea of language as an inadequate means of expressing the self. For instance, she deconstructs words until they are only disjointed sounds, suggesting an inherent instability to language. She writes, "one of my favorite experiments was to pick a word and repeat it ceaselessly to myself until I was in awe of it, until it transformed itself entirely into an absurd sound having nothing at all to do with the thing it signified" (43). She thus suggests a Derridean view of language as ever unravelling or deferring meaning – as merely a stream of signifiers. As Derrida contends, "the signified always already functions as a signifier" (*Grammatology* 7). Similarly, Grealy suggests that personal experience evades linguistic expression, saying, "I felt as if I could speculate and theorize about a thousand

different beautiful truths all in the time it would take my lips to form a single word” (16). In saying this, Grealy implies that the many nuances of self are stymied by language, which reduces one’s experience to a mere, inadequate “single word” (16) – something that cannot possibly express one’s “thousand different beautiful truths” (16). Such a lack of faith in language is also evident when Grealy writes:

the poems we read in English class . . . moved me in ways I
couldn’t understand. It was, in part, the very lack of understanding
that was so moving. I would read . . . and feel that something
important and necessary was being said here, but the moment I
tried to examine the words, dissect the sentences, the meaning
receded. (189)

Words are thus depicted by Grealy as unreliable, mutable, and inconstant – their meaning ever-receding via a series of “nouns and verbs . . . signs and symbols, artificial reports from a buffer zone none of us really owned or cared to inhabit” (58). For Grealy, then, language is “artificial” (58), consisting merely of floating signifiers too unstable to fully contain or “inhabit” (58) meaning.

Grealy depicts language as particularly inadequate to express the bodily self. She writes, “I recognized from coping with the pain of my treatments, a shedding of all extraneous grievances to reveal a purely physical core, a meaning that did not extend beyond the confines of one’s body” (149). In saying this, Grealy implies an inability to articulate one’s physical identity – a “purely physical core” – since such a bodily self evades language in having “a meaning that did not extend beyond the confines of one’s body.” Susannah B. Mintz concurs with such a view, saying, “there is something

irreducible, Grealy implies, about physical experience . . . In this sense, the state of being ‘diseased’ . . . eludes linguistic representation” (179). Grealy thus undermines her autobiographical undertaking by disputing its very foundation – language.

Grealy’s mistrust in the ability of language to express oneself – particularly one’s bodily self – is highly influenced by her own physicality. Specifically, Grealy’s cancer impedes linguistic expression since it develops at the site of speech – her jaw – such that, “it became increasingly difficult to speak” (23); “when I tried to speak, nothing happened” (55). Moreover, Grealy’s ever-changing, diseased face seems to *precipitate* the author’s view of language as similarly unstable. From this perspective, it is of interest to note that language only becomes mutable for Grealy as her face begins to mutate – that Grealy begins deconstructing language as her face itself seemingly deconstructs. In this sense, it is only when “a bony knob had appeared on the very tip of my jaw just under my ear” (24) that Grealy begins to contemplate language, saying “there may have been millions of words uttered before [the word ‘cancer’], but they had no meaning, no leftover telltale shapes to show that they had existed” (43). In saying this, Grealy suggests a correlation between the moments she becomes aware of her disease and of the intricacies of language, since there are no “telltale shapes” of previous words until she hears the one fateful word – “*cancer*” (43 – emphasis original). Furthermore, when Grealy’s cancer escalates to the point where she requires hospitalization, her contemplation of language similarly escalates, such that she begins conducting “experiments with words, shredding their meaning through repetition” (44). Grealy thus suggests a correlation between a breaking down of the body and a breaking down of language, as though language is insufficient to express bodily difference.

Unlike other postmodernists who contemplate language for purely literary, cultural or philosophical reasons, Grealy is specifically prompted by the body and its environment to similarly break down language. Her disease may then be seen as a metaphor for erosion, not only of the body, but also of the systems in which the body exists – including those of self and of language. Of note is that Grealy's cancer begins to erode her body as her family structure itself begins to erode. Grealy writes:

[my brother] Sean was in the early stages of what would be diagnosed as schizophrenia . . . My mother . . . suffered from depression . . . There were always money problems, even before my father lost his job . . . our home [was in a] drastic state of disrepair. (35)

To add to such difficulty, Grealy's father soon dies of pancreatitis (164), something that further degrades the author's family unit. It is not just a cancer of the body that affects Grealy, then, but a kind of 'cancer' that devours her entire family. As a consequence – and unlike many postmodernists – Grealy seems to deconstruct language because her environment, including that of her own body, are being similarly dismantled. Her bodily cancer thus may be seen as mimicking a 'cancer' of the family, both of which prompt her to view language as no more expressive than her unrecognizable face.

Language is depicted in the text as so inexpressive as to actually complicate Grealy's disease, which she does not fully understand largely due to the words used to describe it. Specifically, Grealy is initially told she has a "malignancy" (42) known as "Ewing's sarcoma" (43), something she only comprehends in the abstract. Such medical terms are mere signifiers for her, with little meaning – just as the words she would repeat until they became "an absurd sound having nothing at all to do with the

thing [they] signified” (43). However, when Grealy learns a new word for her illness – “cancer” (43) – she immediately comprehends her condition. So signifying is this particular word that she is “shocked . . . I looked up. ‘I had cancer?’ . . . I thought I had Ewing’s sarcoma” (43). Although her illness has not changed, the word for it has. It is through a word, then, that her illness moves from vagueness to clarity – from “Ewing’s sarcoma” (43) to “cancer” (43). Unlike other words, such as “*Gull. Truck. Banana. Formula. . . . malignancy*” (44 – emphasis original) that Grealy could “examine . . . [and] dissect . . . [until] the meaning receded” (189), the word ‘cancer’ cannot be so manipulated by the author. She writes:

malignancy. I can reconstruct now that its important syllables probably charmed me, its promise of rare and dangerous implications made me feel important, but its lack of meaning provided me with just enough echo to act as background to my shock at hearing the word *cancer*. (44 - emphasis original)

While words like ‘malignancy’ and ‘Ewing’s sarcoma’ merely “charmed” (44) the author with their “lack of meaning” (44), the word ‘cancer’ has an irrefutable gravity and signification that thus causes her “shock” (44) – it is “incisive” (43), unambiguously penetrating her otherwise postmodern perception of language, just as cancer has unambiguously penetrated her body. Mintz seemingly concurs with such a view, saying, “to know that she had ‘cancer’ would be to live in and through some entirely different reality of illness than the one ‘malignancy’ and ‘Ewing’s sarcoma’ had already created” (178). Certainly, Grealy is merely alarmed because her young self did not understand that Ewing’s sarcoma was a form of cancer and that she was quite so ill.

From a literary perspective, however, cancer – the concreteness of both the word and the illness – may be seen as undermining Grealy's erstwhile view of language as consisting merely of harmless floating signifiers.

Nevertheless, Grealy's ever-changing face may itself be seen as a kind of floating signifier. The idea of the face-as-signifier is explained by Sylvia A. Brown, who writes that, "the face is, more than any other part of the body, equated with the self" (298). Grealy seems to support such a view in writing, "my face, my 'self'" (170), adding, "I was my face" (7 – emphasis original). Certainly, Grealy's unique facial appearance may be seen as an unambiguous – rather than as a floating – signifier. Specifically, her distinctive face signifies a distinct bodily subject known as Lucy Grealy. Yet, her face also signifies a type of postmodern linguistic subjectivity – an ever-changing "signifier of the signifier" (Derrida *Grammatology* 7) – in mutating so frequently that the author cannot recognize her own unstable appearance: "I could not recognize myself" (205). Grealy seems to acknowledge such a tension and correlation between bodily and linguistic subjectivities as signified by the face when asking, "how could I pass up the possibility that [another surgery] might work, that at long last I might finally fix my face, fix my life, my soul?" (215) Grealy thus suggests not only that her face and her self are irrevocably intertwined – such that, to 'fix' or alter one is to necessarily 'fix' or alter the other – but also that her face is both a physical signifier that may be surgically altered, as well as a linguistic signifier, representing "my self, my soul, my life" (Grealy "Mirrorings" n.p.). Nevertheless, after many appearance-altering treatments and surgeries, the author can no longer identify with her face. She writes, "my face had been changing for so long that I had never had time to become acquainted with it"

(221). Consequently, as much as Grealy's face signifies her both bodily and linguistically, it is ultimately a floating signifier, since she herself cannot recognize its reflection in the mirror.

Because Grealy's physical appearance is such a determining force or signifier in her experience, a bodily depiction of subjectivity is prominent in the text. Such bodily subjectivity is precipitated by the physical discomfort of Grealy's emerging cancer – by painful symptoms and even more painful treatments – which draw the author's focus increasingly to the body. She writes:

I had never known it was possible to *feel* your organs, feel them the way you feel your tongue in your mouth, or your teeth. My stomach outlined itself for me; my intestines, my liver, parts of me I didn't know the names of . . . the muscles of my stomach, my back, my lungs. (75 – emphasis original)

In becoming so aware of her body, Grealy identifies with it more and more. She writes:

I was becoming aware that I was experiencing my body, and the world, differently from other people. For hours I'd lie in bed . . . conversing silently with myself in the third person . . . the weight of being trapped in my own body. . . . a sort of physical awareness would take hold of me. (91)

Grealy's transition to a bodily subjectivity is conspicuous here. Specifically, in “conversing silently with myself in the third person . . . [until] a sort of physical awareness would take hold of me” (91), she seemingly becomes aware of a new, as yet unacquainted, bodily self – one the author addresses as “she”. Because of such an

intense focus on bodily subjectivity, Grealy's work is considered by G. Thomas Couser a "'some body' memoir—that is, the memoir that does not take for granted that to be is to be embodied, but rather emphasizes what it is to have, or to be, a particular kind of body" ("Undoing" 79). Indeed, Grealy's emphasis upon bodily subjectivity is largely due to her own body's 'particularity', since "[she] was different-looking" (104). For most of the text, then, Grealy contemplates subjectivity as something bodily – as an ever-changing face – such that, "Grealy's disfigurement was undeniably central to her identity" (Couser "Obituary" 3).

Grealy's intense identification with the body may be seen as a type of Lacanian "mirror stage." Indeed, the psychological ramifications of being unable to "make what I saw in the mirror correspond to the person I thought I was" (Grealy 219-220) are great, as Brown explains in saying that, "a fracturing of the face becomes tantamount to a fracturing of identity" (298). Yet, there also seems to be a Lacanian meaning behind Grealy's engagement with mirrors. Specifically, since Grealy relies heavily upon a Lacanian understanding of language, it follows that she might also adopt a Lacanian view of identity. From this perspective, her assertion that "the person in the mirror was an imposter" (220) seems to gesture toward Lacan's idea of the "mirror stage," wherein a child individuates from her parents by recognizing her reflected image as distinct from the parents. Lacan goes on to explain, however, that the mirror's image is illusory, since it is only a reflection and not actually the self. Consequently, as Grealy puts it, one's reflection is "an imposter". Lacan writes:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage . . . as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation

that takes place in the subject when he assumes . . . an image . . . in which the / is precipitated. . . . But the important point is that this form . . . [is] a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming. (*Ecrits* 76 – emphasis original)

From this perspective, Grealy may be seen as enacting a type of adult “mirror stage”, wherein identity is simultaneously constructed and confused by one's reflection.

Specifically, just as a child learns through the mirror stage that she is distinct from her parents, Grealy understands that her image sets her apart from others. She writes, “I was never overlooked. . . . [my face] defined me. . . . I was special” (101).

Nevertheless, just as a child eventually learns that her reflection is not actually the self, Grealy similarly cannot identify with her reflection in the mirror, saying, “I saw my own face reflected back at me. Was that really me?” (175) Grealy goes on to perpetuate a Lacanian idea of self in saying that, because she does not recognize her current face in the mirror, she only identifies with “my ‘original’ face, the one free from all deviation, all error” (157), and with the face she anticipates upon completion of many anticipated reconstructive surgeries – “my ‘real’ face, the one I was meant to have” (157), “the face I was ‘supposed’ to have” (179). Grealy's reference to the “real” here only solidifies a Lacanian interpretation of her words, since it echoes Lacan's notion of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary Orders – “the tripartition I use to situate analytic experience in the symbolic, imaginary, and real” (Lacan *Ecrits* 548) – orders in which Lacan deems one's life to be situated at various stages of development. When Grealy uses the word “real”, then, to describe the face she desires but that ever eludes her despite many

reconstructive surgeries, she seemingly refers to the Lacanian Real, an idyllic but elusive state of being – “that [which] . . . no one will ever reach” (Lacan “Ethics” 53) and that thus acts as “a living lure” (Lacan “Ethics” 60) around which we each construct our lives. Grealy’s postmodern Lacanian approach to language thus seemingly extends to her ideas of self, which are increasingly depicted as anchored in the body.

Because Grealy’s face is such a distinct signifier, the effect is dramatic when it is concealed by masks. For instance, Grealy feels great abandon while wearing an “Eskimo” (120) mask for Halloween. Grealy writes:

I felt wonderful . . . I felt such freedom: I waltzed up to people
effortlessly and boldly. . . . I hadn’t realized just how meek I’d become,
how self-conscious I was about my face until now that it was obscured.
. . . why didn’t [others] always feel as bold and as happy as I felt that
night? (119 - 120)

Here, Grealy finds satisfaction in concealing her facial difference. She feels able to behave as “effortlessness and boldly” (119) as she did before cancer, when she was known as someone who could “outread, outspell, and outtest the strongest kid in the classroom” (15), rather than as someone who looks like she wears a “monster mask” (118). Consequently, while many children delight in playing *another* at Halloween, Grealy views the occasion as an opportunity to play *herself*, something Brown explains in saying:

by masking her face, Grealy can see herself in a new way: as a meek
child whose naturally bold, performative essence has either been

repressed or changed through adapting to the social role scripted for her body post cancer. (304)

Masking thus allows Grealy to feel as though she can release an inner authentic “essence”. As such, Grealy is again liberated when donning a “plastic witch mask” (127) on another Halloween night, saying:

I walked down the streets suddenly bold and free: no one could see my face. . . . [I] did not see one person staring back at me, ready to make fun of my face . . . [I felt] freedom and ease . . . joy. (127)

In enjoying the concealment of her face, Grealy suggests a negative relationship between self and body, whereby physical appearance constricts rather than nurtures identity.

Yet, as much as Grealy feels “bold and free” (127) while masked, I argue that such masking ultimately restricts the author. Specifically, her face is such a strong signifier of self that, despite the “freedom and ease” (127) she enjoys while it is concealed, she nevertheless is relieved upon exposing it again. She writes:

At home, when I took the mask off, I felt both sad and relieved. Sad because I had felt like a pauper walking for a few brief hours in the clothes of a prince . . . Relieved because I felt no connection with that kind of happiness. (127)

Grealy thus suggests an inauthenticity to the brief “joy” (127) she felt in concealment, feeling “no connection with that kind of happiness” (127), specifically because it conceals her primary and unique signifier – her face.

Grealy's distinctive face nevertheless often acts as its own type of mask. Indeed, the author describes "my face that was my own mask that kept me from knowing the joy I was sure everyone but me lived with intimately" ("Mirrorings" n.p.). Her post-cancer face acts as a type of mask since disease has changed it, such that, "I had a big scar on my face. In short, I knew I was different-looking" (104). To this, she adds:

people noticed me. . . . I was never overlooked. . . . with my big blue eyes, which appeared even bigger now that I'd lost weight and now that, without bone to shape it, the right side of my face was starting to sink in.
(101)

Because of such physical difference, schoolboys tease the young Grealy, saying, "Hey, girl, take off that monster mask – oops, she's not wearing a mask!" (118). In this instance, Grealy is not only marked as socially *other* because of her unique appearance, but also as someone disguised or obscured by her own body. As such, Grealy feels her life is suspended while 'masked', only to be reanimated once others deem her beautiful again. She writes, "If [others] thought I was beautiful, and here I could almost not dare to think such a thing, they might even love me. Me, as an individual, as a person" (157). Consequently, Grealy views her face as a type of mask that inhibits or suspends life.

Conversely, however, Grealy's face-as-mask also affords her certain privileges. Indeed, her face marks her as "special" (21), attracting from sympathetic others the "praise and attention I'd been fantasizing about for so many years" (123). For instance, her elementary school holds a special ceremony to acknowledge her "bravery" (123) in dealing with cancer at such a young age. Her face is thus not only a mask, but a

trophy – “my face was my battle scar, my badge of honour” (187). Some of the attention her face garners is thus desirable in Grealy’s otherwise unfortunate ‘masking’, such that she even worries about going unnoticed when her cancer is finally gone and her chemotherapy thus comes to an end. As Grealy writes in an essay years after the publication of her autobiography:

I cried harder than I had in years; I thought now I would no longer be ‘special,’ that without the arena of chemotherapy in which to prove myself no one would ever love me, that I would fade unnoticed into the background. (“Mirrorings” n.p.)

Though Grealy ultimately views her face as a masklike barrier that hinders subjectivity by ever marking her as other, her appearance nevertheless also affords her a kind of positive distinction that bolsters identity, such that, “I possessed a certain power. After all, people noticed me” (101).

Although Grealy suggests otherwise, I argue that her unique face does not mask her identity, but rather significantly expresses it. This is largely because her face makes the invisible visible in disclosing an otherwise unseen illness – the “unseeable intruder” (76) of cancer. Her face may thus be viewed as a type of ‘unmasking’ that renders the internal external. As Mintz explains:

Long after her condition ceases to be life-threatening in what we might pretend is a strictly ‘physical’ sense, Grealy’s disfigured jaw lives on as a badge of sickness, a frightening indication of the body’s mysterious interiority, a sign of the mind’s failure to remain in control. (173)

It is for this reason that Grealy draws such attention – because her face signifies unseen illness and struggle. As such, the author writes, “my face had an effect on people” (104), adding, “most people struggle all their lives to avoid fading unnoticed into the crowd, but this was never my concern” (101). Grealy’s face may thus be seen not as a mask that conceals, but a characteristic that reveals.

Grealy’s ‘mask’-like face suggests a subjectivity defined not only upon appearance, but also upon absence. Specifically, it is not just what is present in Grealy’s face that uniquely signifies her – “a big scar” (104); “a bony knob” (24); “a large strip of foreign skin” (171); “the swollen and discolored parts” (176) – but also what is lacking – “Half my jaw was missing, which gave my face a strange triangular shape, accentuated by the fact that I was unable to keep my mouth completely closed” (3). Moreover, such highly visible distinction has an invisible cost – the absence of a social world beyond the hospital. Once a girl so “beautiful . . . by the third grade two boys had asked me to be their girlfriend” (62), she is now ostracized by her classmates, who “pointed openly and laughed” (124) at her now changed face, such that Grealy “realized they were passing judgment on my suitability, or lack of it, as a girlfriend” (125). Indeed, because of her cancer, Grealy misses years of elementary school. In short, Grealy has little to no social network because she is deemed “ugly” (157). As Grealy writes, “I was too ugly to go to school” (147). Such “ugliness” (7) is something for which Grealy suffers much ridicule, not only as a child enduring taunts and teases from fellow schoolchildren, but even as an adult. Upon moving to London, for instance, Grealy writes:

Groups of men, mostly young and drunk, would spot me from a distance and follow me, catcalling. It was like junior high school all over again. As soon as they got near enough to see my face clearly, they'd start teasing me, calling me ugly, thinking it hysterically funny to challenge one another to ask me out on a date. (213)

Mintz thus contends that

for Grealy, the loss of 'self-esteem' associated with physical abnormality is inflected in a particular way by the fact that her difference is contained in her face—that part of the body that most resolutely signifies individual identity, and that most immediately determines whether a woman meets cultural standards of beauty. (176)

It is not just the presence of distinct facial features that upsets Grealy's bodily subjectivity, then, but also absences, of "truth and beauty I had so long hungered for" (193).⁴

Grealy's depiction of her ever-changing face suggests a postmodern idea of the self as too fluid and inconstant to be expressed in mere words. Butler explains such a fluid idea of identity in saying that "'coherence' and 'continuity' . . . are not logical or analytic features of personhood" (*Gender* 23). To this, she adds, "what can be meant by 'identity' . . . and what grounds the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent" (*Gender* 22). Consistent with such a postmodern notion of identity as inconstant, Grealy's sense of

⁴ Anne Patchett's book about her relationship with Grealy – *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship* – draws its title from this sentence.

self mutates as often as – and seemingly as symbolized by – her ever-changing face. Certainly, however, Grealy's changeable nature is very often occasioned by her ever-changing appearance. For instance, her creeping timidity and her increasing bodily subjectivity are both prompted by the sudden change in her facial appearance. Nevertheless, there appear to be many Grealys at play in the text. Indeed, the author goes by two names: Lucy and Lucinda. 'Lucy' is the self with whom Grealy identifies within the familiarity of her home post-cancer. It is also the name with which she identifies before her face is changed by disease – "from that time now indelibly labeled *Before*" (129). 'Lucinda' is the self that develops after cancer – "from *After*" (129) – particularly during her recurrent and lengthy hospital stays. Grealy writes, "[hospital staff] called me Lucinda. . . . from that moment on I recognized [that name] as the property of all people in uniforms . . . of hospitals" (31) – "Lucinda . . . I wasn't used to people calling me by my full name" (24). In presenting 'before and after,' 'healthy and sick,' as well as 'home and away' selves, Grealy suggests a multiplicity of being, saying, "I slipped in and out of my various personae with great ease" (38). It is perhaps no surprise, then, when Grealy offers two versions of her cancer diagnosis: a subjective version, "my version" (42), in which Grealy is not directly told that she has cancer – and an objective version, "my mother's version, when "[the doctor] told me I had a malignancy" (42).

Butler contends that such fluidity of identity is inherent in autobiography, since "my account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story" (*Giving* 40). In this vein, Grealy alternates not only between healthy and sick selves, but also writing and written selves. The author writes, "I can think of several

interpretations to ascribe to a girl who doesn't remember invoking the word *malignancy*, yet what do those theories have to do with me" (44-45 – emphasis original). In saying this, Grealy transitions from a *written* subject – “a girl” (44) – to a *writing* subject, “me” (45). She thus undermines conventional views of autobiography as a cohesive depiction of self, wherein, “autobiography has often been analyzed as an attempt to build a coherent self through language” (de Nervaux-Gavoty 257). Rather, Grealy's text demonstrates what Susanna Egan considers to be the ‘mirror talk’ of autobiography, where “subjectivity and alterity can take turns within one text, with neither one disappearing as a subject” (Egan 13). As such, Grealy presents many selves at play in the text – “various personae” (38) – seemingly none of which can offer a “definitive story” (Butler *Giving* 40) in her autobiography.

Grealy seems to question whether she is, in fact, the subject of her own autobiography. Specifically, there is a moment in the text when she encounters an article about herself in a medical journal. Grealy writes, “I'm . . . slightly proud that I'm such an interesting case, worthy of documentation. Or maybe I do not really think it is me sitting there, *Case 3, figure 6-A*” (12 – emphasis original). While Grealy may simply be expressing the strangeness of encountering an impersonal representation of her illness in a medical journal, she may also be seen as commenting upon her own autobiography. Specifically, she may be seen as doubting whether the self can be reflected on the page through mere words – which she can reduce to “absurd sound[s] having nothing at all to do with the thing it signified” (43) – just as she doubts the self she sees reflected in the mirror, saying, “I didn't look like me” (219). Grealy experiences similar self-doubt when forced by her well-intentioned mother to try on wigs that will

disguise the baldness caused by chemotherapy – an exercise that, in fact, makes Grealy feel “that much more alien” (109). Grealy writes of the experience, “if my own mother could be so wrong about me, how could I know I wasn’t mistaken in my own interpretations?” (110) In saying this, Grealy seemingly reflects upon her autobiographical journey, as well, which involves its own “interpretations” (110). As Linda R. Anderson explains, autobiography is based upon one’s interpretive memory, which should not be mistaken as fact, since “to remember is not to restore” (58). Indeed, Anne Patchett – Lucy’s college roommate, who published much about their friendship and also wrote the Afterword to *Autobiography of a Face* – notes Grealy’s assertion that her autobiography is not based upon fact, but rather upon literary merit. Specifically, Lucy is quoted by Patchett as saying, “I didn’t remember [my story] . . . I wrote it. I’m a writer” (231). Consequently, when Lucy doubts her own appearance and her interpretations of events, she may be seen as similarly doubting the authenticity of autobiography, which may thus be considered another failed reflection.

Despite Grealy’s fluid ideas of subjectivity and of autobiographical authenticity, I argue that *Autobiography of a Face* does offer a cogent idea of self, as illuminated by Kristeva’s psychoanalytic notion of abjection. Abjection may be seen as a process through which identity radically breaks down, such that the self appears to be “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2), experiencing consequent feelings of “discomfort, unease . . . loathing . . . repugnance, disgust” (Kristeva *Powers* 10-11). Certainly, Grealy’s potentially terminal cancer sets her on “the edge of non-existence,” setting off subsequent symptoms of abjection – of “discomfort” and “loathing” – because of her facial difference. For instance, Grealy notes how young children would ask,

“What’s wrong with her face?” (10), adding, “I’d catch adults staring at me all the time” (141) – “they were uncomfortable because of my face” (11). Grealy is thus also abjected socially, becoming in the community what Kristeva might consider “the jettisoned object” (*Powers* 2). For instance, it is not only because Grealy is too unwell, but that she is too uncomfortable to attend elementary school because of the negative attention her face attracts. She writes, I “missed most of fourth grade and all but a week or so of fifth grade” (118), because of “what I believed to be the indisputable truth: I was too ugly to go to school. I pretty much stopped going to the seventh grade” (147). While her siblings and schoolmates mature and begin dating, Grealy herself is deemed too “ugly” (145) for such couplings, such that, “I felt utterly without hope, completely alone and without any chance of ever being loved” (155). As one so ostracized, Grealy is overwhelmed by feelings of being “embarrassed” (14), “ashamed” (83), “distraught” (184), “disappointed” (187), “churning and shrinking” (185), “consumed with self-pity” (206), “lonely” (206), and “nauseous” (24), all signs that her autobiographical self undergoes a process of abjection. As such, while Grealy contends that her experience is too complex to be expressed by mere language in a postmodern approach to autobiography, Kristeva’s own postmodern theories challenge such a view. Specifically, Kristeva coheres such experience as one of abjection, stating:

the one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself),
separates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings
 . . . A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops
 demarcating his universe whose fluid confines . . . constantly question his
 solidity and impel him to start afresh. . . . the *deject* is in short a *stray*. He

is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding.

(*Powers* 8 – emphasis original)

Grealy is just such a “deject,” constantly undergoing medical procedures in search of a face that will reflect the self, something that ever eludes the author. She writes, “each time I was wheeled down to the surgical wing, high on the drugs, I’d think to myself, *Now, now I can start my life, just as soon as I wake up from this operation*” (187 – emphasis original). As such a “deject” on an endless journey for identity, Grealy may be considered as undergoing a process of abjection, something that coheres the otherwise postmodern fragmented autobiographical self.

Because Grealy’s face and life are rendered unrecognizable by illness, the author is further abjected in becoming unfamiliar or “foreign” (Grealy 171) to herself. Such a sense of self-estrangement is central to abjection, which, as Kristeva explains, involves “confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container . . . I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy’” (*Strangers* 187). Abjection thus makes the familiar strange, disrupting her boundaries and propelling identity in a type of free-fall that leaves one asking, “how can I be without border” (Kristeva *Powers* 4). Such a border is lost to Grealy in no longer being able to rely upon her reflection as an anchor for identity. Consequently, when Grealy writes of her experience with anesthesia that “things around me began to lose their borders. . . . It became increasingly difficult to speak” (23), she may also be seen as generally describing the effect of jaw cancer upon her increasingly tenuous identity. Specifically, she has trouble articulating herself autobiographically, since her own appearance becomes less and less familiar as her illness progresses. As

such, Grealy becomes so abjectly foreign to herself as to write, “Was that really me?” (175)

Grealy not only loses herself in abject illness, however, but also finds herself there – as abject. Certainly, Grealy may be seen as becoming abject through illness, since her cancer itself is deemed abject. As Kristeva writes, the abject is “a nonassimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer” (*Powers* 11). Moreover, when infiltrated by an abjection such as cancer, one *becomes* abject. As Kristeva writes, “the abject permeates me, I become abject” (*Powers* 11). Grealy seemingly undergoes just such a transformation, with cancer changing her from “an absolutely normal nine-year-old . . . some ten days before” (58) to “HAZARDOUS WASTE” (61). Such “waste” (Kristeva *Powers* 3) is abject, wherein “the clean and proper . . . becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame” (Kristeva *Powers* 8). As one ostensibly undergoing such abjection, Grealy feels increasingly “meaningless” (205) in illness, seeming to exist only as “an indistinguishable lump” (130). Grealy adds, “there was something empty about me” (221), “I only felt a void” (137), “I was without value in the world. . . . [enduring] feelings of physical worthlessness” (201). She is thus abject, “a blank subject” (Kristeva *Powers* 6). Yet, abjection helps reveal that Grealy is not merely lost in such postmodern autobiographical abjection as a kind of Derridean floating signifier, but also found there. As Kristeva explains, abjection is “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. *But not nothing, either*” (2 – my emphasis). Abjection thus does not erase a subject, but rather reconstitutes it. As Kristeva writes:

the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject [who]

. . . 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. (*Powers* 5 – emphasis original)

Though Grealy's increasing feelings of tenuousness and uncertainty only add to her postmodern suggestion that the self cannot be articulated, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories suggest that such ambiguity *is* what defines her – as abject.

From a Kristevan perspective, Grealy's bodily sense of subjectivity is further evidence of abjection. Specifically, abjection initiates intensely physical symptoms. As Kristeva writes:

I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.

Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea*" (*Powers* 3 – emphasis original)

Grealy's recurrent vomiting – though a very real side effect of chemotherapy – is thus nevertheless also a symptom of abjection. Thus, Grealy may be seen as abject in the days spent alone in her sickbed after treatments, saying:

I kept my bedroom dark and watched the light from my television change color on the wall beside me. Every hour or so I felt a great urge to lean over and retch . . . Gradually, over the next hour, the feeling of unbearableness would return, subtly, insidiously, until I again

had to lift myself and hang over the side of the bed, my intimate bowl
beneath me. This went on all night. . . . the cycle between nausea and
relief. (79)

This intensely physical cycle precipitates the author's transition from a social to a bodily existence – from “accord[ing] a certain amount of respect in my neighborhood . . . because I once jumped out of a second-stor[e]y window” (15) to “being trapped in my own body. . . . [in] a sort of physical awareness” (91). Consequently, Grealy may be seen as distinctly losing and then finding a very bodily subjectivity through abjection, wherein her diseased face both alienates and constitutes her, such that, “there was only the fact of me, my face, my ugliness” (7).

The manner in which Grealy's distinct, mutating face makes visible the invisible – implying an internal, otherwise unseen disease – is also illuminated by abjection. Specifically, abjection breaks down one's borders of identity, thus confusing inner and outer, unconscious and conscious selves, just as Grealy's face may be seen as rendering the internal external. As Julie Park explains, “for Julia Kristeva, it is the very crisis of the internal rendering itself external that defines abjection” (135). As such, it may be deemed abject the manner in which Grealy's facial difference reveals her otherwise invisible cancer. As Grealy writes, her face denotes that something is amiss, such that, “People would stop in their tracks and stare at me” (200) – “I was different-looking . . . my face had an effect on people” (104). Such interiority made exterior is also evident in her cancer treatments, which turn her further inside out. For instance, after receiving chemotherapy, the author writes, “my body, wanting to turn itself inside out, made wave after wave of attempts to rid itself of this unseeable intruder” (76).

Such an experience is reminiscent of abjection, in which “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself*” (Kristeva *Powers* 3 – emphasis original). Consequently, the idea of Grealy’s journey as one of abjection is further suggested by the manner in which her external appearance reveals an otherwise hidden, internal malady.

Though Grealy is abjectly defamiliarized through illness, she is not merely lost amid a sense of foreignness, but also found there – as “alien” (7). Kristeva’s notion of abjection is again illuminating. Specifically, Kristeva explains that abjection “places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (*Powers* 1), a defamiliarization apparent in Grealy’s inability to recognize her own reflection. Yet, abjection does not merely devastate identity, but also constitutes it, as “a means for defining the borders of subjectivity” (McAfee 57). Abjection is thus dialectical, wherein the death of one thing leads to the birth of another. From this perspective, Grealy’s identification as “alien” (7) throughout the text⁵ denotes not only a self displaced, but also reinvented. Grealy thus not only loses herself in becoming “alien” (7), but also redefines herself there – as alien. Grealy writes:

the cruelty of children is immense . . . The pain these children brought with their stares engulfed every other pain in my life. Yet occasionally, just as that vast ocean threatened to swallow me whole, some greater force would lift me out and enable me to walk among them easily and careless, as alien. (7)

Grealy is thus not only “engulfed” in the “pain” of being made unfamiliar or alien, but also revitalized as alien, as “some greater force” (7) that “enable[s] me to walk . . . easily

⁵ For instance, she has an “alien ache” (16), “in an alien landscape” (8), where she encounters “alien [smells]” (23) and “alien words” (51), where wigs make her feel “that much more alien” (109).

and careless, as alien” (7). In saying this, Grealy suggests undergoing a process of abjection, whereby she finds identity in the very thing that threatens it. Specifically, just as abjection is “a weight of meaninglessness . . . which crushes me” (*Powers* 2), Grealy’s illness destabilizes her identity, as a “vast ocean [that] threatened to swallow me whole” (7). Yet, Grealy is then safeguarded by that very threat, discovering in her subsequent ‘alienation’ that she is “special” (21), just as abjection is ultimately “a repulsive gift . . . that [ensures] ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (*Powers* 9). Grealy even seems to invite such an interpretation in saying, “I fantasized . . . about being abducted by space aliens who’d fix me” (186). Certainly, Grealy may be seen here as merely wishing for a miraculous restoration of her face by otherworldly beings. Yet, this moment also suggests that Grealy turns toward, rather than away from, her abject self, seeking communion with other ‘aliens’ who have undergone facial reconstructions and grafts, as well – “people with alien bits of flesh sewn to them” (155). As one both lost and found in abjection, then, Grealy is both devastated and restored by her ‘alien’ status.

As one ostensibly redefined by abjection, Grealy increasingly identifies with the abject. Indeed, she begins to identify almost exclusively with the site of her abjection – her face – saying, “Everything led to it, everything receded from it—my face as personal vanishing point” (7). She even characterizes herself as morbidly abject, saying, “I was someone whom doctors talked to about sewing her hand to her face” (211). Mintz seemingly supports an interpretation of Grealy as identifying with the abject, saying, “Grealy represents herself as embodying the very condition of ugliness. Ugliness is not just one attribute of a whole person; rather, she is ugliness itself” (174). In so identifying

with abjection, Grealy increasingly feels most at home when encountering it. For instance, painful chemotherapy sessions are “the only time[s] I was ever completely myself” (90). Such oneness with illness and with suffering is further suggestive that hers is a process of abjection. As Noëlle McAfee explains, “insofar as . . . unity is an effect of abjection it will have to be tenuous and it will be a tale of suffering. . . . with its ubiquitous images of death, decay, defilement” (54). Grealy’s increasing identification and even comfort in abjection further depicts her as abject, something perhaps evidenced by the fact that, “my inner life became ever more macabre” (Grealy 126).

Grealy’s existence as a type of living corpse further contributes to an interpretation of her autobiographical process as one of abjection. Specifically, death consistently haunts Grealy, whose cancer offers only “a reasonable chance of survival . . . at five percent” (67). She is thus made abject, living “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2), with “death infecting life” (Kristeva *Powers* 4). Others, too, identify Grealy as deathly, such as when, “an old friend, Teresa . . . asked, completely out of the blue, if I was dying. . . . ‘the other kids say you’re slowing dying, that you’re ‘wasting away’” (121). In another instance, Grealy imagines how a friend’s father must feel around her, since “his wife had died of cancer several years before . . . I couldn’t have imagined what went through his mind to now see a child with the same disease, the same prospects” (63). Mortality is thus a very real concern for Grealy, who, so close to death, consequently “felt absolutely nothing. . . . Nothing. I only felt a void” (137). As such, she may be deemed abject, a state in which, as Thea Harrington explains, “the fundamental fear [is] the dissolving of the subject . . . that void of being, of meaning, that is death” (147). McAfee explains such an abject existence in saying:

Another phenomenon that sets off abjection is the presence of a cadaver. Here the very border between life and death has been broken, with death seeming to ‘infect’ the body. And we who are faced with a corpse experience the fragility of our own life. Here I am, bodily wastes and all, face-to-face with the ultimate border. (47)

Death thus defines Grealy, reminding her of its presence lurking just beyond the fragile borders of life, demarcated with “each breath . . . each sensation on my skin”. Kristeva explains the abject nature of such a tenuous, corpse-like existence in saying:

without makeup and masks . . . 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. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (*Powers* 3 – emphasis original)

Again, however, such abjection does not merely eradicate Grealy, but reconstitutes her – as a type of “repulsive gift” (Kristeva *Powers* 9). Specifically, in existing as a type of living cadaver, Grealy comes to appreciate even the smallest markers of life, saying, “gradually my obsession with death was replaced with other obsessions . . . what it meant to be alive” (67). She writes:

each breath was an important exchange with the world around me,
each sensation on my skin a tender brush from a reality so beautiful
and so mysterious that I would sometimes find myself squealing with
the delight of being alive. (91)

While the author is thus further abjected by her close proximity to death, she nevertheless finds new life in such abjection.

Even after her cancer is no longer a threat, Grealy continues to characterize herself as an abjectly corpse-like figure. She writes:

I felt there was something empty about me. . . . I had stopped looking in mirrors. I found that I could stare straight through a mirror, allowing none of the reflection to get back to me. . . . the dead know they are dead only after being offered that most irrefutable proof: they can no longer see themselves in the mirror. (221)

Though her cancer has by now been eradicated, she continues to feel “dead” because she still views her unrecognizable and distinctive face as a failed signifier of self.

Despite her thriving social and academic lives as an adult, then, Grealy nevertheless feels abjectly ‘dead’ because of her facial appearance, saying, “Whatever sense of inner worth I developed was eroded by the knowledge that I could only compensate for, but never overcome, the obstacle of my face” (206).

Nevertheless, as much as Grealy may be seen as devastated by abjection, one might equally argue that she is enhanced by it. Specifically, in increasingly identifying “as alien” (7), the author seemingly becomes more than she was – “special” (Grealy 101) – since, “as an alien, I could transform myself anywhere, anytime” (89-90).

Indeed, Grealy adds that, because of her disfigurement, “I possessed a certain power. After all, people noticed me. . . . I was never overlooked” (101). Her abject experience also offers her greater insight, wherein, “I was becoming aware of . . . a reality so beautiful and so mysterious” (91). Indeed, her identity expands through abject illness to include a very bodily subjectivity. The dialectical process of abjection thus not only safeguards Grealy’s tenuous subjectivity – wherein “abject and abjection are my

safeguards” (Kristeva *Powers* 2) – but also enhances it, as “a repulsive gift” (Kristeva *Powers* 9). Grealy herself seems to acknowledge such expansiveness in saying, “I undertook to see my face as an opportunity to find something that had not yet been revealed. Perhaps my face was a gift to be used toward understanding and enlightenment” (180). As such, Grealy may be seen as not merely destabilized, but also as enriched by abjection.

As mentioned throughout this chapter, a Kristevan reading of *Autobiography of a Face* helps situate Grealy’s autobiographical subjectivity as a process of abjection amid a growing mistrust in language and in the body – both of which are increasingly depicted as floating signifiers. Though postmodernism is thus evident in Grealy’s writing, the author nevertheless shifts away from the fundamental tenets of the postmodern movement via her bodily approach to autobiography. Specifically, unlike most other postmodernists, Grealy is prompted by an increasing physicality to consider the nature of language and of the self – to deconstruct words and personal identity as her body itself seemingly deconstructs. In particular, while postmodernists generally advocate that language constructs the self – in predating and thus conditioning personal identity – Grealy contemplates an opposite view, that the body ultimately dictates one’s language and one’s identity. Specifically, it is only when her disfiguring jaw cancer makes it “increasingly difficult to speak” (23) that she grows increasingly uncertain of words and of self. Such an overturning of postmodernism is mirrored by the manner in which Grealy’s identity itself is overturned, something highlighted by the notion of abjection, which invites a view of the autobiographical self as both eradicated and enhanced by the abject. As such, Grealy is simultaneously oppressed and augmented

by the realization that, “I was ugliness” (7 – emphasis original). Grealy’s text is thus unique in autobiography by asserting a bodily self. As Kerstin W. Shands and her co-authors explain, “Grealy’s autobiography goes against the grain of most autobiographical texts. While most life writing texts concentrate on the effacement of the body, Grealy’s account asserts the power of the body and the way it shapes identity” (21). Of each of my chosen texts, then, Grealy’s makes the most nuanced presentation of the question of the mind-body problem in terms of postmodern autobiography on the one hand, and of embodied identity on the other.

Chapter III: Foreign Familiars: The Self as Abject Foreign in Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*

My third chapter examines autobiographical subjectivity from a postcolonial perspective by turning to Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (originally published in 2000), which presents the autoethnological self from diasporic, cultural, familial, and class perspectives. A privileged member of Indian aristocracy, Namjoshi chronicles what may be considered a process of abjection when moving west to live more openly as a lesbian, a sexual orientation not readily accepted by her eastern family and culture. Specifically, in leaving her Indian 'homeland', Namjoshi transitions from a privileged "someone" (64) in the east to what she considers a racialized "less than nothing" (16) in the west. She thus becomes what Julia Kristeva considers abject, "a blank subject" (*Powers* 6) of "sublime alienation" (*Powers* 9), deemed other or "radically separate, loathsome" (*Powers* 2) in the xenophobic west. Nevertheless, as much as Namjoshi writes from an abject position of postcolonial marginality and foreignness, her subject likewise may be seen as *abjecting* such marginality in order to become her text's privileged, cohering 'centre'. From this perspective, Namjoshi may be seen as embracing a Bhabhian 'third space' of multiplicity (Mann 89) despite restrictive western labels that imposed upon her, such as "FOREIGN / EXOTIC / THIRD WORLD / NEEDY" (71). Specifically, Namjoshi abjects such socially constructive labels – which she deems a reductive "mishmash" (41) – to instead found a singular identity as the focus and centre of a life narrated in her own terms. To do so, Namjoshi embraces the abject, something Kristeva considers highly signified by "the corpse . . .

the utmost of abjection” (*Powers* 4), since abjection is “death infecting life” (*Powers* 4). Specifically, the author appropriates the voices of her deceased grandmother, Goldie, and her former servant, Goja, to re-construct her own life story. Namjoshi writes in the voices of these dead figures, saying, “you changed us. Created Goja, created Goldie. . . . But it’s not the truth” (146). It is, rather, Namjoshi’s ‘truth,’ her version of reality, since “the ‘facts’ in this narrative are not reliable” (Namjoshi ix). Instead, Namjoshi “manipulates facts” (ix) in order to recreate her past and present lives, thus conflating her experiences in the east and in the west to form a cohesive, centering subjectivity that attempts to “join the two halves of my existence . . . so that at last there might be the possibility of reconciliation, and if not reconciliation, then at least straightforwardness” (85). In this chapter, I rely upon Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection to illuminate how Namjoshi is able to become a centering force in her text through an abject assimilation of the self as comprised of deceased mother figures.

Although an autobiographical work – something Serena Guarracino contends in saying, “subjectivity [in *Goja* is] presumably the author’s own (the narrating ‘I’ of the novel)” (135) – Suniti Namjoshi nevertheless suggests the postmodern notion that identity cannot be articulated. As Judith Butler contends, “the ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility” (*Giving* 37), ostensibly because it is impossible for a subject to accurately or objectively recollect and record her own life. It is seemingly under this assumption that Namjoshi undermines any notion of truth in her “autobiographical” (ix) text, even sub-titling it *An Autobiographical ‘Myth’*. Chaganti Vijayasree concurs with the notion that the text evades notions of truth, saying, “nowhere does the narrator [of *Goja*] insist that we take

what she says about herself as the ultimate truth” (*Artful* 167). Furthermore, Namjoshi, whose autobiography contains much of her own poetry, contends that “poets tell lies” (18), adding that, when a topic is particularly sensitive, “the tale can only be told as a fairy tale, as a long and impossibly tall story” (22). For instance, in such a “tale”, Namjoshi conveys an experience of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a male servant. As Eva C. Karpinski notes, “she invents a dissociative way of telling the story of abuse through an allegory of playing cards. Reminiscent of fairy tales and Lewis Carroll” (237). Here, as in many other places in the text, Namjoshi’s subject writes in the third person – as “Piglet” (25), “the child” (31), and “a great artist” (26) – as though confirming Butler’s argument that an autobiographical subject cannot attempt to be that of the author but, rather, only something resembling the author and her constitutive community. Butler writes:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life. But this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story. (*Giving* 37)

With such a view seemingly in mind, Namjoshi not only refers to herself in the third person at times, but also surrenders the “I” of her autobiography to her respectively deceased grandmother and servant, Goldie and Goja, recounting their lives almost as

much as her own, and often speaking from their perspectives. For example, in a polyphonic blending of the three identities, Namjoshi writes:

‘You loved me,’ says Goldie . . .

‘You loved me,’ I say . . .

‘You loved me,’ says Goja. (143)

In telling the lives of those from her past – often in their own voices – Namjoshi seemingly surrenders the “I” of her story in accord with Butler’s contention that, “in the making of the [autobiographical] story, I create myself in a new form, instituting a narrative ‘I’ that is superadded to the ‘I’ whose past life I seek to tell” (*Giving* 39). A new heteroglossic “I” is thus formed, incorporating not only Namjoshi’s voice, but also those of her deceased grandmother and servant, as well. Consequently, as Vijayasree contends, “*Goja* . . . is about three women – Goja, Goldie, and Suniti” (*Artful* 165). In compounding the text’s “I” from the singular to the plural, Namjoshi undermines any notion of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ in her autobiography. As Vijayasree states:

in a typical postmodernist strain, Namjoshi not only conjures up
imaginary figures that would inhabit her fictional world, but also
constantly exposes the fictionality of the so called real that is the staple
of all autobiographical writing. (*Artful* 167– 68)

Namjoshi thus challenges ideas of subjectivity and of ‘truth’ in her “autobiographical . . . mythical” (ix) work, thus presenting a postmodern view of autobiography as impossible.

A particular obstacle in autobiographical expression, for Namjoshi, is the idea of the self as multitudinous, as too fluid to be expressed by language. An immigrant to Canada from her birthplace of India, Namjoshi demonstrates a Bhabhian notion of the

immigrant self as one of “hybridity” (Bhabha 56), wherein the foreigner is deemed to exist in a liminal space between her pre- and post-immigration cultures, a

Third Space . . . split-space . . . of culture’s *hybridity*. . . the ‘inter’
 . . . the *inbetween* space . . . [wherein] we may elude the politics of
 polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Bhabha 56 –
 emphasis original)

Specifically, Namjoshi is torn between the cultures of east and west, of her birthplace and her adoptive homelands. She writes, “I belong to India and to the West. Both belong to me and both reject me” (67). As such, Harveen S. Mann concurs with the idea that “Namjoshi occupies . . . a ‘third space,’ an interstitial location between nations and cultures” (98). Indeed, Namjoshi’s text is purportedly an attempt to ally her experiences in east and west, “to join the two halves of my existence . . . I want to bridge my two worlds so that at last there might be the possibility of reconciliation, and if not reconciliation, then at least straightforwardness” (85). Namjoshi’s “two halves” (85) certainly refer to her diverse experiences living in the east and then the west. Yet, they also seemingly refer to the idea of the self as plural. In this sense, Namjoshi may be seen as supporting Butler’s contention that the self is comprised of “multiple and coexisting identifications [that] produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances” (*Gender* 91). For example, Namjoshi characterizes her immigrant subject as a compilation of many, often conflicting selves, such as “FOREIGN / EXOTIC / THIRD WORLD / NEEDY” (71), while simultaneously being an aristocratic member of India’s “warrior caste” (91), who – as an elite officer in the Indian Administrative Service” (65) – “was bowed down to” (65). She is “Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu” (83) – “triply

oppressed' . . . as a woman, a lesbian and a brown-skinned person" (16), a compilation of many competing identities, such that "my mind is a hodgepodge of Greek myth, Hindu experience and Christian words" (58). Consequently, Namjoshi may be seen as presenting a self that is too fluid and multitudinous to be adequately expressed by language.

While Namjoshi is suspicious of language as a signifier of the multitudinous self, she nevertheless acknowledges language as a strong indicator of class. As Namjoshi explains, even one's manner of address can indicate one's station. For instance, she conveys how servants are addressed differently than members of the aristocracy, saying:

the king, my grandfather, called me to him and told me that I must not address my grandmother in the singular. Henceforce she was to be addressed in the plural. . . . But he didn't tell me to address Goja [our servant] in the plural. (5)

The language in which Namjoshi writes – English – is also an indicator of privilege. It is the author's second language – the language of the ruling classes. Her first is Marathi – "her oral mother-tongue, Marathi" (Guarracino 135). As a member of an affluent Indian family, however, Namjoshi was later schooled in the languages of affluence, of India's Hindi-speaking ruling class and of its English-speaking British colonizers. Unlike underprivileged Marathi-speaking Indians, then, Namjoshi's aristocratic family afforded her an education at elite Hindi- and English-speaking schools, thus setting her apart from the very subject of her text, Goja – an impoverished servant who "was given into

service into the [Namjoshi] household . . . [when she was] five years old” (4) and therefore deprived the luxury of learning English. As Guarracino contends:

Quite uncommonly for the Indo-English context , here [in Namjoshi's writings] Hindi is the language of authority and exploitation (the language used with servants), while English is the language of socialization and learning: both English and Hindi are experienced as master languages.
(135)

While language is depicted by Namjoshi as a problematic indicator of self, it is nevertheless portrayed as a keen indicator of class.

By writing in a language inaccessible to the book's titular character, Namjoshi self-consciously grapples with the hypocrisy of asserting the very privilege she wishes to condemn. Specifically, Namjoshi rails against the injustice of class divides she nevertheless benefits from, describing her upbringing both as “glamorous as in fairy tales. . . . [yet] also revolting” (6), saying, “How is it possible to be a nice person, when most of the people about you are poor?” (6). She largely draws from her own family history as a means of exhibiting class divides, such as that between her privileged grandmother Goldie, “the Ranisaheb, glittering and glorious in green and gold” (11), and the subaltern servant Goja, who, as “a servant and only five years old, you sleep on the floor in the dark” (5), asking, “why was one allowed to be a queen, and why did the other one have to be a servant” (5). She notes how deep such class divides run, observing that servants were considered “the other species” (12). Indeed, the servants were considered so inferior as to be mere property. Namjoshi says of Goja, “our servant? It's like a slap in the face. Our? Servant? To have to say this is deeply

shaming” (109). The text, then, is largely an attempt to honour those like Goja by acknowledging and recording their otherwise overlooked lives. As Namjoshi writes, “What servants have thought and felt, convention requires they keep to themselves. And history pays no attention” (13).

Nevertheless, when it is suggested by Namjoshi’s deceased servant Goja – around whom the text is largely centered – that Namjoshi write her autobiography in Marathi, the author refuses. She says, “I can’t. . . . It won’t sell” (90), despite Goja’s reminder that, “I don’t speak English” (90). Namjoshi thus reveals not only how capitalist divisions are signified and maintained by language, but also by one’s complicity in such divisions. As Guarracino explains:

The language of the colonizers grants [Namjoshi] access to the bureaucratic engine of the waning Empire, but her inability to read and write in her mother-tongue marks the chasm between herself and the people she deals with . . . forcing her to admit the schism between her oral mother-tongue, Marathi, and the languages in which she had been taught to read and write, English and Hindi. (135)

Namjoshi’s writing may thus be seen as addressing class issues not only through her stories, but also in the very language used to tell them.

Language also is a signifier of Namjoshi’s own otherness, specifically of her immigrant status. Where Namjoshi’s knowledge of English and Hindi privilege her in India, her accent and unfamiliarity with colloquialisms nevertheless signify her as “alien” (97) in the west. She writes:

when I first came to North America I had felt confident about my ability to deal with the Americans and Canadians. I knew about them. I knew their language, *and then I discovered I didn't!* I understood the words, but not the context. I understood the words, but I understood them differently. 'Lift' did not mean 'elevator,' because they did not know that was what it meant. (80 – emphasis original)

Namjoshi thus highlights the nuances of language as a personal signifier, contemplating how subtleties of usage and expression can be both an advantage and a liability. In so doing, Namjoshi suggests a power in mastering language. She writes:

the most important thing about my encounter with the West was the English language. It took me several years and required my politicisation to understand how language had power over power itself. Over the years, language mediated everything: my struggle with powerlessness and loss of identity, my understanding of who defined whom and how effectively, and my need to work out what really mattered and somehow to say it. What worried and delighted me was how language cloaked, altered and even fashioned reality, how there were multiple realities, and how it was possible to juxtapose these so that they resonated and shimmered and multiplied meaning. (78-79)

Here, Namjoshi uses language not only to understand the world, but also to navigate and influence it. It is through an exploration of words, then, that Namjoshi transitions her immigrant self from foreign to familiar. As Vijayasree writes, "Namjoshi . . . made language her apparatus to probe the world around her and perceive patterns in the alien

world that she had chosen as her dwelling place” (*Artful* 170). To this, Karpinski adds, “Namjoshi’s postmodern sensibility is visible in an awareness of the power of language to fashion ‘multiple realities’ and multiple meanings, coupled with her understanding of subjectivity as non-unitary” (238). Language is thus presented by Namjoshi not only as a personal signifier, but also a socio-political force to be harnessed.

In focusing heavily on language as a means of determining the world, Namjoshi suggests a Derridean view of words as socially constructive. Specifically, just as Derrida contends that “there’s nothing outside of the text” (*Grammatology* 158), Namjoshi argues, “*Where one is* a word. *Who one is* a word—Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu, donkey, monkey, dying animal . . . And much of one’s life is just a matter of exploring words” (83 – emphasis original). In saying this, Namjoshi posits language as an unavoidably invasive system, echoing Derrida’s contention that:

the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. (*Grammatology* 158)

As such, language is always already foreign, not only if it is not one’s native tongue, but because it is fundamentally foreign to the self in being a system into which one is born and to which one must thus adapt. Consequently, Namjoshi may be seen as arguing two types of foreignness in saying, “English isn’t plain. English is exotic, English is foreign” (96). Namjoshi thus suggests a self divided not only by categories, such as culture, class and ethnicity, but also by language. For instance, she writes of “the split between sleeping and waking, night and day, literature and life, India and Canada,

between things and their name, words and their meaning” (84). Such a view depicts language as incapable of transparency, thus leading Namjoshi to consider her autobiography uncertain or “Janus-faced” (85).

Nevertheless, a more coherent idea of self is offered in *Goja* when considered through Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. A psychoanalytic approach to the text seems tenable since Namjoshi herself describes the work as psychoanalytic in nature, as a means of coming to terms with her past – “to explain, bridge the two worlds, say some of the things were left unsaid and arrive at some understanding between [Goldie, Goja] and me” (75). Indeed, Namjoshi spends much of the text conjuring her past in order to reconcile with it. She writes, “above all I’ve written this account for my beloved dead—even when I dispute with them, even when I ask them to explain themselves, or try to explain myself to them” (x). In a chapter about *Goja*, Vijayasree concurs that the text is psychoanalytic in nature, writing, “a narrative reconstitution of the past is a psychologically significant process” (*Artful* 167). The psychoanalytic notion of abjection thus seems an appropriate approach to the text.

From a Kristevan perspective, Namjoshi may be seen as undergoing a process of abjection. Just as the “*abject* [is] the jettisoned object, is radically excluded” (Kristeva *Powers* 2 – emphasis original), Namjoshi is ostracized by her family upon moving west to live openly as a lesbian. She feels “castrated . . . unloved” (23), saying to Goldie and Goja, “*I miss you but you exiled me!*” (115 – emphasis original). Indeed, such abjection haunts Namjoshi even in her otherwise privileged childhood in the east. Specifically, though the author is of the ruling aristocratic class, she endures “sexual abuse” (14) in her childhood home at the hand of a family servant – “the servant who molested me”

(31). While the abuse itself is abject in being “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror” (Kristeva *Powers* 4), the violence alone is not all that abjects the young Namjoshi. Rather, Namjoshi’s family further abjects her in being complicit with her violator, in turning a blind eye to avoid social disgrace rather than protecting the child. As Namjoshi writes, “I suspect my mother knew, and all the mothers, did know or at least guessed, and that it did not break their hearts; they colluded in disgrace” (14). Consequently, the young Namjoshi – rather than her violator – is assigned abject shame, since, “if I said anything I would be the one to suffer disgrace” (14). In being so victimized by the predatory servant and by knowing family members, Namjoshi is made abject, just as “the clean and proper . . . becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame” (Kristeva *Powers* 8). Moreover, such abuse abjectly overturns class hierarchies, with the young Namjoshi becoming subject to a formerly subjugated servant. Class is thus trumped by abjectly oppressive gender norms surrounding female propriety.

Abjection may be seen as continuing into Namjoshi’s adulthood when she loses her privileged, aristocratic status upon moving west, transitioning from “someone that others would bow down to” (64) to an “invisible” (71) minority. As Karpinski notes, “she ‘became someone’ only to fall into anonymity and marginalization when she was a student in North America” (238). Such a transition may be considered one of abjection, which Kristeva characterizes as:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as

radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing,
either. (*Powers* 2)

Namjoshi undergoes just such an experience, saying:

I had escaped from the family, but I was too frightened to enjoy the
freedom of near invisibility. My being invisible allowed truck drivers to
run me over. . . . Shop assistants could forget I was waiting. . . . And
ignorant Americans could patronize me. (71)

Consequently, while Namjoshi moves west in order to be openly gay, she must work to
mask her foreignness there, thus trading one form of concealment for another.

Specifically, where she had to hide her homosexuality in the east, she must now
endeavor in the west to mask, or to compensate for, the fact that she is “a brown-
skinned person” (16). She writes, “in order to be recognized I had to look either like a
white man or like something appertaining to one: a white woman or a white child” (71).

Otherwise “invisible” (71), Namjoshi is abject – “a blank subject” (Kristeva *Powers* 6).

As Namjoshi writes, “Me. . . . ‘A *blank*’” (29 – my emphasis). She is triply *other* in the
west – “a woman, a lesbian, and an Indian, I am an alien three times over” (97).

Signified as ‘foreign’ by “those eyes, those lips, those cheek bones, that skin unlike
others, all that distinguishes [her] . . . the difference in that face . . . the foreigner’s
features” (Kristeva *Strangers* 3), Namjoshi is abjected by the community, being
“subjected to ethnocentric racism” (Namjoshi 72). For example, the author recounts an
experience waiting for the bus:

Let me describe something to you. A September day, Toronto, in the
seventies. I’m standing at the bus stop waiting for the university bus to

take me to the college where I work. A red-headed young man comes up to me. He wants to know whether I've encountered any racism here—you know, people looking down to me and all that. He himself is a liberal, he assures me. He would like to help those who are less fortunate than himself. (108)

Race is thus Namjoshi's primary, reductive signifier in the west, one that invites others, such as the red-headed man, to instantly define her as *other*, as "less fortunate than himself" (108). Namjoshi is thus socially abjected. As Kristeva explains:

I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be 'me.' Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent. (*Powers* 10)

Consequently, Namjoshi seemingly only comes into being in the west when "possessed" by the racially categorizing gaze of the dominant other, such as the red-headed man. Namjoshi experiences a similar instance of being made *other* when invited to a classmate's house for dinner. Again, Namjoshi is recognized merely as "a brown-skinned person" (16) by her friend's father, who "informed me that my teeth were very white . . . he had meant my teeth were white in contrast with my skin" (73). The father then inquires not about Namjoshi's studies, but about her exoticized 'homeland', asking, "do you have tigers and lions in India?" (72) When she tells him that they do, the father feels entitled to (mistakenly) correct Namjoshi, saying, "No, no . . . you don't have lions in India. It's in Africa they have lions and tigers" (72). In being so

conspicuously “invisible” (71), Namjoshi is thus made abject in the west, existing “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2). Namjoshi writes, “I had no past, no history and no human framework supporting me. I felt stripped” (78). Thus, teetering “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2), Namjoshi becomes abjectly uncertain in the west, asking, “I was not myself?” (80)

Namjoshi not only experiences abjection and becomes abject, but she also actively *abjects*. Specifically, Kristeva contends that, among other things, “abjection [is] a process of jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself. The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself” (McAfee 46). From this perspective, while Namjoshi feels abjected or “*exiled*” (115 – emphasis original) by her family, she may likewise be seen as the one abjecting. She writes, “I had escaped from the family” (71), adding, “I was unwilling to serve the family and to conform to [eastern] society” (76). She thus “spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes” (McAfee 46) a family that, conversely, has abjected her. Similarly, while Namjoshi feels abjected in the west as “foreign . . . exotic” (98) and “a third-class citizen” (109-110), she may also be seen as abjecting the west in its attempts to assimilate her within its dominant culture. Namjoshi writes:

despite all this talk of sacrosanct identity and integrity of the personality,
that we are all composites, that we are all parts of each other. Horrible!
Someone else’s nose stuck in my face. A medley of different bodies, of
different personalities . . . a mishmash. (41)

Though Namjoshi feels subjugated in the west – “‘triply oppressed’ . . . as a woman, a lesbian and a brown-skinned person” (16) – she nevertheless rejects and *abjects*

dominant western norms, sardonically saying, “Be! Be what? Be heterosexual! Be Christian! Be American! Be like them?” (42) She adds, “I was unwilling to serve the family and to conform to society” (76). Just as abjection is a process through which, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva *Horrors* 3 – emphasis original), Namjoshi abjects cultural and familial norms in a refusal to surrender her individuality and preferences.

Abjection is also apparent in Namjoshi’s desire to reconcile with her deceased mother, as well as with her deceased mother-figures, Goldie and Goja. The figure of the mother is central to Kristeva’s theory of abjection. As McAfee explains, “the first ‘thing’ to be abjected [by a subject] is the mother’s body, the child’s own origin. . . . In order to become a subject, the child must renounce its identification with its mother” (48). Specifically, in what Jacques Lacan considers the ‘mirror stage’”, a child becomes aware of his independence from the mother, with whom he previously felt united. As Lacan explains:

The child . . . [begins to] recognize as such his own image in a mirror. . . . This act . . . once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates—the child’s own body, and the person and things, around him. (“Mirror Stage” 502-3)

A follower of Lacan, Kristeva argues that a subject feels a persistent sense of loss after identifying himself as separate from the mother, as “this hollow, this void, this ‘minus 1’” (Kristeva “Psychoanalysis” 82). In a futile attempt to assuage such abject feelings of loss, Kristeva argues that one will ever after “desire to return to the archaic mother” (“Psychoanalysis” 84). However, such a desire is ultimately abject, as it can never be satisfied. Lacan explains that:

the desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end,
the terminal point, the abolition of the world of demand, which is the
one that at its deepest level structures man’s unconscious. (*Ethics*
68)

An abject desire to return to the mother seems to be a driving force in *Goja*, considering that Namjoshi wrote the text for two prominent mother-figures: “the two most important people in the world to me . . . were Goja and my grandmother. I loved them both . . . above all I’ve written this account for my beloved dead” (x). Namjoshi even goes so far as to conjure these two deceased mother-figures, “ask[ing] them to explain themselves, or try[ing] to explain myself to them” (x). A literal foreigner, Namjoshi is thus also a psychic foreigner, one who has been rejected by or who has lost her mother figures.

Kristeva explains such a phenomenon as:

a secret wound, often unknown to himself, [that] drives the foreigner to
wandering. . . . misunderstood by a loved and yet absent-minded,
discreet, or worried mother, the exile is a stranger to his mother. . . . The
foreigner, thus, has lost his mother. (*Strangers* 5)

For Namjoshi, the loss of the mother is threefold. Her birth-mother was largely absent and is now deceased – “I am unloved, because my mother hasn’t loved me. Well, not long enough, not well enough, and now she has up and gone and died” (23) – as well as the two mother figures who raised her, Goldie and Goja, from whom Namjoshi was separated when she moved west. Namjoshi writes, “I took leave of Goja and my grandmother and the rest of the family and set off for the States” (67). The text may be seen as a Lacanian attempt to reconcile with these abject mothers, since Namjoshi seemingly acknowledges the “mirror stage” separation from her birth-mother in the “Fairy Tale” (22) chapter. Here, Namjoshi’s mother is represented by the “Queen of Spades” (25) and Namjoshi is represented by “Piglet” (24). As Karpinski contends, “her mother [is] personified by the Queen of Spades . . . [and Namjoshi] her black piglet child” (237).

Initially, Namjoshi-as-Piglet feels threatened by the ‘mirror stage’ of her development, frightened that her existence depends upon her mother: “‘If she dies, you die,’ the *mirrors* told her” (24 – my emphasis). Ultimately, however, Piglet resolves to individuate from her mother, saying:

I will inhabit my own body,

I will occupy space,

I will own my face. (29)

For the remainder of the text, however, Namjoshi appears driven by a futile Lacanian desire to unite with the mother figures of Goja and Goldie – “an attempt to return to the unnamable” (Kristeva “Polis” 85-86) – devoting two-thirds of her autobiography to discussions with them, such that they might “join and combine” (10) as one “She-I” (11).

While Namjoshi's desire to unite with the mother figures of Goldie and Goja is abject in its futility, such abjection is only intensified by the fact that both Goldie and Goja are deceased. From this perspective, Namjoshi's desire to reconcile with her deceased mother-figures situates her as a type of abject living corpse. As McAfee explains, the corpse precipitates abjection, since it underscores the fragility of life and thus of one's subjectivity. McAfee writes:

Another phenomenon that sets off abjection is the presence of a cadaver. Here the very border between life and death has been broken, with death seeming to 'infect' the body. And we who are faced with a corpse experience the fragility of our own life. Here I am, bodily wastes and all, face-to-face with the ultimate border. (47)

Namjoshi is just so precariously 'infected' by the dead, who take root in her:

The body is infested. The Goja-monster, the Raja-monster, the Goldfish-monster, the Mummy-monster, the Daddy-monster, everyone I've ever known takes root, grubs for sustenance, even the servant who molested me. Can I live with that? . . . All these people are jostling one another, entering into me, living with me. I am an ark. All these people I repudiate are part of me. *They are me*. (30-31 – emphasis original).

In saying this, Namjoshi depicts a self abjectly constructed by predatory "monster" others, each of whom parasitically "takes root, grubs for sustenance" and whose influence she cannot escape, even "the servant who molested me." Consequently – as "an ark" – Namjoshi may be seen as abjectly comprised of the dead.

Abjection also is apparent in Namjoshi's having "written this account for my beloved dead" (x), admitting that "death pierces the text" (55) in her conjuring of them. She writes, "If I concentrate, it's easy enough to summon them" (88). The result is an abject resurrection of the dead: "her grandmother Goldie and her maid Goja both of whom are dead and now textually resurrected by her" (Vijayasree *Artful* 163). Since abjection is "death infecting life" (*Powers* 4), Namjoshi thus makes herself over as abject – as one who inhabits the dead, saying of the deceased Goldie and Goja, "these two dead trot in my head" (18), adding "I carried you with me all the time" (85). So constituted by the dead, Namjoshi shares her "I" of the text and speaks with them, something Karpinski considers 'ghost writing':

[Namjoshi] thus engages in a practice of ghost writing, inviting the dead into her narrative and allowing herself to be inhabited by the ghostly presences of the Ranisaheb, the servant, and others. Death pierces and enters the text (55) even in the form of her beloved cat (40) or through digressions to extratextual moments such as the passing of Namjoshi's favourite aunt during the writing of the book. (233)

Namjoshi is thus made over in abjection, becoming a monstrous corpse-like figure that houses the dead. As Karpinski states, "Goldie and Goja can only be constructions of monstrous intersubjectivity, the conjoined 'we' speaking 'with one voice', combined in the image of a three-headed monster" (233). As such, the subject in *Goja* is a corpse-like abject, consisting not only of Namjoshi, but also of the deceased Goldie and Goja, as well – as one with "three monstrous heads" (18) who "chat in the deep and backward abyss" (18).

By abjectly absorbing her dead relatives and sharing with them the “I” of her autobiography, Namjoshi’s subject may be seen as a cohering force in the text. As Namjoshi herself states, her writing is an attempt at coherence, to “join the two halves of my existence . . . to bridge my two worlds” (85). For instance, she frequently endeavours to cohere dominant binaries in order to undermine stereotypes, such as those about “the Fabulous West [and] the Mysterious East” (88), by focusing upon language. For example, in saying, “English isn’t plain. English is exotic, English is foreign” (96), she not only argues that English is a difficult language to master, but also that the ‘English’ west might be considered as “mysterious” (88), “foreign” (96) and “exotic” (71) as the east. In this respect, she notes upon going west that, “It was like being Alice in Wonderland” (73), adding, “the West had its own brand of homophobia and its own kind of sexism, and it had racism as well” (77). Growing to feel simultaneously foreign and familiar in both east and west, Namjoshi attempts to conflate the two, “to put together the two halves of my experience . . . I belong to India and to the West. Both belong to me and both reject me” (67). Karpinski seemingly concurs with the idea that Namjoshi seeks to establish commonality rather than difference in her text, saying, “*Goja* persistently frustrates traditional ethnographic expectations of cultural complicity by resisting ‘the ongoing tendency to dichotomize and reify the distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’” (Dasgupta qtd. in Karpinski 242). Namjoshi even goes so far as to occasionally reverse ideas of foreignness. For example, when describing her Canadian lover, Namjoshi redefines her, such that the ‘native’ Canadian now becomes the “exotic” (71) one. Specifically, Namjoshi self-consciously *others* her lover, referring to her as “Paramour” (94) and thus transforming her into an object of fable. Such

depersonalization continues when Namjoshi describes her lover variously as “a woodland creature. . . . an old woman, a precocious newcomer, perhaps a genius, certainly a goddess” (94). She says, “she was Circe. She was Aphrodite” (96), adding, “SHE IS PARAMOUR, a mythical monster, the Lady of a Thousand Million Tongues. Perhaps she is fire” (97). In reality, however, “Paramour was a woman with two young children. She was not a goddess. . . . She wanted to live fully, but was often tired. . . . To herself she was often weary” (101). Namjoshi thus exoticizes her lover by re-defining her as something other, something foreign – as myth and even element. She seems to admit as much in saying, “I desired her by *definition*” (96 – my emphasis) – not only by the definition of “desire”, but by the author’s re-definition of Paramour, her (re)creation. Namjoshi thus de-exoticizes or centres herself through what might be seen as an exoticization and marginalization of others.

In feeling both foreign and familiar herself, Namjoshi also considers foreignness from the perspective of the dominant, white, western culture now surrounding her. Specifically, she notes how westerners born in the west can be unaware of their privilege in a multicultural society of what they consider ‘their’ land. As the character of Paramour says:

I am a foreigner in my own country. I cannot see the wood for the trees. If the wood belongs to me, then the trees don’t. If the trees belong to me, then the forest doesn’t. Don’t you understand? This is Canada. I am a native among foreign trees. And I look to you, the foreign one, the exotic one, the one who is an Indian and not a

native, for company. . . . In this country everyone is so lonely. . . .

there is only snow. (98)

Certainly, Namjoshi may be seen here as addressing Margaret Atwood's contention that, "we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders" (x). Namjoshi may, then, have included this scene with *Paramour* in order to juxtapose her own abject feelings of abject foreignness as compared to those of someone like Atwood. Namjoshi may thus be echoing Fred Wah's sentiments, as though asking "Why deny the immigrant his or her real world? Why be in such a rush to dilute? Those of us who have already been diluted need our own space to figure it out. I don't want to be inducted into someone else's story" (Wah "Diamond" 839).

Nevertheless, by exploring ideas of foreignness and of binaries such as east and west, Namjoshi emphasizes both difference and sameness, thus allowing her to move from abject marginality to centrality.

When viewed as a cohering and centering force, Namjoshi seemingly reproduces for examination the role of 'master' to the subaltern servant figure of Goja. Guarracino concurs with a view of Goja as subaltern in saying, "Goja, as woman, peasant, poor, and servant, would seem to fit into the [subaltern] picture" (137). The idea of Namjoshi as 'master' to her characters' position of 'servant' is plausible since Goja's – as well as Goldie's and even *Paramour's* – narratives are offered only from Namjoshi's perspective, such that "the picture of Goja that emerges . . . is one-dimensional and only deals with Goja as seen by and as known by Namjoshi" (Vijayasree *Artful* 165). Namjoshi thus may be seen as ventriloquizing others as 'master', even referring to Goja

and Goldie as “my captives” (103). From this perspective, though Namjoshi is initially stymied by language – “the English language had colonised my brain” (66) – the author now seemingly assumes the role of colonizer *through* language. For instance, in her role as author, Namjoshi controls Goldie’s and Goja’s narrative, such that:

Once I have summoned all my inhabitants and seen them milling
about me like noisy schoolchildren, I realise that I am their teacher,
that I am in some relation of authority to them. (38)

Namjoshi is thus dominant in her authorial position of “teacher” and “authority” – in textually ‘summoning’ Goja and Goldie. She goes on to say to them, “I am the omnipotent narrator, and you are the hypothetical audience. . . . I am omniscient” (90) – again suggesting the author’s position of dominance and control in the text. As Namjoshi herself explains of her textual ‘omnipotence’, “I could deal with words. It was my training, my craft. . . . I could redesign the landscape!” (82). As such, Namjoshi re-creates the past, beginning with an improvement of Goja’s circumstance. She says, “I’ll endow Goja with a kindly mother” (3), asking “should I make Goja an embodiment of Charity because she gave me love when I needed it most?” (3) Namjoshi thus establishes herself as a kind of ‘master’ to the text’s literal and figurative ‘servant’ characters.

Nevertheless, Namjoshi’s role as textual ‘master’ and centering “authority” (38) has its root in ethics, as a means of highlighting the problem of so speaking for the abject ‘servant’ subaltern. Specifically, the author suggests an ethical component to her writing about “the discrepancy between the poor and the rich that felt so wrong” (61). Karpinski concurs with such a view, arguing that, “Namjoshi’s oblique or queer

outsider/insider position . . . allows her to use her marginalization as “[a] filtering consciousness” (Dasgupta qtd. in Karpinski 243). Certainly, however, many theorists argue that Namjoshi’s autobiographical subjectivity remains of the margin. Akshaya K. Rath, for instance, echoes Namjoshi’s feeling of being “triply oppressed” (16) in saying, “as a coloured lesbian in the West, her own positioning has been thrice away from the mainstream society” (146). Nevertheless, in largely focusing her text on the abject subaltern Goja, Namjoshi risks becoming a centering force that reinscribes the very injustices she wishes to renounce. As Karpinski cautions, “[autoethnographic] discourses often inadvertently reinscribe . . . oppositions and their hierarchical power dynamics” (Karpinski 228), adding, “the ethical questions involved in writing about the subaltern woman inevitably haunt [Namjoshi’s] text” (245). Gayatri Spivak warns of the danger inherent in attempting to speak for the subaltern, saying:

there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self. Here . . . are the unorganized peasant labor. To confront them is not to represent . . . them but to learn to represent . . . ourselves (*Can* 288-9)

Namjoshi seems keenly aware of such a hazard, with Goja’s character telling her, “most of this is about you, not me” (152). Far from subaltern, then, Namjoshi is rather what Spivak might consider an “Indian elite” (*Can* 284):

the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism . . . credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, and

culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings—to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas. (Guha qtd. in Spivak *Can* 283-4)

Namjoshi seems to address Spivak's concerns directly when describing herself as "triply oppressed" . . . as a woman, a lesbian and a brown-skinned person" (16), something that directly echoes Spivak's depiction of the 'elite':

Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get [oppressed] in three ways. If, however, this formulation is moved from the first-world context into the postcolonial (which is not identical with the third-world) context, the description 'black' or 'of color' loses persuasive significance. (Spivak *Can* 294)

Namjoshi thus seemingly acknowledges that she is 'elite' and cannot speak for the subaltern, a privileged position further emphasized in a self-mocking comparison of herself to Goja. Namjoshi writes:

once I found myself at the bottom of the heap, I understood clearly what you had suffered, what servants suffered. Don't you remember that on my first trip home I brought presents for all the servants—well, many of them—which I had paid for with my own sweat and blood? (99)

Namjoshi is being ironic here, emphasizing how she could not possibly have "understood clearly" Goja's suffering. Though disadvantaged in her immigrant status in the west, Namjoshi is nevertheless clearly privileged there as an educated woman in a well-paying position that affords her the many "presents" distributed to her eastern servants. She writes:

I had study leave from the Government of India and a research assistantship at a Midwestern university to do a Master's in public administration, and went to Canada where I did my doctorate in English Literature and then taught there for many years. (67)

By contrast, Goja is owned by the Namjoshi family and exists in abject poverty:

And Goja?

Has nothing. The clothes she's wearing.

No vow of poverty more penurious. (8)

Namjoshi's appropriation of the voice of others may thus be seen as an ethical attempt at reconciliation and witnessing. The author writes, "during [Goldie's and Goja's] lifetimes I never had the nerve to say anything to them. But now? Goja? Goldie? I would like if possible to make my peace" (76). As part of such reconciliation and witnessing, Namjoshi attempts to give voice to, and thus record, the formerly voiceless, such as Goja, noting how "the lives of servants go unrecorded . . . the servants go unnoticed. They disappear silently . . . It should not be because their lives meant nothing" (7). As such, Namjoshi's work may be seen as an attempt to 'write back', to address and counter the effects of privilege. As Karpinski states, "autoethnography . . . set[s] the stage for the ethnographic subject to 'write back' to the metropolitan culture" (228). To do so, Namjoshi mocks her status as an Indian 'elite' to expose the harms of oblivious privilege, acknowledging that she cannot possibly understand or identify with her subaltern servant Goja. Namjoshi asks, "is it fair to compare suffering, Goja? What were your griefs? Unannotated? Not noted. . . . Did it matter?" (17) To this, Goja responds, "Why should I mind? I am only a servant. And anyhow, I am not this proud,

loud, wise human being you would have me be. At times I'm not even intelligent. You don't really understand what it's like" (14). Consequently, while there is a potential hazard to Namjoshi's writing on behalf of, and as, the subaltern Goja, the author nevertheless seems acutely aware of her tenuous position as textual authority, something perhaps best expressed when Namjoshi as Goja says, "*Do not exploit me again and again*" (149 – emphasis original).

This chapter attempts to situate Suniti Namjoshi's autobiographical identity in *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* as not only subject to abjection – in being torn between her 'homeland' in the east and her residence in the west, where "Both belong to me and both reject me" (67) – but also as liberated by such abjection. Specifically, in becoming one who "had no past, no history and no human framework supporting me. I felt stripped" (Namjoshi 78), Namjoshi teeters precariously in abject "non-existence" (Kristeva *Powers* 2), saying, "I was not myself?" (80) She is thus considered in postmodern, Derridean terms as "under erasure" (*Grammatology* 88) – as undermined by the very words used to write the self. Yet, Kristeva's notion of abjection seemingly emancipates Namjoshi in her newfound role as a "blank subject" (Kristeva *Powers* 6). Specifically, though the author feels eradicated in the west through such labels as "FOREIGN / EXOTIC / THIRD WORLD / NEEDY" (71) – consequently becoming "invisible" (71) – she nevertheless seems to privilege such a state of abjection, saying distastefully of her social oppressors, "Be! Be what? . . . Be like them?" (42). Instead, Namjoshi intensifies her abjection, becoming a corpse-life figure who houses the dead – herself, and her two mother figures, Goldie and Goja – with "not one, but two, not two, but three / --three monstrous heads" (18). In doing so, Namjoshi employs

autobiography as a means to avail herself of what Kristeva considers the “gift” (*Powers* 9) of abjection, which both eradicates and saves the self – as abject. As Kristeva writes, abjection’s “repulsive gift . . . [ensures] ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (*Powers* 9). The “forfeited existence” for Namjoshi is the three-headed ‘monstrosity’ she becomes in assimilating her dead mother figures, something that enables her to achieve a desired reconciliation with them – since the text is admittedly an attempt “to bridge my two words so that at last there might be the possibility of reconciliation” (85). Of my chosen texts, then, *Goja* is distinct in coalescing an otherwise fragmented postmodern self – specifically from sexualized, immigrant and feminist perspectives – such that the self and the past are recuperated within the “deep and backward abyss” (Namjoshi 18) of autobiographical abjection. As Karpinski notes, “playful postmodernism of fragmentation is countered by Namjoshi’s . . . ethical universalism. . . . Her version of new humanism is an antidote to a postmodern sense of fragmentation and relativism” (239). It is thus fitting that the text nears completion with a moment of reconciliation between Goldie, Goja and Namjoshi – with the three saying to one another, “We loved you, Little One. Forgive us” (143) – “I loved you too. . . . Forgive me” (144). As such, this postmodern work culminates in an atypical moment of unity and ethics – of communal forgiveness.

Chapter IV: Birth by Death Drive: Literary immortality in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

This chapter explores the mutability of memory and of autobiographical 'authenticity' by focusing on Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (originally published in 1951), wherein the self is situated as an abject inhabitant of a textually reconstructed, idealized past populated largely by the dead. Longing to return to his aristocratic past in pre-revolutionary Russia – and lamenting the subsequent exile from his Russian 'homeland' – Nabokov abjects his present self in favour of a romanticized past one. The result is what seems to be a work of fiction that – in a postmodern fashion that was characteristic of the era – undermines conventional expectations of 'truth' in autobiography. Specifically, the author is "handicapped by an almost complete lack of data in regard to family history, and, consequently, by the impossibility of checking my memory" (Nabokov *Speak* 11). Thus unimpeded by 'fact,' Nabokov writes about "a childhood entirely unrelated to my own" (95), using autobiography to recreate and enhance his past – "to reconstruct [my past] . . . perhaps a little more perfect" (215). Because "many of the portrayed family members are, in fact, dead" (Straumann 40), Nabokov may be seen as abjectly dwelling among the dead. Indeed, Nabokov expresses an intense desire to retrieve the dead of his past, noting "the nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood" (73). As one impossibly desiring communication with the dead, Nabokov is abject, since abjection "is death infecting life" (Kristeva *Powers* 4). Indeed, Nabokov depicts himself as corpse-like from the outset of the text, as dead even before he is born. Specifically, the opening

scene describes family footage taken just before his birth and characterizes his awaiting baby carriage as “having the encroaching air of a coffin” (19) as though “[the author’s] very bones had disintegrated” (19). Nabokov may thus be seen as abjectly hovering “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2). The author even depicts himself as a “ghostly envoy” (98), one who prefers the deceased of his past and thus “makes a ghost of the present” (76). In textually summoning and inhabiting the past – “I re-enter my past” (86), where “nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (77) – Nabokov may be seen not only as resurrecting it, but also as reincarnating himself there, as abjecting his present self for a privileged past one. He writes, “I have doffed my identity in order to pass for a conventional spook and steal into [other] realms” (20).

Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories illuminate Nabokov’s autobiographical work as a process of abjection, where “abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a state of life, of new significance” (*Powers* 15). Despite Nabokov’s antipathy toward psychoanalysis – particularly toward Freud – Nabokov’s work nevertheless lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading. As Joanna Trzeciak contends, “although Nabokov dismissed Freud as a trivial and vulgar thinker and derided him at every turn, the presence of Freud and Freudianism is quite conspicuous in his works” (*Waltz* 54). In this chapter, then, I work through Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories to illuminate how Nabokov’s autobiographical subject may be seen as engaged in a dialectical process of death and rebirth through abjection.

Though self-identified as an autobiographical work, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* nevertheless challenges traditional views of autobiography as

a truthful account of one's life. Conventionally, autobiography is considered to be based upon the author's factual, verifiable recollections. As James Olney states:

The man who sets about writing his memoirs imagines, in all good faith, that he is writing as an historian and that any difficulties he may discover can be overcome through exercise of critical objectivity and impartiality. The portrait will be exact. (*Autobiography* 39-40)

Similarly, in what he considers an "autobiographical pact" (*Autobiography* 13), Philippe Lejeune contends that "the author . . . the narrator . . . and the principal character [of an autobiography] are identical" (*Autobiography* 4). In turn, Lejeune's accompanying "referential pact" (*Autobiography* 22), sets out an expectation of truthfulness to autobiographical works. Lejeune writes:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are referential texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of *verification*. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. . . . making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc. (*Autobiography* 22 – emphasis original)

Yet, in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov suggests that memory is too unreliable for autobiography. Specifically, he describes "the anomalies of a memory, whose possessor and victim should never have tried to become an autobiographer" (13), contending that the goddess of memory, "Mnemosyne . . . has shown herself to be a

very careless girl" (13). He thus undermines any expectation of authenticity in his autobiography, admitting to such discrepancies of 'fact' therein that:

at . . . family reunions, [an earlier edition of] *Speak, Memory* was judged. Details of date and circumstance were checked, and it was found that in many cases I had erred, or had not examined deeply enough an obscure but fathomable recollection. (14)

Nabokov suggests a further erosion of autobiographical 'fact' occurred in the many revisions and translations of *Speak, Memory* – initially entitled *Conclusive Evidence* (Straumann 35) – saying, "I have . . . introduced basic changes and copious additions into the initial English text . . . This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place" (12). Such a postmodern upsetting of conventional notions about autobiographical authenticity appears not in fact careless, but quite intentional. Specifically, in his essay, "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov indicates that "literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth. Every great writer is a great deceiver" (14). Certainly, Nabokov may only be referring to his fictional works here. Yet, it is unlikely that he would undertake an autobiography if it were not also subject to his idea of literary 'deception'. Phyllis Roth supports such a view in saying, "*Speak, Memory* . . . provides a model for the creation of artistic truths out of memories and experience, by means of enchanting and diabolical deceit" (27). Such "enchanting and diabolical deceit" may be seen, for instance, when Nabokov describes over many pages a past love named Tamara, only then to undermine the veracity of what he has just written, saying:

not only is the experience in question, and the shadows of all those charming ladies useless to me now in recomposing my past, but it creates a bothersome defocalization, and no matter how I worry the screws of memory, I cannot recall the way Tamara and I parted. (240)

Nevertheless, the author goes on to describe their parting “with heartbreaking vividness” (Nabokov *Speak* 240). Thomas G. Couser condones such a blending of fact and fiction in autobiography, saying:

It is not always—or perhaps ever—easy to say exactly how the obligation to the truth needs to be fulfilled. The memoirist’s dilemma is as follows. On the one hand, the memoirist is obliged to tell the truth, or at least not to lie—because the genre resides in the realm of nonfiction. On the other, as its name suggests, memoir relies primarily on an inherently fallible faculty, human memory. . . . Furthermore, as a literary genre, memoir involves a degree of creativity. So there is a paradox at the heart of memoir: the genre demands a fidelity to truth that may overtax its source and conflict with its aspirations as art.

(*Memoir* 80)

Nabokov’s autobiography demonstrates just such a “degree of creativity,” aspiring less toward precision than toward a recording of impressions, imaginings, and memories of memories - “the recollection of that recollection” (Nabokov 76).

Nabokov further suggests a postmodern approach to autobiography in depicting the self as highly constructed, particularly by family. For instance, the vast evidence of

Nabokov's "rich nostalgia" in *Speak, Memory* is something he considers to have inherited from his mother. He writes:

As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, [my mother] cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the various time marks distributed throughout our country place. She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate—and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses. (40)

Here, Nabokov may be seen as learning from his mother to preserve the past, something Roth contends in saying, "it was she who taught him how to defy mortality by deliberate acts of memory" (12). To this, Boyd adds:

it is his mother who teaches him to . . . notice . . . fleeting details
because they can be hoarded only within the sanctum of the mind. . . .
she trains him in memory and in her sense of the preciousness and precariousness of the world around. (*Stalking* 284)

Nabokov's physical self, too, is constructed by family, such that the author claims to share his grandmother's features: "the Korff nose (e.g. mine) is a handsome Germanic organ with a boldly boned bridge and a slightly tilted, distinctly grooved, fleshy end" (53). So constructed is he by his family that Nabokov often writes more about them than about himself. Indeed, the book opens with his absence, while other family members gather to watch "homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before [my] birth" (19). Thereafter, Nabokov seemingly disappears among the many extensive

genealogical listings he provides of his ancestors and their accomplishments, a cataloguing that continues for several pages of *Speak, Memory*. He writes, in part:

According to my father's first cousin . . . the founder of our family was Nabok Murza . . . a Russianized Tatar prince in Muscovy. . . . in the fifteenth century our ancestors owned land in the Moscow principedom. . . . During the following centuries the Nabokovs were government officials and military men. My great-great-grandfather . . . was . . . chief of the Novgorod garrison regiment called 'Nabokov's Regiment' in official documents. (51-52)

As such, family history often seems to take precedence above and even to overshadow the author. For instance, though Nabokov was a respected lepidopterist, whose works and research are on display around the world, it is not his own name to which a large carving at the American Museum of Natural History refers, but rather that of his Uncle Konstantin Nabokov. Nabokov writes:

On the left side of the main entrance hall of the American Museum of Natural History—an eminently fit place to find my surname in golden Slavic characters, as I did the first time I passed there—with a fellow lepidopterist, who said 'Sure, sure' in reply to my exclamation of recognition. (61)

Consequently, even though Nabokov went on to become not only a celebrated author, but a renowned butterfly collector, as well, it is not he, but a largely unknown relative who is foregrounded. Family thus seemingly plays such a role in constructing Nabokov that his autobiography is ostensibly as much about them as it is about the author.

In offering variations of the past and of the constructed self, Nabokov may be seen as presenting a view of the self as fluid. For instance, the author is split between a past 'remembered' self and a present 'remembering' self. As Dabney Stuart contends, "both the adult's consciousness at the time of writing and the child's consciousness at the time [depicted] coexist in the assembly of [Nabokov's] recollection" (179). When speaking of his past love, Tamara, for instance, Nabokov writes, "In looking at [things] from my present tower I see myself as a hundred different men, all pursuing one changeful girl in a series of simultaneous or overlapping love affairs" (240). As such, Nabokov depicts the autobiographical self as multitudinous, a view supported by Judith Butler, who contends that identity consists of "multiple and coexisting identifications [that] produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances" (*Gender* 91). Consequently, the autobiographical identity depicted by Nabokov extends even beyond his 'origin' to a time before he was born. For example, he describes Alexander Pushkin's duel on the Nabokov 'Batovo' estate in 1820, 82 years before Nabokov came into being. Yet, Nabokov keenly recalls his imaginings of the duel in boyhood, as though he had witnessed it. He writes:

I can feel upon my skin and in my nostrils the delicious country
roughness of the northern spring day which greeted Pushkin and his
two seconds as they got out of their coach and penetrated into the
linden avenue beyond the Batovo platbands, still virginally black. I see
so plainly the three young men . . . following their host . . . into the park.

(62)

Imagination and memory thus intertwine and conflict throughout the text such that many versions of the past and of the self are offered, wherein identity may be seen as “an ongoing discursive practice . . . [that] is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler 45)

Nabokov also suggests autobiography itself as a means of constructing identity. Specifically, the author so manipulates ‘fact’ within the text, it is as though he is fabricating himself therein. From this perspective, the text may be seen as having ontological properties for the author, such as when Nabokov initially submitted his work “under the title *Conclusive Evidence*; conclusive evidence of my having *existed*. (Nabokov *Speak* 10 – my emphasis). He also alludes to an ontological aspect of his writing in referring to his boyhood poetry as “hardly anything more than a sign I made of being *alive*” (217 – my emphasis). As such, Stuart goes so far as to suggest that the highly fictional aspect of *Speak, Memory* is a means of autobiographically conjuring the self, saying:

Speak, Memory . . . is an autobiography, but it is not a record, or account, of ‘facts’ . . . It is the imaginative narration in which events, actions, and details of landscape (both indoors and out) . . . are formed, shaped, and rendered significant by a single, ordering consciousness. It is, in short, fiction, a molding . . . not opposed to ‘fact’ . . . but the way ‘fact’ is born. . . . Facts are raw material . . . the building blocks we put together one way and another to invent ourselves and the worlds we people. (177-8)

Nabokov's autobiography is thus posited as not merely validating existence, then, but constructing it. Linda R. Anderson argues that autobiography is inherently creational, saying, "it could be argued that one of the desires that is encoded by autobiography . . . is that of becoming . . . one's own progenitor, of assuming authorship of one's own life" (64). In "reconstruct[ing my past]" (215) through writing, then, Nabokov may be seen as not merely as recording, but as autobiographically constructing the self.

The idea of art as creational of self is suggested when Nabokov recalls a bedtime story his mother would tell. In the story, a boy is able to enter a picture and interact with its contents, something Nabokov's boyhood self follows suit in imagining. He writes:

In an English fairy tale my mother had once read to me, a small boy stepped out of his bed into a picture and rode his hobbyhorse along a painted path between silent trees. While I knelt on my pillow in a mist of drowsiness and talk-powdered well-being . . . I imagined . . . climbing into the picture above my bed and plunging into that enchanted beechwood—which I did visit in due time. (86)

In this scene, Nabokov depicts art as something to which life aspires. Specifically, the young Nabokov may be seen as aspiring to become art, to become like the fictional boy and enter into an art piece. In saying that "I did visit in due time" (86) the beechwood in the picture, Nabokov may simply imply that he later encountered the picture's tree in real life, perhaps when he "strolled through a beech forest in Vermont" (94) in later years with his former drawing master, Mstislav Valerianovich. Yet, Nabokov may also mean that his imaginary 'visit[s]' to the tree became more and more convincing, such that, "in due time" (86), he feels he "did visit" (86) the painting's tree, thereby conjuring

reality through art – what Nabokov considers an “artistic truth” (117), something more representative than mere fact alone (Roth 27). Nabokov’s desire to attain such “artistic truth” allows him to access through art what is otherwise inaccessible. In this sense, where his boyhood self was able to interact with the painting’s tree, his adult self is able to interact with the past through autobiography. As such, for Nabokov, “art . . . redeems from time what would otherwise be lost” (Roth 22). Boyd supports the idea that Nabokov uses *Speak, Memory* as an artistic intermediary through which to engage with the past, saying:

In life we can never escape being who we are and what we are, but in art we peer inside other souls, we return at will to the past, we look from outside on an invented world. Nabokov deliberately exploits all these special conditions of the work of art. (270-271)

In “recomposing [his] past” (240) through an imaginative blend of fact and fiction, Nabokov seemingly uses autobiography as an artistic intermediary through which to revisit and revive the past.

The function of imagination is so privileged in Nabokov’s autobiography as to posit reality as abject. For instance, upon learning that his childhood drawing master was not as old as he imagined, Nabokov feels slighted at the imposition of reality upon his constructed memory. He writes, “I experienced a queer shock; it was as if life had impinged upon my creative rights” (93). Reality, then, is something Nabokov abjects. As Kristeva explains, “abjection [is] one of those violent, dark revolts . . . it rejects” (*Powers* 1), adding that, “abjection . . . [is] directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (*Powers* 1), wherein, “it is something

rejected from which one does not part” (*Powers* 4). Reality is just such a thing for Nabokov who, though preferring an imagined past, cannot entirely escape its reality, which “wriggl[es] on beyond the subjective limits so elegantly and economically set by . . . memories that I thought I had signed and sealed” (93), by memories he felt were firmly and safely reconstructed. The author thus experiences a moment of abjection upon being confronted with facts that contradict his privileged, constructed memory. As Kristeva explains, abjection is “essentially different from ‘uncanniness,’ more violent, too; abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (*Powers* 5). Even in autobiography, then, life as imagined or as artistically constructed is so favoured by Nabokov as to depict reality as abject.

Though Nabokov eschewed psychoanalysis – and Freud in particular – a psychoanalytic reading of the self as abject in *Speak, Memory* nevertheless seems tenable. In his autobiography, Nabokov writes:

let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby,
fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for
sexual symbols . . . and its bitter little embryos spying, from their
natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents. (20)

As such, Nabokov “protest[ed] vehemently against a number of indecent absurdities” (*Strong* 339) that were suggested in William Woodin Rowe’s psychosexual, Freudian readings of Nabokov’s works in the book *Nabokov’s Deceptive World*. Nevertheless, Trzeciak supports Rowe’s approach, noting that, “although Nabokov dismissed Freud as a trivial and vulgar thinker and derided him at every turn, the presence of Freud and

Freudianism is quite conspicuous in his works" (*Waltz* 54). Similarly, Alan C. Elms contends that "Nabokov was a Freudian in spite of himself" (353). In his psychoanalytic reading of *Speak, Memory*, John M. Ingham contends that Nabokov's frequent disparagement of Freud suggests a secret concurrence with him, saying, "[Nabokov] protests too much; the sheer virulence of his attack on psychoanalysis suggests that it secretly admits the truth of just what it wants to deny" (49). Similarly, Jenefer Shute notes that "Nabokov's constant invocation of Freud has struck many critics as itself 'obsessive'" (414). She adds that the great lengths to which Nabokov goes in order to undermine and parody psychoanalytic readings of his work only intensify such readings. She writes:

The psychoanalytic structure is inscribed [by Nabokov] and then effaced by parody, yet it remains intact, in place, and wholly legible. Such, on a larger scale, is Nabokov's relation to the repudiated Freudian text. The 'Freudian' or 'symbolic' signifier, though subjected to the ritual of derision, is permitted to survive . . . Indeed, the very methods employed to assert the text's independence [of psychoanalysis] are those that undermine it. (419)

As such, Maurice Couturier recommends a psychoanalytic approach to Nabokov's texts, saying, "I sensed more and more that I was laboring [in Nabokov's books] under a tyrannical law from which none of the hermeneutic tools I was using could unshackle me. . . . [until] psychoanalysis [came] to the rescue" ("Cruelty" 1). Other theorists have thus followed suit, with Steven Bruhm conducting queer Freudian readings of Nabokov's works, and with Phillis Roth going so far as to contend that *Speak, Memory* was

psychoanalytic in nature, written by Nabokov “to master fears, anxieties, and unacceptable desires, transforming them into a transcendent fiction which is acceptably ‘aesthetic’” (3). Moreover, Roth characterizes *Speak, Memory* as “Nabokov’s *Interpretation of Dreams*” (7). In general, Smith and Watson contend that all life writing is psychoanalytic in nature, such that “autobiographical acts are investigations into and processes of self-knowing” (90). Consequently, despite Nabokov’s “vicious snap[s]” (15) at Freud, a psychoanalytic approach to *Speak, Memory* seems defensible. Notwithstanding Nabokov’s “contempt for psychoanalysis and its founder” (Couturier “Cruelty” 1), Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories help illuminate Nabokov’s autobiographical self as abject. A coupling of Nabokov with Kristeva is supported by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, who contends that both writers similarly invoke semiotic language:

By inviting Julia Kristeva and Vladimir Nabokov into the same paragraph I suggest that they act as accomplices—perhaps unwitting ones—in that redefinition of fundamental premises which I take to be central to postmodernism. Both begin with language and its processes and for both a key step, perhaps *the* key step, is the reinstatement of semiosis into the symbolic order. (330 – emphasis original)

I too, then, will couple Kristeva with Nabokov in order to illuminate Nabokov’s autobiographical self as abject – as existing in literal and psychic exile, ever seeking a past from which he is displaced, as “something rejected from which one does not part . . . it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (Kristeva *Powers* 4) – “an exile” (Kristeva *Powers* 8). Barbara Straumann invites such an approach in saying:

[Nabokov's] autobiography invokes a narrative of exile, a type of text that presupposes the chronotope of a home or homeland which, in retrospect, comes to be mythically refigured as a paradisiacal site or state from which the exiled person has been expelled. (33)

Nabokov thus seems to idealize and privilege the past over the present. Indeed, his focus is almost exclusively upon the past, which the author seemingly wishes to meticulously preserve, like “those blessed libraries where old newspapers are microfilmed, as all our memories should be” (15), thus “mak[ing] a ghost of the present” (76). Nabokov's fixation upon the past is evident when he admits to an “inexplicably nostalgic image of ‘home’ (that I had not seen since 1903)” (76) amid “a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood” (73). He even suggests that the past pursues him – “those distant times whose long light finds so many ingenious ways to reach me” (118), such that “my childhood calls me back into that distant past” (28). He may thus be seen as abject, as a type of foreigner to the present, “*an outcast, a lost soul*” (Kristeva *Horror* 8 – emphasis original), whose “lives are based on *exclusion*” (Kristeva *Horror* 6 – emphasis original) – exclusion, in this case, from his homeland and “perfect childhood” (24) there.

Nabokov also situates autobiographical subjectivity as abject. Specifically, in depicting himself as a medley of familial traits amid past, present and even imagined selves, Nabokov's identity is so fluid as to become strange to himself, such that he describes his autobiography as a type of “stereoscopic dreamland” (99). Indeed, Nabokov's fetishization of his autobiographical past may itself be considered abject. Specifically, just as “the abject [is that] from which [one] does not cease separating . . . in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered” (Kristeva *Powers* 8 –

emphasis original), Nabokov engages throughout his autobiography in the “the act of vividly recalling a path of the past . . . something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zeal all my life . . . [with] almost pathological keenness” (75). Moreover, Nabokov seemingly posits reality as an abjection that must be tempered by imagination, something that perhaps leads to what Roth considers “Nabokov’s need for the control provided by art” (27). Nabokov writes:

happy is a novelist who manages to preserve an actual love letter that he received when he was young within a work of fiction, embedded in it like a clean bullet in flabby flesh and quite secure there, among spurious lives. (249)

Though the author suggests it is pleasing to be in the possession of something ‘real’ from one’s past – “an actual love letter” – that is preserved in something of the imagination – “a work of fiction” – there is nevertheless competing imagery here to suggest that reality abjectly spoils fiction. Specifically, the ‘reality’ of the love letter does a violence to the textual fiction, “like a clean bullet in flabby flesh.” Nabokov further posits reality as a type of abjection in suggesting that one must mediate or escape it through fiction. He writes:

The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says ‘go!’ allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined

in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. (“Good”

5)

Certainly, the author may merely be suggesting here that reality is fodder for fiction.

Yet, in describing the world as a “chaos” that “does not exist at all as an accepted entirety,” the ‘truth’ or reality upon which Nabokov bases his writings may be considered abject, as a “nonexistence” (Kristeva *Powers* 6) that “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva *Powers* 4). Indeed, Nabokov himself is described as abjectly non-existent in the opening scene of the text, wherein his family watches homemade movies “a few weeks before his birth” (19). Nabokov is further abjected here in referring to himself by the third person pronoun “his” rather than “my,” since abjection is a process during which one “considers himself as equivalent to a Third Party” (Kristeva *Powers* 5).

Nabokov’s careful organization of his autobiographical past into “a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections” (9) may thus be seen as a means of abjecting the discomfort of abject reality, which is escaped through fantasy such that “a sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory” (77).

Nabokov’s use of imagination to escape abject reality seems evident when the author recalls a trip to the store taken by his mother, while his boyhood self remained home with an illness. Unable to witness from his sickbed the journey taken by his mother, Nabokov nevertheless recalls his young imaginings of it, “vividly visualiz[ing] her driving” (37) in such detail that:

I saw my mother’s seal furs . . . the muff she raised to her face—that graceful, winter-ride gesture of a St. Petersburg lady. . . . I saw [her

carriage] stop at Treumann's . . . the footman . . . carried her purchase. (38)

Here, the young Nabokov merges with his mother during “the dreaded remnants of delirium’s dilating world” (38), imagining so intensely her ride to the store that he sees it through her eyes, as well – “before my eyes and before those of my mother” (37). The author thus suggests an abject merging with the mother to escape the discomfort of self, a merging he relives in writing about his desired past with her, saying: “as I write this, the touch of reticulated tenderness that my lips used to feel when I kissed her veiled cheek comes back to me—*flies* back to me with a shout of joy out of the snow-blue . . . past” (38). Such a moment of incorporating with the archaic mother in an escape of self is abject, as Kristeva explains in saying:

“I am threatened.” The fantasy of incorporation by means of which I attempt to escape fear (I incorporate a portion of my mother's body, her breast, and thus I hold on to her). (*Powers* 59)

By merging with his mother through imagination, Nabokov depicts what might be considered a moment of autobiographical abjection.

Nabokov is further abjected by the fact that the past on which he fixates is a space of decline and deterioration. As Nabokov contends, “the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart” (117). Though Nabokov attempts to autobiographically reconstruct the past, the endeavour is nevertheless futile, since “autobiography is not simple repetition of the past as it was . . . it reveals no more than a ghostly image of . . . life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted” (Olney *Autobiography* 38).

Nabokov seemingly acknowledges the futility of his autobiographical quest, noting how “sixty years [of memories] crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers” (99), and how “the leaves mingle in my memory . . . I still seem to be holding that wisp of iridescence, not knowing exactly where to fit it . . . ever faster around me [it] finally dissolves among the slender shadows” (152). Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* thus dwells amid the deteriorating abject, wherein “I behold a breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away” (Kristeva *Powers* 4).

Nabokov’s sense of abjection in trying to impossibly retrieve the past may be seen as symbolized by his childhood governess, Mademoiselle. Like Nabokov, Mademoiselle is also a type of exile, leaving her homeland of Switzerland for Russia, “cold . . . frozen stiff” (99) and alone, unfamiliar with the new land’s customs or language, such that she “was a stranger, shipwrecked, penniless, ailing, in search of the blessed land where at last she could be understood” (98). She is seemingly bewildered during her entire time on the Nabokov estate, where:

her Russian vocabulary consisted, I know, of one short word, the same solitary word that years later she was to take back to Switzerland. This word . . . meant “Where?” . . . Uttered by her like the raucous cry of some lost bird . . . she would wail, not only to find out her whereabouts but also to express supreme misery. (98)

Nabokov just so struggles to locate himself in the world, as “a stranger, shipwrecked . . . in search of the blessed land” (98) – particularly the “Eden” (24) of his “lost childhood” (73). As Mademoiselle herself surely wondered, Nabokov ponders how he has been exiled from an idyllic past, asking, “what am I doing in this stereoscopic

dreamland? How did I get here? . . . a passportless spy . . . The vibration in my ears is . . . my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound . . . [amid] fancy's rear-vision mirror" (99). Nabokov is thus abject in the bewildering present, uttering, as Mademoiselle once did, "Where?" (98). Specifically, as abject, he is one who asks, "'Where am I?' instead of 'Who am I?' . . . [he] is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss" (Kristeva *Powers* 8 – emphasis original). Indeed, Nabokov's fixation on the past – "my old blood singing" (99) – may be seen as compelled by just such a "sense of danger, of the loss" (Kristeva *Powers* 8). His memory is "fading fast" (Nabokov 95) – "the end of which keeps receding" (Kristeva *Powers* 8), and his writing is a "desperate attempt to save [it]" (Nabokov 98). An exile from her own 'homeland' and past life, the abject Mademoiselle may be seen as symbolizing Nabokov's own state of abjection.

Abjection is also apparent in *Speak, Memory* when one considers that the text is populated almost entirely with dead figures. Nabokov himself writes that, "at fifty, one is still dwelling in the clapboard house of one's childhood . . . among later accumulations of dead objects" (250). As such, Boyd observes that, "Nabokov . . . refrained from discussing any living person other than himself" (13). Indeed, those remembered throughout *Speak, Memory* have almost all died. There is: "Rileev's execution" (62); "Uncle Ruka died" (72); "my brother Sergey . . . who is also now dead" (74); "the kind of Russian family to which I belonged—a kind now extinct" (79); "at the outbreak of the Revolution, I . . . saw my first dead men" (89); "Burness, by then dead" (93); "Mademoiselle had died" (117); "My father . . . was fatally shot" (193); and "[Cousin Yuri] was killed fighting the Reds in northern Crimea" (200). The text is interspersed with

photos of these beloved dead. Moreover, Nabokov's autobiography begins with the notion of the author himself as dead in being absent from the home movies scene, where "he did not exist . . . at all" (19). These opening paragraphs have a definite funereal tone, with the author describing "the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated" (19). Moreover, his mother's "waving from an upstairs window" (19) is akin to a goodbye – an "unfamiliar gesture [that] disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell" (19). The book seemingly begins, then, with the author as dead, something perhaps confirmed when he later refers to himself as a "ghostly envoy" (98) reaching out to the now deceased Mademoiselle. Nabokov may thus further been seen as abject by living among – and perhaps even as one of – the dead.

Nabokov's text may also be seen as an abject attempt to resurrect the dead. Specifically, rather than accepting the natural passage of time – "I rebel against this state of affairs" (20) – Nabokov attempts to revive the past, by "recomposing my past" (240). In doing so, Nabokov effectively revives the dead there, such that, "I next see my mother leading me bedward" (83), and "English nurses and governesses . . . come out to meet me as I re-enter my past" (86). In Chapter 5, he similarly resurrects Mademoiselle. This section of the book is dedicated entirely to her, in "my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (95). Fearing that "the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast" (95), Nabokov may be seen as trying to textually reconstitute and thus preserve "her abundant dark hair, brushed up high and covertly graying; the three wrinkles on her

austere forehead; her beetling brows; the steely eyes . . . that vestigial mustache” (95-6). Nabokov goes on to recollect pranks he and his brother would play on Mademoiselle, and the impression that she left upon the two boys. So convinced is he of his textual portrait that Nabokov wonders if he has retrieved her from the past, saying, “Have I really salvaged her from fiction?” (117) Straumann supports a view of *Speak, Memory*, as a type of attempted resurrection, saying:

Nabokov creates patterns and connections between seemingly disparate details because this allows his mnemonic writing not only to come back and return to particular moments at will, but also to reread and rewrite the past and, in so doing, reverse what is irreversible. (47)

By including seemingly frivolous and unnecessary details about his past – such as his governess’s “vestigial mustache” (95-96) and “beetling brows” (95-96) – the author may be seen as engaged in an abject attempt to resurrect the dead by writing them into being, one small feature at a time.

Nabokov appears not only to attempt a revival of the past in *Speak, Memory*, but to abjectly restore and even improve it – to make it “a little more perfect” (215). Kristeva explains that such a process of renewal is inherent in abjection, which not only eradicates one’s identity “as radically separate, loathsome. Not me” (*Powers* 2), but also reinvents identity through a “process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death” (*Powers* 3). Nabokov becomes just such an other, eschewing or abjecting his present self in favour of a past idealized one. As Nabokov writes:

I would draw with my forefinger on my pillow the carriage road sweeping up to our Vyra house, the stone steps on the right, the carved back of a

bench on the left . . . I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. . . . That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be. (76)

Nabokov thus recreates the past with “robust reality.” Because such reminiscences are almost exclusively of childhood, Nabokov’s literary conjurings may be seen as an abject attempt to return to childhood. He writes:

I see myself . . . clambering over wet black rocks at the seaside . . . As I crawl over those rocks, I keep repeating, in a kind of zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word ‘childhood,’ which sounds mysterious and new, and becomes stranger and stranger as it gets mixed up in my small, overstocked, hectic mind . . . my magic muttering accompanies certain spells I am weaving. (26)

Nabokov thus attempts through language to transport himself back specifically to “childhood” – albeit an idealized version of it – where “nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (76). This impossible aspiration is abject, as Kristeva explains in describing such a desire as a falsely immortalizing return to the mother – as “the desire to return to the archaic mother who is resistant to meaning” (“Psychoanalysis” 84).

Kristeva writes:

Meaning is made infinite by desire. I am not therefore a dead subject . . . I am subject to Meaning . . . which escapes me . . . so that the

meaninglessness/madness of desire may appear and, beyond that, so that every phantasm is revealed as an attempt to return to the unnameable [mother]. ("Psychoanalysis" 86)

Nabokov's privileging of childhood and reluctance to embrace adulthood may be seen when he encounters a worm about to prepare its cocoon. He writes:

The tremendous larva of the Goat Moth, ostentatiously segments, flat-headed, flesh-colored, and glossily flushed, a strange creature 'as naked as a worm' . . . crossed my path in frantic search for a place to pupate (the awful pressure of metamorphosis, the aura of a disgraceful fit in a public space. (132)

Here, Nabokov seemingly disdains maturation into adulthood as an "awful pressure of metamorphosis . . . a disgraceful fit" (132). Kristeva describes such reluctance to mature as abject, as a means of clinging to the mother in order to secure the past. She writes, "the return to the archaic . . . is an antidote to the threat of lost memory" (*Sense* 16). For Kristeva, the "archaic" is the *chora* – the infantile Lacanian 'real' – a state of being wherein a child has not yet individuated from his parents or learned to speak. As Kristeva explains, "the chora is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated . . . as the distinction between [the Lacanian] real and symbolic" (*Revolution* 26). She adds:

the *chora* . . . precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. . . . The chora is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a position that

represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either). (*Revolution* 26 – emphasis original)

As such, the chora encompasses the space where a child does not yet feel separate from the world, including one's parents. Nabokov seems to recall such a state in admitting "the inner knowledge that I was I and that my parents were my parents seems to have been established only later [in life]" (21). He only becomes aware of his own individuation – in what Lacan would consider the 'mirror' stage (Lacan "Mirror") – when walking between his parents, holding their hands:

I became acutely aware that the twenty-seven-year-old being . . . was my mother, and that the thirty-three-year-old being . . . was my father. . . . If my left-hand-holder and my right-hand-holder had both been present before in my vague infant world, they had been so under the mask of a tender incognito; but now my father's attire . . . came out like the sun, and for several years afterward I remained keenly interested in the age of my parents . . . like a nervous passenger asking the time in order to check a new watch. (22)

Nabokov's newfound awareness – that he is no longer in the chora, at one with his parents "under the mask of a tender incognito" (22) – but separate from them, causes him "nervous" (22) distress. Indeed, the knowledge of himself as a grown individual is experienced as a "second baptism" (21) and "shock" (21). His desire to escape such awareness and return to the Kristevan chora may be seen in the "cave game[s]" (23) he so enjoys as a child, where he would:

form a narrow passage which I would be further helped to roof snugly with the divan's bolsters and close up at the ends with a couple of its cushions. I then had the fantastic pleasure of creeping through that pitch-dark tunnel, where I lingered a little to listen to the singing in my ears—that lonesome vibration so familiar to small boys . . . and then, in a burst of delicious panic, on rapidly thudding hands and knees I would reach the tunnel's far end, push its cushion away, and be welcomed by a mesh of sunshine. (23)

Despite Nabokov's assertion that he was creating here "the primordial cave (and not what Freudian mystics might suppose)" (22), birth imagery is nonetheless apparent. As Elms asserts:

this appears to have been a game of mastery of separation anxiety; the child returns to the womb, enjoys it, but eventually delights in bursting out into the world of light. Nabokov . . . provides no more support for his apparently archetypal hypothesis about the 'primordial cave' than he does for the explanation presumably favored by 'Freudian mystics'.
(363-4)

Nabokov's evident desire to return to the chora is not only suggested in his cave games, but also when he merges with his mother in his sickbed, imagining her ride to the store that day, "Before my eyes and before those of my mother" (38). The author is thus able to effect a type of return to the chora, something perhaps confirmed when he says that his autobiographical conjurings of the past lead to "ecstasy . . . into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with the sun and stone" (139). Nabokov thus may be seen

as abjecting his present self in favour of his childhood self in an attempt to return to the Kristevan chora, since “abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a state of life, of new significance” (Kristeva *Powers* 15).

In attempting to return to his past, Nabokov may be seen as not only trying to manipulate time, but also to transcend it. Specifically, Nabokov rails against the ravages of time to which mortal beings are subject and, instead, seeks a type of immortality through writing. He says:

nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft [life], as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. . . . I rebel against this state of affairs. . . . Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. (20)

Here, Nabokov refutes the unequivocalness of death, of “the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life” (20), demanding rather “the free world of timelessness.” Indeed, the author appears to achieve such timelessness in his writing, saying that, through it, “the edge of . . . mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence” (297). With the “edge of mortality . . . taken off” (297), Nabokov is able to ‘infinitely’ move from one time period to the next in his text, to “steal into realms that

existed before I was conceived” (20). Stuart supports the notion of Nabokov’s achieving immortality in the text, writing, “one clear and explicit purpose of *Speak, Memory* is, of course, to make immortal what might otherwise be totally lost by the Paduks and paddocks of history” (182). Nabokov may thus be seen as preserving his memories as meticulously as his beloved butterfly collections. Specifically, just as he categorizes his butterfly collections to withstand time, he writes that “the following of . . . thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (27). As such, Straumann contends Nabokov ‘preserves’ the past in his autobiography just as he does his butterfly collection:

Could one go as far as to say that the textual aesthetics of Nabokov’s memory text resembles a butterfly collection? They both trace aesthetic patterns and, in order to do so, depend on ‘killing agents’ (SM: 95). The text ‘kills’ time by arresting certain moments so as to assemble them in recurring themes and thematic patterns. (46)

As a means of ‘preservation’, then, autobiography suspends time for Nabokov as a type of ‘killing agent’, wherein the author’s present self is forsaken for a fictionalized past self, thereby achieving a type of immortality. Nabokov seems conscious of such a ‘timeless’ effect to his writing in describing it as a means of manipulating time. He writes:

I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness . . . This is ecstasy. (139)

As such, Häggglund contends that “Nabokov scholarship is dominated by the thesis that his writing is driven by a desire to transcend the condition of time” (449). Similarly, Boyd argues that *Speak, Memory* aspires towards “the full freedom of timelessness, consciousness without the degradation of loss” (65). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva notes the inherent ability of autobiographical writers to achieve timelessness in their work, writing:

The return, or access, to the archaic as access to a timeless temporality: this is the experience . . . that the great literary texts, particularly *Remembrance of Things Past*, allow us to approach. The access to the archaic, to timelessness, to ‘pure embodied time,’ to use Proust’s expression . . . [which] brings me back to the lost foundation and the installations of destroyed habitats. (*Sense* 16)

Thus Nabokov – whose *Speak, Memory* has often been compared to Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (Moraru “Time”) – may be seen as reaching a “timeless temporality” in his search for “the lost foundation” and “destroyed habitats”, particularly of his Russian childhood. It is presumably through such literary immortality, then, that Nabokov is able to begin his autobiography before temporal birth, as if “he did not exist there at all” (19).

In abjectly attempting to return to his lost childhood – thus privileging his “recompos[ed]” (240) past self and living amongst its dead – Nabokov’s life writing may be seen as a type of ‘death’ writing. Indeed, some theorists contend that any form of life writing engages with death. Susanna Egan, for example, argues that one cannot accurately express oneself through words – due to “the impossibility of seeing the self”

(12) – which causes an unavoidable “split between subject and object, between writing and written selves” (11), such that “life writing [i]s a death sentence” (12) for the autobiographical author, so that his written subject might live. This seems apparent in *Speak, Memory* when Nabokov ends up providing “the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own” (95). Derrida, too, suggests that autobiography represents a type of death narrative. Like Egan, Derrida maintains that the written autobiographical self exists independently of the writer, saying, “I am double. Therefore, I do not mistake myself, at least not yet for my works” (Derrida *Ear* 19). This is yet another sign of abjection in autobiography, since Kristeva contends that “the time of abjection is double” (*Powers* 8). Derrida adds that, while the written self achieves immortality in autobiography through its constant affirmation of the past (and therefore timelessness), the writer of autobiography writes himself out of existence. Derrida states:

To receive one's life as a gift . . . the gift being what has managed to get written and signed with this name . . . its returning-to reaffirm what has occurred . . . to return eternally, immortally: this is what *constitutes*, gathers, adjoins, and holds the strange present of this auto-biographical *récit* in place. . . . that buries the dead and saves the saved or exceptional as immortal . . . because he tells *himself* this life and he is the . . . addressee . . . And since the ‘I’ of this *récit* only constitutes itself though the credit of the eternal return, he does not exist. . . . It is the eternal return that signs or seals. (*Ear* 12-13 – emphasis original)

Specifically, Derrida contends that, in writing one's life, one transitions from the teller to the recipient of that "story". The textual self thus supersedes the author to the extent that the textual self even becomes the signatory of the text. As a result, the original writer "does not exist" (Derrida *Ear* 12-13). This is perhaps evident when Nabokov begins *Speak, Memory* by saying, "he did not exist there" (19), and also when he refers to himself later as "a conventional spook" (20) and "a ghostly envoy" (98) in his text.

Kristeva too contends that autobiography is a type of death narrative. Specifically, she contends that desire – in Nabokov's case, "the inexplicably nostalgic image of 'home' . . . [where] everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (76) – ruptures a subject, such that life is forfeited for one's unattainable desire. Kristeva writes:

'desire is the desire of the Other'—which includes the subject as divided and always in movement. Because the subject is desiring, he is the subject of a practice, which itself can be carried out only to the extent that its domain—the 'real'—is impossible. . . . This desire is essentially the death wish . . . for a subject . . . [desires] to the detriment of an 'objectivity,' called 'the real,' from which this subject will be forever cut off.

(*Revolution* 131)

From this perspective, in Nabokov's intense of desiring of his "perfect childhood" (24) – his "Eden" (24), a Kristevan *chora* or Lacanian 'real' – he forsakes himself, thus "mak[ing] a ghost of the present" (Nabokov 76). Through such readings of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov may be seen as engaged in a type of abject death writing, fixating on an autobiographical self of the past to the detriment of the authorial self in the present.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov may be seen as abjecting his present self in favour of an idealized past one by attempting “to reconstruct [my past] . . . perhaps a little more perfect” (215). He thus posits autobiography as a means to “re-enter my past” (86) and to conjure it textually, saying, “I keep repeating, in a kind of zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word ‘childhood’ . . . my magic muttering accompanies certain spells I am weaving” (26). He is thus able to enter an abject space autobiographically – “a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered” (Kristeva *Powers* 8 – emphasis original) – where he attempts to resurrect “the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood [which] had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart” (117). So successful is the author in summoning what has been lost to time that his imaginings become real, such that, through “fancy’s rear-vision mirror . . . the snow [he recalls] is real ” (99). He imagines so distinctly his former nurse Mademoiselle as alive and well as to wonder, “Have I really salvaged her from fiction?” (117) Nevertheless, he may be seen as abject in his autobiographical return to the past, for “The return, or access, to the archaic as access to a timeless temporality . . . brings me back to the lost foundation and the installations of destroyed habitats” (Kristeva *Sense* 16). Yet, Nabokov achieves a kind of timelessness through such abjection. In refusing to accept losses that occur during the passage of time – “I rebel against this state of affairs. . . . the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness” (20) – Nabokov becomes infinite, “so that the edge of its mortality is taken off . . . having developed an infinity of sensation and thought” (297). Nabokov’s text is distinct in this dissertation by not only refuting memory in conventional postmodern fashion, but in overtly recreating and textually inhabiting a

reconstructed past. As such, he becomes his own Frankensteinian monster – resurrected and immortalized through autobiography – existing as an abject inhabitant of an idealized, static past, wherein “nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (77).

Chapter V: Speaking in Other Tongues: Substituting the Author Through Prosopopoeia in Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story: The Writing Life*

My fifth chapter explores Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (originally published in 1995) as a type of autobiographical abjection that is enacted through the use of prosopopoeia, through speaking as another (Benne 281). As with many other postmodern writers, Kroetsch says, "I do not believe the autobiographical is possible" (60). Yet, the author offers much autobiographical information about himself when speaking of – and ostensibly through – such characters as Albert Johnson, Morag Gunn, his Aunt Rose and, especially, Rita Kleinhart, a character he describes as his "double" (213). Through such prosopopoeia, Kroetsch abjectly writes himself out of subjectivity by adopting the identity of another. He thus enacts a type of self-erasure and self-othering, saying, "by borrowing fragments / of other lives I borrow an / autobiography of my / own. I disappear" (118). Such an approach may be considered one of abjection, a destabilizing psychological process that, as Julia Kristeva contends, "places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (*Powers* 1). The subject thus becomes both same and other, a "foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify" (Kristeva *Strangers* 187). For example, Kroetsch is simultaneously 'foreign' and familiar when expressing himself autobiographically through his Aunt Rose, saying, "Aunt Rose's mouth was a nest. Her mouth was the recurrently mute sign of all my days. . . . It was the disconsolate cry I had heard from my own throat" (63). In so merging with his aunt, Kroetsch is made abject, existing liminally between self and other, since "the abject is in between the self and the other" (Oliver *Reading* 57).

Despite Kroetsch's postmodern denouncement of the tenability of autobiography, then, he nevertheless reveals much autobiographical material by telling his story through the mouths of others. Kroetsch not only becomes an abject other in such a process – wherein “I’ am in the process of becoming an other” (Kristeva *Powers* 3) – but he also *abjects* those he may be seen as autobiographically ventriloquizing. Specifically, he negates their own cultural and linguistic histories such that they become mere *tabulae rasae* for Kroetsch's narrative. In this chapter, I rely upon Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories to contemplate Kroetsch's use of prosopopoeia as a form of abject erasure and re-constitution of the autobiographical self as colonizing other.

Throughout *A Likely Story*, Robert Kroetsch adopts a postmodern view of the autobiographical self as unwritable. Indeed, the author's artistic commitment to the postmodern movement was so great that he became known as “the country's foremost and best-known practitioner of postmodernism” (Henry 289), a status that even earned him the nickname of “Mr. Canadian Postmodern” (Hutcheon *Canadian* 160). Kroetsch's view of autobiography as impossible is thus greatly informed by the postmodern notion that one cannot accurately tell one's own history. As such, Kroetsch's text both asserts and denies autobiography, offering personal stories while nevertheless maintaining that “this is (not) an autobiography” (217). As Paul Hjartarson contends, “*A Likely Story* . . . both invokes and frustrates our desire for conventional autobiography” (379). In doing so, Kroetsch appears to support Phillippe Lejeune's contention that, “In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing” (*Autobiography* 131-132). Indeed, though Kroetsch maintains that “it is not possible to write / an autobiography” (117) and “I do not believe the autobiographical is possible”

(60), the author nevertheless offers much autobiographical material in his text. For example, he describes his origins, saying, “I was born in Alberta in 1927” (65) to “a farming community . . . where I’d spent most of my childhood and youth” (28) – “200 miles north of the American border, in what is called Central Alberta. The town of Eastend” (77). He reminisces about his childhood there, “liv[ing] on a big farm that employed in those days a lot of hired help” (41), by whom “I was considered to be hopelessly spoiled and hopelessly lazy” (45). Through such personal revelations, Kroetsch offers much autobiographical material in a genre he otherwise considers unviable.

Consistent with suspicions of ‘truth’ advocated in the postmodern era, Kroetsch undermines traditional expectations of authenticity in autobiography. Conventionally, however, factual accuracy is considered the genre’s cornerstone, as Paul John Eakin explains in saying, “Telling the truth—this is surely the most familiar of the rules we associate with autobiographical discourse” (*Living* 34). Yet, Kroetsch upsets such an expectation, admitting to “hav[ing] grave doubts about the whole possibility of autobiography. We’re too busy lying to ever be autobiographical” (*Snowy* 67). Kristjana Gunnars notes Kroetsch’s tendency away from notions of ‘truth’ and toward embellishment and tall tales, something implied by the very title of Kroetsch’s autobiography: *A Likely Story*. As Gunnars writes, “there is an endless succession of stories that need to be told, never exhausted, and they are all, as Kroetsch admits, lies” (“Addiction” 63). In overtly undermining any expectation of authenticity in his text, Kroetsch subverts traditional expectations of ‘truth’ in autobiography by contending that his work is “just plain outright lies” (73).

Kroetsch also differentiates between memory, autobiography, and facticity, noting that “autobiography is not memory” (186). Specifically, he seems to concur with Judith Butler’s subsequent assertion that one can never accurately tell one’s own story, because the telling is, at best, a reconstruction of unreliable hindsight, of what Kroetsch considers “mere memory” (42). As Butler writes:

my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing,
even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling. My
account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I have no
definitive story. (“Giving” 27)

Kroetsch’s autobiography is, indeed, “haunted” by lapses in memory. For instance, when recalling a formative incident in his childhood, Kroetsch is disturbed by an inability to remember specific details about it. He writes, “I’m troubled that I cannot begin to guess how old I was” (41). He is similarly troubled about conflicting memories of a distinct boulder he encountered in the prairies, saying, “I remember exactly what it looked like, and yet it cannot possibly have looked the way I remember it” (49). During another formative incident, this time with “a huge métis by the name of Gabe” (25), Kroetsch again expresses concern over his unreliable memory. He says, “I cannot tell you his last name because I was sure I’d never forget it and didn’t write it down” (27). Rather than relying upon memory for his autobiography, then, Kroetsch may rather be seen as meditating upon the dubiousness of his own text.

So aware is Kroetsch of the gaps in his autobiographical memory that he even seems to mimic them in his form. For example, when attempting to tell a story from his childhood about a cow that became caught in quicksand, Kroetsch repeatedly breaks off

into other, seemingly unrelated stories. He writes, “Let me tell you a story. . . . But I was going to tell you a story, and perhaps I am telling you a story. . . . But I was going to tell you a story” (76-78). Kroetsch thus recreates in his writing a type of accuracy that is otherwise lacking – a specifics of forgetting.

Rather than merely depicting how and what has been forgotten from his past, however, Kroetsch reimagines and even embellishes lost periods, thus privileging literary merit over historical accuracy. Fact and fiction thus blur in his text, with Kroetsch noting that, in “claiming to remember, we discover the slippage that transforms memory into history and fiction alike” (82). He adds,

We are tempted to write a history, with all its claims to authenticity, to validation by research, to generalizations that assert themselves as truths. But against all that we know . . . the temptation to tell a story. We know the impulse to exaggerate. (70)

While conventional notions of autobiography assert facticity, Judith Butler contends that such an “impulse to exaggerate” – something that abounds in Kroetsch’s text – should be expected in autobiography. As Butler writes, “the constitutive identifications of an autobiographical narrative are always partially fabricated in the telling” (*Gender* 91). Such fabrication is apparent when Kroetsch repeatedly reconstructs or “lies” (73) about what cannot be precisely recalled. As Gunnars contends, “he knows . . . that his function in society is essential, for it is the writer who is called upon to ‘create worlds,’ as Kroetsch terms it, or to mythologize our existence” (“Addiction” 63). As an example, Kroetsch attempts to describe his first excursion to the Canadian north, a space that made a great impression upon the young writer, despite

seemingly important but nevertheless forgotten details. Kroetsch says, “I seem to have no recollections at all of my first arrival in the Northwest Territories” (21). Yet, he immediately contradicts himself by providing those purportedly lost recollections, saying, “What I do remember of my first arrival in the North is my first morning of work” (25). Kroetsch thus achieves autobiography through a kind of ‘artistic’ truth that allows him to express his history despite assertions that such an act is impossible, saying, “I have written my manifesto, after all” (64).

As though mirroring the fragmented memories and half-truths that comprise his autobiography, Kroetsch writes in a fragmented form inspired by the scrapbook. Eschewing traditional linear and cohesive ideas of autobiography, Kroetsch instead heralds an impressionistic, ruptured form of life narrative, saying:

scraps . . . have the paradoxical ability to become a book. . . . we take the scraps and make a book of our own. A scrapbook acknowledges its own limits. One cannot put a beach in a scrapbook, at best only pictures and accounts of a beach. (141)

In saying this, Kroetsch suggests that autobiography can only offer partial glimpses or “scraps” of the self, so much so that “we must learn to read the gaps, the silences . . . what if the scraps are the story?” (136) Kroetsch also argues that such a “scrapbook” approach leads to a more genuine account of the written self since, in upholding a sort of disorder or confusion, it allows for many interpretations, something that impedes the marginalizing effect of dominant metanarratives. He writes:

a scrapbook is made up of fragments . . . of scraps . . . collage has been a major technique in the art of the twentieth century. . . . in

keeping a scrapbook one faces first of all the matter of choice—what scraps to choose . . . our lives are often informed by small moments. . . . [people] want someone to make an informing narrative of the confusion . . . to put the fragments—the scraps—into order. . . . The great stories . . . we call the master narratives. (132–34)

Such “small moments” are evident not only in the short vignettes Kroetsch provides, but also in the many “scraps” or voices that comprise his autobiography, voices like that of Albert Johnson, Morag Gunn, Aunt Rose, and Rita Kleinhart. Indeed, such scraps are seemingly what make Kroetsch’s autobiography possible, since, “by borrowing fragments / of other lives I borrow an / autobiography of my / own” (118). Susanna Egan emphasizes the importance of such scraps in maintaining autobiographical multiplicity or heteroglossia. She writes:

the quilt is useful for discussion of [autobiographical] talk, because it evolves as continuous process . . . Quilting . . . is a traditionally female and frequently communal activity. It involves the patching together by hand of scraps of fabric, which form a new, variegated whole. Yet the individual scraps can still be identified . . . family scraps become memorability reworked . . . the work itself provides times and rhythms for gossip, storytelling and community business. . . . it contains . . . the voices of its many makers. (17)

Similarly, Catherine Bates conveys the importance of scraps – of otherwise forgotten or discarded aspects of self – in conceptualizing a heteroglossic identity. She says, “we can understand that rubbish – or abandoned or rejected matter – is part of our identity.

Our lives include the unordered and the left-behind” (“Messing” 10). Kroetsch seemingly concurs with such a view, saying:

the idea of scrap implies a larger whole, an organized universe, an explanatory mythology, from which the scrap has fallen away. . . . Our lives . . . often went unrecorded; they survived as a collection of photographs in a shoe box, a scattering of stories told around a kitchen table. They survived as a scrapbook. . . . Margaret Laurence . . . suggests that [such] discard and dirt might be as much inventions as is any vision of completeness. (136)

In adopting a view of autobiography as best told through scrapbook form, Kroetsch further undermines a conventional notion of the genre as cohesive, thus offering a view of the self as varied and heteroglossic.

Just as Kroetsch contends that autobiography is not a unified work but rather a collage of scraps, he similarly depicts the self as too multifaceted and changeable to be cohered in writing. For instance, in an interview with Robert Budde, Kroetsch attributes his mistrust in writing the self to the multifaceted nature of identity. He says:

Each of us is many voices. That’s why I distrust the authority of that lyric ‘I.’ Sort of forgoes one’s own multiplicity. So look for a way to let the multiplicity speak itself and then that has consequences. You lose a sense of centredness. (*Muddy* 124)

In saying this, Kroetsch expresses concern about the ability to comprehensively write the self – one’s “lyric ‘I’” – in all its many iterations. Kroetsch thus depicts autobiography as a reductive process, which “forgoes one’s own multiplicity.” Such a concern is

echoed in *A Likely Story*, when Kroetsch portrays his written self as threatened by his writing self, saying:

I woke with a start at the touch of a hand to my throat, and found the
hand was my own. We are never safe from ourselves, never. We stave
off that marauder, the marauder who writes the poem, by writing the
poem. (211)

Kroetsch describes the self here as many, as split between written and writing selves – as both “I” and as “the marauder who writes the poem”. Moreover, in characterizing the writing self as a type of “marauder,” Kroetsch not only suggests a haphazardness to writing, but also a violence, wherein “a hand to [the] throat” is threateningly placed upon the written self by the “marauder” writing self. Autobiographical subjectivity is thus not only multiplicitous for Kroetsch, but also predatory, wherein the writing self stifles the written one as though suggesting a restrictive, rather than an expressive, nature of autobiography.

Perhaps in an attempt to express the multiplicity of self, Kroetsch writes his autobiography by speaking not only about himself, but also about and through others – a form of prosopopoeia. Paul De Man explains prosopopoeia as a literary device through which an absent or voiceless person may speak through another, saying, “prosopopoeia [is] the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (926). While De Man explores language itself as vehicle for prosopopoeia in autobiography – “all [the] textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (922) – I argue that Kroetsch uses other people and characters – such as Morag Gunn, Albert

Johnson, Aunt Rose, and Rita Kleinhardt – as a means of exercising an autobiographical prosopopoeia. For example, Kroetsch uses *The Diviners'* Morag Gunn – a fictional author in Margaret Laurence's novel – to explain his own frustration with the pre-existing cultural and historical meaning of words, a socially constructive condition that overwhelms the author even before he begins to write. Kroetsch-as-Gunn thus complains about “the fullness of the [blank] page, its overflow, not its emptiness” (152). Similarly, Kroetsch uses the elusive Albert Johnson – a “silent trapper who refused to give so much as his name to his pursuers” (30) – to champion his own literary “will toward self-destruction” (31) in what may be deemed a Barthean “death of the author” (31). Specifically, Kroetsch heralds Johnson's silence as an expansive act that invites many interpretations of self by stating none in particular. One is thus not reduced to a singular story, but allowed to inhabit many stories – something reflected in Kroetsch's autobiographical penchant of “telling a story by having it unravel into stories” (32 – my emphasis). I thus argue that people and characters inhabiting Kroetsch's text come to express Kroetsch himself through prosopopoeia, such that, as the author writes, “Fictional characters allow / us to test ourselves—I am / tempted to say, *text our-* / selves” (114 – my emphasis).

Through – and ostensibly as – Rita Kleinhardt, Kroetsch explores the idea that one's history can be told from many perspectives, including the perspectives of others, an approach that Rita considers the “notion of collective biography” (173). As Rita explains, collective biography “take[s] a bundle of texts, a blather of lives, to blunder one poem out of one isolate and acquisitive poet” (209). The self is thus comprised of many, with “one isolate and acquitive poet” being informed by “a bundle of texts, a

blather of lives.” Kroetsch-as-Rita thus unsettles traditional notions of autobiography as “the story of one’s life written by himself” (Spender 115). Autobiography then surfaces as a potentially ethical space in which one makes room for the other and thus becomes more than oneself, as Butler contends in saying, “I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was” (*Giving* 27). Kroetsch admits difficulty in attempting an otherwise monoglossic approach – in expressing the self as merely “I” – saying, “I do get restless with the ‘I’ in so [much writing] and I am certainly resistant to the unified centre” (*Muddy* 124). As such, Kroetsch enacts prosopopoeia through both first-person and third-person narration, fluctuating between “she” and “I”, for example, when speaking as and for Rita in both subject and object positions.

In presenting the autobiographical self as multiplicitous, Kroetsch echoes Derrida’s sentiment that the self is too complex and manifold to ever be adequately expressed by autobiography. As Derrida writes:

how can an autobiographical writing, in the abyss of an unterminated self-analysis, give to a worldwide institution *its* birth? The birth of whom? of what? and how does the interruption or the limit of the self-analysis . . . reproduce its mark from then on never ceasing to make little ones, multiplying the progeniture with its cleavages, conflicts, divisions, alliances, marriages, and regroupings (*Post Card* 305 – emphasis original)

Kroetsch may thus be seen as giving Derridean “birth” (*Post Card* 305) to the self, “with its cleavages, conflicts, divisions, alliances, marriages, and regroupings” (*Post Card* 305), so much so that he becomes another. The idea of a cohesive autobiographical

subject is thereby undermined, with Kroetsch and others intertwining to the extent that even Kroetsch must ask, “Did [they] write these exquisite lines, or did I?” (185).

Kroetsch not only refuses to characterize the self as singular, but also does not privilege or legitimize any particular aspects of identity as ‘true.’ For example, when speaking about a childhood encounter with a cow, Kroetsch writes:

Part of me is persuaded that I actually saw the cow in the quicksand.

That part of me is still horrified at the sight of the cow . . . There is another part of me that suggests I never actually saw the cow. That part of me suggests that I and the other kids were [just] told the story. (79)

These two aspects of self differ greatly and seemingly exist independently.

Consequently, neither self emerges as ‘true’, thus asserting a postmodern idea of the self as many. As Rosalind Jennings contends:

Kroetsch adopts a postmodern skepticism about the ability ever to achieve a coherent and static subjectivity. He states that ‘It is not possible to write an autobiography’ since there is no ‘true’ self to discover. (23)

As such, Kroetsch depicts the self as many, as in the poem “Lonesome Writer Diptych.”

Here, two poems are written alongside one another, reflecting a young Kroetsch’s opposing views on the merits of language and silence. He writes:

Time to me was a sound.	As a child I memorized
I could hold it to my ear	the exquisite temptation
and count its passing. . . .	of silence.
The hands of a	

clock were called hands. (11)

The poem on the left engages with the use of language to articulate concepts, such as time – “the hands of a / clock were called hands” – while the poem on the right advocates “silence”. Both sides of the page represent different, simultaneously ‘true’ aspects of the writer. The idea of a cohesive autobiographical self is thus undermined, with identity perhaps fluctuating within the liminal space of the diptych’s hinge.

Kroetsch also posits language itself as a hindrance to autobiography, depicting words as inadequate to express the self. Though his autobiography is subtitled *The Writing Life*, the author is often left “wordless” (35). For example, he cannot find the right words to describe a schoolroom incident, such that, in trying to do so, he says, “I hear my language threatening to disintegrate” (42). Attempting to transform experience into words thus causes the author frequent pause, wherein, “my mind—my tongue—hesitates between the words” (95). This is because, for Kroetsch, language is seen through a postmodern lens as an unnatural, foreign system into which one is born and to which one must thus conform. For instance, when a young Kroetsch learns the words to express time – “the hands of a / clock were called hands / The face of a clock was / called a face” (111) – he conceives of language as a mere metaphor for concepts, which might thus be misconstrued. Specifically, the human attributes assigned to the concept of time – the “hands” and “face” of a clock – suggest a human intervention (language) that disrupts the concept of time. This is because time itself lacks hands or a face – human terms applied by human language, something that seemingly anthropomorphizes and thus colonizes an otherwise bodyless concept. The notion of time is thus made over by language as a type of palimpsest that obscures, rather than

illuminates. Consequently, while Kroetsch understands time as auditory – “time to me was a sound” (11) – he must abandon such an idea in favour of words that privilege a visual understanding, a clock with “hands” and “face”. As such, Kroetsch argues that “words are a lock, not a key” (197), seemingly confirming that a learned, pre-existing, external system or structure, such as language, eclipses rather than expresses one’s experience. In an interview with Kristjana Gunnars, Kroetsch goes on to say, “You have to take structures [such as language], but keep in mind that they are fictitious. That they aren’t in nature; that they are our inventions, and let us not be fooled by our inventions” (*Snowy* 65). In saying this, Kroetsch echoes Lacan’s sentiment that language is a socially constructive system of symbols into which one is born and to which one must conform. Lacan writes:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of man with a network so total that they join together those who are going to engender him . . . before he comes into the world; so total that they bring to his birth . . . the shape of his destiny; so total that they provide the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him. (“Mirror” 231)

Judith Butler explains this Lacanian notion of language as unnatural, restrictive, and socially constructive when saying, “Lacan claims that we can never tell the story of our origins, precisely because the language bars the speaking subject from the repressed libidinal origins of its speech” (*Gender* 91). As though supporting such a Lacanian view of language, Kroetsch is described as having “swallowed a dictionary” (50) at a young age. Certainly, this may only be a suggestion that the young Kroetsch had a large vocabulary. Yet, it also seems to infer that language was something thrust upon the

young Kroetsch. The author further depicts language as something imposed upon him in saying, “I am uncertain what my age was when I entered into the alphabet” (42).

Again, Kroetsch may only be referring to the age at which he learned the alphabet. Yet, the word “entered” here suggests a more Lacanian meaning, as when Kroetsch entered into the system of language or its Lacanian “symbolic order” (Lacan *Ecrits* 35).

Kroetsch’s encounter with a prairie boulder seems to support a Lacanian approach to the text. Kroetsch describes the boulder as something that defies description and categorization. He says, “You must abandon all your assumed notions about boulders. That rock was smooth without being shiny . . . no longer white, not yet red. . . . I might have risked the words *roseate*, *damask*” (49 – emphasis original). The “erratic” (49) boulder excites the young author with its ahistoricism and marginality, which seem to transcend language. Located “some distance off the prairie trail that wound across this land . . . It had been transported hundreds or even thousands of miles by glaciation, that boulder” (49). In thus pre-dating language, the boulder seemingly invites Kroetsch himself to escape language – to move beyond its limits. Kroetsch writes:

I became quite literally aroused at the sight of that rock. . . . I reached for universes of grass and stone. Not I—we—touched. We knew a rough and blind joining . . . We found our lovers’ talk and found, also, the limits of all words. (50 – emphasis original)

Kroetsch thus discovers a new language with the boulder – one that is beyond “the limits of all words” – in defiance of an inherited system of language that cannot adequately describe the boulder. Through the wordless boulder, Kroetsch learns to

“speak the unspeakable . . . I’m talking about our very unwillingness as well as our inability to speak the name of all that we are” (72). In experiencing such an inability to express oneself through words, Kroetsch depicts language as a foreign Lacanian system that can never adequately articulate the self.

Kroetsch again conveys the limits of language when attempting to describe the taste of homemade wine. Differing from store-bought wine – which “was usually sweet” (92) and which one “drank in the house” (92) – homemade wine had a “kick” (93) and was drunk “in the barn” (93). The store-bought wine is thus genteel and pleasing, something of the centre that may be drunk openly, even in domestic spaces. The homemade wine, by contrast, is unrefined and coarse, situated marginally in being drunk alongside livestock. The barn wine is seemingly used by Kroetsch to express a deficiency in language to express the marginal, something previously symbolized by the boulder. He writes:

The wine in the barn, unlike the same wine in the house, was expected to have a kick. Kick, I have since learned, is not generally thought of as a key word in the vintner’s lexicon. . . . [They] used other words.

Erotic words that had to do with leg and nose. Kick was

unambiguously a word from the margin and for the margin. (93)

In saying this, Kroetsch expresses the inadequacy of language to convey one’s experience. Unlike the “sweet” (92) wine of the house, the homemade barn wine defies words, conjuring instead a kind of bodily response – a “kick” instead of “erotic words” – such that, “When you knocked back your glass of wine in the barn you made a face, and then you made a noise that was free of the usual signifying phonemes” (92). The

margin – the barn wine – thus comes to represent a great many things that cannot, for Kroetsch, be captured by language. They can seemingly only be expressed by instinctive bodily “noises”. Kroetsch seems to confirm such an interpretation of the barn wine in saying that it “taught something about the limits of language. I was being taught something about the dangers and the pleasures of the margin” (93). It is seemingly because of such linguistic limits that he writes:

There was for me, at one
time, literally no way in
which I could imagine
Alberta was the stuff of a
novel . . .
The promise of moun-
tains
glaciers. (119)

Here, it may be said that Kroetsch is only suggesting that his childhood province would not make a good subject for a novel. Yet, it also may be argued that Kroetsch is depicting language as insufficient to describe what seems to exceed words, such as the boulder and the barn wine – “The promise of moun- / tains . . . / glaciers” (119). Consequently, Kroetsch’s disbelief in autobiography seems based upon a mistrust of language as an adequate means through which to articulate the self.

To demonstrate “the limits of all words” (50), Kroetsch attempts to describe the otherwise indescribable grief of his sister’s death. Kroetsch says, “when I realized my sister would not live through the day. I could only handle the realization by writing. I

was losing it" (157). Undoubtedly, the author was "losing" himself emotionally. Yet, the poem also suggests that Kroetsch was "losing" language, something incapable of expressing his pain. Moving away from the prose of the autobiography at this point, Kroetsch's poem represents a notable change in style. Words are squeezed into tight couplets of gnarled syntax, seemingly representative of the author's anguish. Non-sensical imagery and words reflect a world turned upside down, where "timers hold eggs inside their mouths" (158), God becomes "glod" (159), and things are no longer "glikely" (159) or in "agreement" (160). Unable to find words to express the pain of grief, Kroetsch creates the words needed, inventing "disagruntle" (160) and "wrecktitude" (164), which may be a noun suggesting the finite wreckage of death. Thus, as his sister's life destabilizes, Kroetsch's language similarly destabilizes in a seeming failure to express the experience. Writing, then, is an uncertain art for Kroetsch, where:

every poem, one might say, is a failed translation, an accidental
impostor manu-fractured by the incompetence of a weak-eyed
translator sweating in the light of a lantern whose wick is badly in need
of a trimming. (199-200)

For Kroetsch, then, language is unable to express the entirety of one's experience – it is an "impostor", subject to breaking down in its failure to fully articulate the self.

Not only does Kroetsch suggest that language is inadequate to express the self, but also that it is too socially constructive. Specifically, Kroetsch depicts language as always already infused with meaning that perhaps works against the intent of the writer. For example, it is seemingly just such a pre-determination in language that has

Kroetsch write a poem about a samurai when he “wanted to write a manifesto” (55). Lacan explains such a phenomenon in describing language as having its own independent, signifying itinerary. Lacan writes, “[language’s] symbolic order . . . is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the major determination the subject receives for the itinerary of a signifier” (*Ecrits* 7). Lacan goes on to say that language thus constructs the author, arguing that, “Man speaks . . . but it is because the symbol has made him man . . . [it] superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature” (*Ecrits* 65-66). In other words, one does not create *in* language, but is created *by* language. Thus obliged to work within a construct (language) that can never adequately express the self, Kroetsch is frustrated when language commandeers his intent. He writes:

One of the poems I wrote was about a Japanese samurai. . . . I was troubled by that poem. . . . I was troubled. I was troubled because the poem had not let me write the poem I wanted to write. . . . You see, I did not want to write a poem about a Japanese samurai. To be, briefly, frank, I’m not quite sure I know what a Japanese samurai is. . . . I had written a poem, a pretty fair poem . . . yet I was horrified, thunderstruck—because the poem contained a variety of elements that violated my every intention as a poet. . . . Somewhere in what I so admired and loved—somewhere in the generosity of literature—was a tyranny that was making me write a poem that I did not want to write. (53)

Seemingly because of “the constitutive order of the symbolic” (Lacan *Ecrits* 31) here, Kroetsch is unavoidably shaped by language, such that “I was being forced by the shape of the poem, even by the language, to say things I did not want to say” (54). Kroetsch suggests a violence to such linguistic construction, saying it “violated my every intention as a poet . . . somewhere in the generosity of literature—was a tyranny that was making me write a poem that I did not want to write.” Gunnars concurs with the idea that Kroetsch depicts language as a socially constructive system, saying:

In his essay, ‘I Wanted to Write a Manifesto,’ Kroetsch makes a case . . . which is that language comes before writing. The writer is drawn into the act of textual practice by the force of language, and cannot not do so. . . . Repeatedly in the nine essays that comprise *A Likely Story*, Kroetsch positions the writer as somehow powerless before his task. . . . The loss he is speaking of is that which slips between the reach and the achievement, the desire and the fulfillment. The accomplishment can never be reached, which is what makes writing a hopeless grief. (“Addiction” 62)

In depicting language as a socially constructive system, Kroetsch suggests a view of autobiography in the postmodern era as restricted by the very words used to write it.

Kroetsch’s notion that language is both constructive and inadequate is evident when he recalls a boyhood trip to church. In this seminal scene, Kroetsch no longer merely questions, but entirely loses faith in language. In regularly attending church and witnessing the community priest transform well water into holy water using only words, the young Kroetsch comes to believe that language has transformative powers. He

says, “I had learned that holy water was well water that had been transformed by a ritual blessing. It had been transformed by the priest’s words. Words were all the priest had to work with” (47). The seeming transformative power of language has a significant impact upon the young writer, conveying to him that “the power of language . . . is life granting” (55). Every Sunday at church, the young Kroetsch reaches into a bowl of holy water to cross himself with it, touching the sacred liquid that has been consecrated by words. On a particularly frigid winter Sunday, however, he reaches into the bowl only to find ice, a revelatory moment demonstrating that language has, in fact, transformed nothing. Kroetsch writes:

On the particular morning . . . the church was bitterly cold. . . . I . . .
reached up to dip my fingers in the holy water. . . . Or rather—I tried to
dip my fingers into the holy water. . . . To my utter astonishment, the holy
water was frozen. In that instant . . . I was launched into a crisis of belief
from which I have probably never recovered. . . . I discovered that
betrayal is at the heart of language. In that terrible instant . . . I realized
that the priest’s blessing, Father Martin’s words . . . had not rescued
ordinary water from its ordinariness. (57-59)

Kroetsch seemingly uses this scene to dramatize his despondency upon concluding that language cannot achieve the extraordinary, that it cannot ‘rescue the ordinary from its ordinariness’. It is a significant moment of loss – a “terrible instant” – for the writer, who, in “utter astonishment,” is consequently “launched into a crisis of disbelief from which I have probably never recovered.” With language thus revealed as incapable of elevating

something as ordinary as water to something “holy”, the author ever after questions his own literary vocation. He writes:

When I set out to write a story or a poem . . . I approach again . . . the
Wanda church. I am that small boy . . . I reach one hand over my head,
beyond my line of vision, toward the water in the font—toward that open
mouth of water. . . . I assure myself . . . this time, I say . . . surely this time
. . . at least this one time . . . Blindly, I trust. I reach. And again I am
surprised . . . I am surprised into the impossibility of words. (64)

In saying this, Kroetsch intimates his motivation for writing an autobiography while also maintaining that “it is not possible to write / an autobiography” (117). Specifically, he equates his adult writing self with his trusting and hopeful younger self, saying, “I am that small boy”, marveling at the phenomenal potential of words just as his young self marveled at its effect upon ‘holy’ water. Though the adult Kroetsch has come to believe that “betrayal is at the heart of language” (58), he nevertheless seemingly remains hopeful of its transformative power, “assur[ing] myself . . . this time, I say . . . surely this time . . . at least this one time . . . Blindly, I trust. I reach. And again I am surprised . . . I am surprised into the impossibility of words” (64). Consequently, Kroetsch may be seen as attempting to express himself through a means he lost faith in.

For Kroetsch, it is not only the socially constructive nature of language, but also of social conditioning that makes autobiography impossible. Specifically, Kroetsch contends that one is so shaped by social forces as to be unable to tell one’s own story with any degree of autonomy. Mirroring Butler’s assertion that “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence” (*Giving* 7), Kroetsch says,

“the stories one tells are not ever and cannot be one’s own” (23). He goes on to explain that “the writer is part of an apparatus that produces the texts that society and culture require in order to be society and culture” (151). Linda Alcoff explains such a view in saying that personal identity is not an independent process, but a communal one, wherein the self is highly shaped by the metanarratives and norms of one’s social world. She writes:

[Identities] are both imposed and self-made, produced through the interplay of names and social roles foisted on us by dominant narratives together with the particular choices families, communities, and individuals make over how to interpret, and resist, those impositions as well as how to grapple with their real historical experiences. (3)

Such an idea of the socially-constructed self is illuminated by Kroetsch in a scene where he encounters an old labourer who used to work on his father’s farm. The labourer had considered the young Kroetsch “to be hopelessly spoiled and hopelessly lazy” (45).

The worker says to a now-grown and established Kroetsch:

‘You were,’ he said, in a voice that still harboured a trace of loathing, ‘the most spoiled brat I ever saw in my whole life.’ His expression ‘my whole life’ had a finality about it that humbled me. (56)

No longer that “spoiled brat”, Kroetsch nevertheless continues to be defined and *confined* by such a characterization, since it “humbled” (56) him. Kroetsch attempts to work against this social construction, asserting himself now as a thoughtful man and successful author by treating the man to drinks and mentioning his own literary success. But, the old man will not accept a revised idea of Kroetsch, who writes, “I paid for more

beer . . . He couldn't believe that just that morning I'd received my first acceptance, ever, for a piece of my writing" (56). In other words, Kroetsch cannot convince the old man that he is not a "spoiled brat" anymore. He thus depicts the self as unable to overcome social conditioning, saying, "that ragged old man . . . wouldn't let me change my story" (56). For Kroetsch, then, it is not only literary, but also social construction that frustrates autobiographical acts.

Kroetsch maintains that it is not only people who are constructed by other people, however, but that texts are constructed by other texts, an idea that further undermines the plausibility of autobiographical authenticity. In this sense, Kroetsch suggests that originality in literature is impossible, since texts are always already influenced by previous texts. Rather than beginning a work with a blank page, then, Kroetsch contends that the page is already full of previous stories one (un)knowingly draws upon. The author writes:

we are marginalized by the unspeakably full page of our knowing.

History. Literature. America. Britain. Europe. The page announces
itself as jam-packed, unalterably full; that is one of the strategies of the
full page. (95)

In saying this, Kroetsch suggests that even a blank page is inevitably "full" of the culture that precedes and surrounds it, in much the same way as Roland Barthes contends that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (*Image* 148). J. Hillis Miller explains the idea of texts endlessly receding into and building upon one another, saying:

[A] previous text is both the ground of the new one and something [a] new poem must annihilate by incorporating it, turning it into ghostly insubstantiality, so that it may perform its possible-impossible task of becoming its own ground. The new poem both needs the old texts and must destroy them. It is both parasitical on them, feeding ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it is the sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home . . . Each previous link in the chain, in its turn, played the same role, as host and parasite, in relation to its predecessors. From the Old to the New Testament, from Ezekiel to Revelation, to Dante, to Ariosto and Spenser, to Milton, to Rousseau, to Wordsworth and Coleridge. (446-7)

Consequently, just as language may be considered a pre-existing Lacanian system into which the self must conform, texts also may be seen as “constructed” by or born from pre-existing texts, thus becoming “hosts” and “parasites” to one another. Kroetsch seemingly elaborates upon the idea of such intertextual influence in saying, “to announce one’s intention to write a novel is to announce one’s intention to write what is already written. The chances of being original are less than slim” (151). As such, Kroetsch further undermines any notion of authenticity in autobiography, since texts are posited as unavoidably influenced by preceding texts.

Kroetsch overtly contemplates intertextual influence in his autobiography when writing about *The Diviners*. Here, Kroetsch focuses upon the scene where Morag Gunn’s daughter, Pique, leaves a note in her mother’s typewriter to tell her she has left home. Kroetsch uses this scene to dispel the notion of authorial originality and “the

conviction that the author begins from a blank sheet of paper . . . Making something out of nothing” (149). Rather, Kroetsch argues that “it is the fullness of the page, its overflow, not its emptiness, that enables [an author] to write” (152). Specifically, Kroetsch positions Pique’s note as a Millerian “host” to Morag’s future text, as “parasite.” He writes, “Pique . . . invokes in her own writing the colonialization paradigm implicit in the notion of canonical writing” (155). Pique’s note is thus a part of textual history from which Morag’s own writing cannot help but emerge. Kroetsch writes:

Morag Gunn, sitting down at her typewriter—sitting down to begin—
finds she has already begun . . . the first page of her narrative is written
. . . In structuralist terms, she is confronted by . . . an unexpected
disordering of authorial control. (149)

Kroetsch thus interprets Pique as a constructive cultural force for Morag. Her note tells Morag “do not get all uptight . . . [thus] constructing the person to whom she writes” (150). Morag, in turn, is depicted as almost powerless against Pique’s socially constructive authority. As Kroetsch writes, “not only [has Morag] begun. She has been begun. She has been positioned. Contrary to the assumption of authorial freedom, she has been left with almost nowhere to turn” (149). Not only is Kroetsch conducting a Millerian analysis of Pique’s note as “host” to Morag’s “parasite,” he is also simultaneously positioning *The Diviners* as “host” to his own autobiography’s “parasite.” Specifically, Kroetsch uses Laurence’s novel to intertextually express scepticism about the authorial originality in his own writing, something that leads him to question, “Did the author write the text or did the text write the author?” (16) Through his interpretation of Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, Kroetsch contemplates a postmodern belief that

texts are highly constructed by other texts, further troubling the idea of autobiographical authenticity.

Kroetsch's reliance upon postmodern skepticism in his autobiography may be seen as situating the autobiographical self as abject. Specifically, Julia Kristeva describes abjection as feeling "apprehensive . . . sickened . . . shameful . . . condemned . . . repuls[ed] . . . twisted" (*Powers* 1). Kroetsch expresses just such abjection in his postmodern view of writing, with its mistrust of 'truths', cohesion, and even of language itself. Indeed, Kroetsch describes a feeling of abjection toward writing in saying:

We live with this *unease* about what we've [written], yet we do it. There is a sense of *danger* about it all . . . One likes to be a poet in the face of all the *embarrassment* and *impossibilities*. The utter *absurdity*" (Kroetsch *Snowy* 58-9 – my emphasis)

He adds that "Poetry is excrement. It is marginally useful as fertilizer. In using it as fertilizer we run the risk of transmitting a variety of venereal diseases" (209). Such imagery is abject – it is "waste" (Kristeva *Powers* 3, 16), "defilement and pollution" (Kristeva *Powers* 17), "a piece of filth, waste, or dung. . . . repugnance . . . sewage, and muck" (Kristeva *Powers* 2).

Such abjection is only amplified through Kroetsch's reliance upon prosopopoeia to express the self – upon regularly depositing the self and speaking through another. Kroetsch thus becomes abject in speaking through such people and characters as Morag Gunn, Albert Johnson, Aunt Rose, and Rita Kleinhart, since "the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva *Powers* 1 – emphasis original). Specifically, he may be seen as abjectly surrendering his own "I" in order to

assume that of another. Kroetsch himself seems to admit such autobiographical abjection when considering himself as having become monstrous in the “labyrinth” (118) of autobiography. He writes:

[in] an
autobiography of my
own. I . . .
discover that I have once
again made a turn in the
labyrinth and met the
monster with the body of
a human and the head of
a bull. (118)

Because Kroetsch is the creator of his ‘labyrinthine’ autobiography, he may be seen as the very monster within it – the self confronted autobiographically as abject other.

Kroetsch appears to be abjectly transformed by autobiography from the start of the text. In the first chapter, for instance, the narration moves from the first to the third person pronoun, from “I” to “He”, in the chapter’s title: “Why / Went Up North and What / Found When *He* Got There” (13 – my emphasis). Certainly, it may be said that the “He” of the title refers to “a huge métis by the name of Gabe” (25) who makes a large impression upon the young Kroetsch up north. However, Kroetsch undergoes considerable transformation up north, saying, “[in] the North . . . I was become the possibility of the us that is in me” (35). Consequently, it is not implausible to think that the “He” of the

chapter's title refers to Kroetsch himself as a transformed other. Such depersonalization is further evidence of abjection, something Kristeva considers:

uncanny strangeness . . . initially it is a shock, something unusual, astonishment . . . uncanniness maintains that shred of unease that leads the self . . . toward depersonalization. (*Strangers* 188)

Kristeva elaborates upon the self as abject other in describing it as:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate . . . Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. (*Powers* 2)

In referring to himself variously as “I,” “he,” “us,” and even as “she” when writing as other characters, Kroetsch may be seen as undergoing an abject “*destruction of the self*” (Kristeva *Strangers* 188 – emphasis original) through autobiography.

Kroetsch's autobiography as a process of abjection or self-erasure is perhaps most evident when Kroetsch describes his text as an “attempt to write an autobiography / in which I do not appear” (7). In saying this, Kroetsch not only indicates an attempt to pen an unconventional autobiography, but also a self made abject other through autobiography. Moreover, to amplify such abjection, he is quoting here a character from another of his texts. It is Kroetsch's “double” (213) – Rita Kleinhart, from Kroetsch's preceding text, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* – who makes the statement. Consequently, Kroetsch may be seen as so distanced from his own autobiography as to be twice removed from it. Kroetsch is thus seemingly ‘doubled’ over in abjection, since “the time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment

when revelation bursts forth” (Kristeva *Powers* 8). The idea of Kroetsch as abject only intensifies as he moves from such doubleness to disappearance, saying, “I disappear” (118) in autobiography. He is thus abject, positioned “on the edge of non-existence . . . [which] if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (2). Admittedly, Kroetsch’s work is one of “self-erasure and self-mockery” (Kroetsch *Likely* 42) – what Thomas Wharton describes as “his writerly strategies of deferral and self-erasure” (4). It may thus be seen as abject, since, as Kristeva writes, “there looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being . . . sickened, it rejects” (*Powers* 1).

Kroetsch’s seeming attempt at abject self-erasure is apparent even on the cover of his autobiography, which displays an unfocused picture of a prairie boy (ostensibly Kroetsch), who is further obscured by faint handwriting that runs overtop both him and the page. The word “not” is written across the boy’s already indistinct face, as though de-emphasizing the author’s role in his own autobiography. As Jennings writes:

In . . . *A Likely Story* . . . [Kroetsch] states . . . that his aim is to ‘attempt . . . to write an autobiography in which I do not appear’. This wish to subvert the traditions of subjective self creation is announced on the front cover of the work and is repeated throughout the collection. . . . Both language and image fail to clearly signify the self. . . . in an apparent assertion of self-negation. (21-22)

The very artwork gracing Kroetsch’s text thus suggests that the written self is abject, wherein the author negates himself from his own autobiography, such that, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva *Powers* 3 – emphasis original). The cover artwork further

implies that it is not just the socially constructive nature of language that obscures or abjects the author – something suggested by the word “not” running across the boy’s face on the cover – but also the artistry of writing itself. Specifically, most chapters in Kroetsch’s text do not conform with traditional autobiographical accountings of a life, wherein “the avowed plan of autobiography . . . is simply to retrace the history of a life” (Olney *Autobiography* 39-40). Rather, Kroetsch’s autobiography emphasizes the art of putting one’s life into words – “the writing life, not with the personal life, of the writer” (Kroetsch 217). Kroetsch’s work thus concentrates not only upon the self – again, something suggested by the word “not” running across the boy on the text’s cover – but on the art of writing the self, wherein one is at the mercy of words that run over and obscure the self. Such a focus upon language in Kroetsch’s autobiography leads Smith and Watson to contend that the text is “characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author’s standing as a professional writer with the work’s status as an aesthetic object” (Smith and Watson 4). So abject is Kroetsch’s written self that even his cover image is hazy and obscured by words of negation.

In largely focusing upon the role and art of language in autobiography – rather than upon the self – Kroetsch may be seen as abjectly deposing the self. For instance, he describes his work as that of “doubtful authorship” (74). Certainly, Kroetsch may merely be undermining the quality of his work in saying this. However, such a characterization suggests one who is made abjectly strange or other to oneself in autobiography. Indeed, Kroetsch both asserts and denies his autobiographical self, presenting an uncertain blend of writing and written selves in what Kristeva might

characterize as abjectly “braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux mark[ing] out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me” (10). Kroetsch’s contemplation of “playing dead” (97) is instructive here. The term refers to a writing strategy of Rudy Wiebe, in which there is:

a willingness to acknowledge the withheld, the unknown, the disguised, the lie. Wiebe confronts the indecipherable text. . . . He writes his marginalia, and that marginalia tells us of the secret. It does not tell us what the secret is. It tells us of the presence of the secret. (104)

Kroetsch too seemingly writes from the margins of self, depicting autobiographical stories in an attempt at “speaking the unspeakable” (72) only to later assert that they’re “just plain outright lies” (73) complicated by “the impossibility of words” (64). As such, Kroetsch seems to continually undermine the autobiographical self he depicts.

An example of Kroetsch’s “play[ing] dead” in autobiography is when he describes one of his childhood heroes, “Albert Johnson—the MacKenzie River delta trapper who played dead by not ever revealing his name or his past or his intentions” (101). In so refusing to self-identify, Johnson escapes restrictive categorizations that would otherwise negate the idea of self as multiple. Specifically, he will not reduce himself to a name. There is, consequently, no singular story about him, but many:

some say he wasn’t a bit insane . . . some say he thought he was shooting [someone] robbing his trapline . . . some say the police shot an unidentified man and called him Johnson just to make the case look good . . . some say . . . Johnson quietly disappeared. (31-32)

Without a name to contain him, Johnson becomes multiplicitous, “unravel[ing] into stories” (32) such that, “he became the words he would not speak, the story he would not tell. . . . Where is the center? Where is the margin” (101-2). Thus de-centred, Johnson comes to represent what Kristeva considers the indistinct abject:

I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container . . . I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy.’ The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy. (*Strangers* 187)

Kroetsch becomes similarly abject in his autobiography, saying in it, “I disappear” (118). Such a dissolution of the autobiographical self is further evident when Kroetsch writes that “Albert Johnson was both story and artist for me . . . he wore the silence of the artist like a badge, an indication of his will toward self-destruction” (31). A penchant toward such autobiographical “self-destruction” suggests a self made abject in Kroetsch’s text, as one “on the edge of non-existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 2).

Kroetsch’s seeming dissolution of the self suggests a type of abject death inherent in autobiography. Indeed, Susanna Egan maintains that “life writing [i]s a death sentence” (12) in its inability to comprehensively express the self. Kristeva seemingly concurs with the correlation between abject death and literature, noting “this interdependence among . . . *death, language*” (*Revolution* 131 – emphasis original), adding that “language . . . is at the service of the death drive” (*Revolution* 70). To this, she adds that “one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its

only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature” (*Powers* 5). From the perspective of writing as always already abject, Kroetsch’s seeming erasure of the autobiographical self – as signified by such characters as Albert Johnson – may be seen as a kind of unavoidable death of self. As Kristeva writes:

‘art’ takes on murder and moves through it. It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes ‘art.’ In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such a practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death. (*Revolution* 70-71)

Such abjection is seemingly what motivates Kroetsch to characterize ‘the writing life’ as morbid: “this morbidity we call literature” (209). More importantly, perhaps, is the impression that Kroetsch goes so far as to desire such abjection in his writing. Specifically, just as “abjection . . . does not have, properly speaking, a definable object” (Kristeva *Powers* 1) in being a place “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva *Powers* 2), Kroetsch attempts in his autobiography to “speak the unspeakable” (72). He describes such a desire in saying:

It’s the unspeakable. If we’re talking around anything, I don’t like to name it, and I suppose it’s the unnameable or the unspeakable. . . . the unknowable. What’s knowable is already boring in a certain way. We want to go to that edge, where something is still unknown. And we’re still full of surprises, discoveries, impossibilities, and contradictions.

The material hasn't been coopted into any kind of system yet. I'm very wary of explanations. (*Snowy* 56)

In wishing to “go to that edge” in his writing, Kroetsch may be seen not only as “playing dead” (97) in writing an autobiography he claims is not an autobiography, but also as abjectly entertaining a type of literary death therein, saying of writing, “perhaps it is always a concern with death” (103).

Kroetsch seemingly attempts to create an abject blank space – “this hollow, this void, this ‘minus 1’” (Kristeva *Psychoanalysis* 82) – upon which to inscribe the self anew, free of any predetermining cultural encumbrances. Such a blank space is, for Kroetsch, symbolized by the “*untold*” (26 – emphasis original), “silent” (28) North, a space he deems free from predetermining cultural or linguistic constructions that would otherwise influence one's writings and one's potential – a problematic view of the north considering its long indigenous history. Nevertheless, Kroetsch writes of his (albeit negligent) interpretation of the north:

To write is, in some metaphoric sense, to go North. . . . One goes North at that very point on the page where the word is in the process of extending itself onto the blankness of the page. Whatever inscription might exist behind the point of the pen, there can only be blankness ahead. (14)

The north thus represents not so much a place for Kroetsch, then, as an abject absence. Kroetsch writes:

I realized I had not two *pages* to write upon but rather two *margins* to write in. I could write alongside, with and against, the blackly printed

page of our inheritance. I could write alongside, with and against, the unspeakable white glare of what I call, metonymically, North. (96 – emphasis original)

The “unspeakable white glare” of Kroetsch’s North – again, something problematized and perhaps made even more abject by the author’s erasure of the area’s rich indigenous history – becomes an abject, limitless space, wherein “the abject [is] . . . in short, a *land of oblivion* (Kristeva *Powers* 8 – emphasis original). The idea of north as abject seems confirmed when Kroetsch describes it as “stumbl[ing] over the edge of the known” (14), just as abjection is that which is “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva *Powers* 1). As such, the North is uninscribed, uninhibited, and therefore an unobstructed space for Kroetsch’s writing, with the “North [offering] the silence that would let me tell stories of my own” (23). Yet, in such an abject space of “blankness” (14), Kroetsch may be seen as abjectly disintegrating there, in “the disintegrative word” (26) of the north, without an acknowledged history or language to ground him. He writes:

the North makes possible a new story. . . . not through the encounter with the self . . . but rather through the astonishing encounter with an Other that eradicates self into all its disparate potential. (35)

In overlooking the rich indigenous cultural heritage of the North, Kroetsch transforms it into a hollow space in which the self becomes other – a space that abjectly “eradicates self” – just as abjection is “the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death” (Kristeva *Powers* 3). Kroetsch may thus be seen as not only becoming abject

within autobiography, but also as seeking an abject space in which to write it, a space *made* abject by his reductive depiction of it.

Kroetsch's silent and demented Aunt Rose serves a similar function for Kroetsch as his vacuous idea of the north. Like the north, Aunt Rose is stripped of her past history and identity by Kroetsch, thus seemingly re-purposed as a *tabula rasa* through which the author might tell his own story through a type of predatory ventriloquism. Specifically, Aunt Rose's vulnerable state of speechlessness is seemingly taken advantage of by an opportunistic Kroetsch, such that his aunt becomes a mere vessel for the author's own words. Kroetsch writes, "it was only I who could speak; she could not say a word in return" (63). The author thus exhibits problematic colonizing and predatory tones in using his Aunt Rose as a kind of blank page upon which to inscribe himself. He writes:

Aunt Rose opened her mouth. . . . She opened her mouth, but she did not make the slightest sound. . . . I had traveled to her bedside to recover my own history. . . . I realize I had been given my own history. Aunt Rose's mouth was a nest. . . . It was the possible sign of nothing. It contained and offered the shape of all nothingness. . . . It was the disconsolate cry I had heard from my own throat. . . . she gave me the open flower of her mouth. . . . The spittle on the gray lips of Aunt Rose's mouth was . . . as sweet as water. (63-4)

Aunt Rose is thus made an abject, limitless other, offering not an inherited "history" that would further inform the autobiographical Kroetsch, but posited merely as an appropriated vessel through which the author might assert his own identity. She is

thereby reduced to an abject “nothingness” upon which to devise “my own history”.

Kroetsch thus exploits his aunt as a type of incubator or “nest”, drawing sustenance from her in an act akin to rape, wherein he consumes the “sweet . . . water” of her vulnerable “open flower”.

Kroetsch also engages in such prosopopoeia with the character of Rita K., something that again depicts the author as abject other. Rita is a doppelganger for him – Kroetsch’s “double” (213) – something the author confirms in saying “[she] is a certain part of myself obviously” (*Muddy* 124). In being “a snoop and a thief, a voyeur, a strange bird, and, as some of her farther neighbours put it, a nut case” (175), Rita may be considered abject. Even her preoccupations are abject, being “fascinated by prairie cemeteries . . . peeling white paint, the smell of rotting wood, the worn pathways of ants” (175), just as the abject is concerned with “body fluids . . . defilement . . . shit” (Kristeva *Powers* 3). It is the abject Rita who invites Kroetsch to re-assess language and thus become abject himself, through writing. Specifically, Kroetsch notes, “[Rita] tells us there is another possibility in language” (206) – a possibility to abjectly disappear – just as “she disappeared into art” (204) and would “deny her own signature” (194). In writing as the elusive Rita, Kroetsch not only becomes an abject other, but an abject *feminine* other, a considerable transformation considering that “Kroetsch’s . . . worlds are irretrievably patriarchal ones that reinscribe, and perhaps even nostalgically celebrate, the binary differences on which male privilege is founded” (Cumming 3). Such a transition from male self to female other may be seen as an abject inversion of self – a turning inside out – since Kroetsch considers “external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the

vagina: internal, eternal” (Kroetsch “Fear” 47). Such an inversion of self, with the internal ‘feminine’ made external, may be seen as abject, since, “it is the very crisis of the internal rendering itself external that defines abjection” (Park 135). Kroetsch thus abjectly empties or erases himself, symbolically turning “north”, in becoming radically feminine as Rita. For instance, when speaking of his encounter with Rita, Kroetsch says, “I cried and cried until I had cried out my life. After that I was empty enough to be a writer” (201). He thus experiences an abject “*destruction of the self*” (Kristeva *Strangers* 188 – emphasis in original) and its “violent, dark revolts of being” (Kristeva *Powers* 1) in speaking autobiographically through Rita, who facilitates his authorial disappearance.

Amid ambiguous postmodern suggestions that “this is (not) an autobiography” (217), Robert Kroetsch’s *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* invites a view of the autobiographical self as abject. Eschewing traditional notions of autobiography as a story about oneself (Olney 115), Kroetsch instead negates the self – he “disappear[s]” (118) in a seeming “*destruction of the self*” (Kristeva *Strangers* 188 – emphasis original) – becoming other in his autobiography, something particularly evident when speaking through such people and characters as Albert Johnson, Morag Gunn, his Aunt Rose, and Rita Kleinhart. Through such prosopopoeia, Kroetsch not only *becomes* an abject other – wherein “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other” (Kristeva *Powers* 3) – but he also *abjects* others, problematically transforming them into seeming palimpsests upon which to inscribe his own story through a type of colonizing ventriloquism. Of my chosen texts, *A Likely Story* most explicitly contemplates the postmodern idea that, since language inhibits self-representation, “it is not possible to write / an

autobiography" (Kroetsch 117), an assertion nevertheless undermined by Kroetsch's expression of the written self through others.

Chapter VI: An Inherited Self: The Self as Family in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*

This chapter focuses on Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (originally published in 1982), wherein personal identity is depicted as so highly constructed by culture and by family as to seemingly evade representation. Indeed, the author expresses great postmodern doubt in the ability to express oneself through language, saying, "I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about words" (Ondaatje 152). More importantly, in saying that he is "writing this book about *you*" rather than "*me*", Ondaatje upsets the traditional premise that autobiography will focus upon its author – that it will be "the story of one's life written by himself" (Olney *Autobiography* 115). Specifically, in autobiographically chronicling the journey to his childhood home of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) to rediscover his storied family history there – "a childhood I had ignored and not understood" (16) – Ondaatje relies heavily upon family members for textual content. This results in a type of co-authorship with family – something Ondaatje deems "a communal act" (175) – that comprises so much of the text that "the reader actually learns less about the author than about certain family members" (Matthews 357). In being so displaced in a genre that typically emphasizes the author, Ondaatje is seemingly made 'other' in his text, something reminiscent of what Julia Kristeva considers the "*abject* . . . the jettisoned object . . . radically excluded" (*Powers* 2 – emphasis original). In so surrendering his autobiography to others, Ondaatje suggests not only a surrendering of authorial control, but also a highly constructed, polyphonic view of the self, where "the 'I' has no story of its own" (Butler

Giving 8), thus becoming “this [abject] hollow, this void, this ‘minus 1’” (Kristeva “Polis” 82). In this chapter, I work through Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories to illuminate how Ondaatje’s autobiographical subject focuses so outwardly on family members as to seemingly be deposed or abjected in a genre that typically emphasizes the self.

In largely focusing upon others rather than upon the self, Ondaatje upsets traditional notions of autobiography by writing a postmodern work that often reads more like a biography. As Smaro Kamboureli contends,

Running in the Family is a postmodern text . . . because it whimsically insists on inhabiting the terrain of autobiography while at the same time displaying its energy as a text that wants to be ‘other’ of what it declares to be. (81)

To this, William Verhoeven adds that “*Running in the Family* . . . ultimately makes no pretense at being either a straightforward biography . . . or a conventional autobiography, despite its formal affinities with both genres” (10). As Philippe Lejeune explains, however, autobiography is conventionally viewed as a text primarily about oneself. He writes:

We call autobiography the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality.

(trans. by Folkenflik 13)

Ondaatje thus upsets traditional notions of autobiography, something that is not only apparent in the frequency with which Ondaatje shares the “I” of his text with family members, but also in the regularity with which he allows them to situate the narrative.

Specifically, Ondaatje often allows family members to direct the course of his text, with the author relegated to mere recorder of how they “trade anecdotes and faint memories, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. . . . In this way history is organized” (19). For instance, during the “Lunch Conversation” chapter in which various unidentified family members jostle to convey fragmented stories about their family history during a cacophonous gathering – thus creating a disorienting atmosphere of “conflicting voices that cancel each other out” (Kanaganayakam 39) – an anonymous speaker must seemingly explain to Ondaatje where the text is headed next. The speaker says, “Your mother is nine. And this takes place in Negombo” (88), to which a seemingly compliant Ondaatje replies, “OK” (88). In so allowing others to direct and overtake the narrative, Ondaatje suggests a communal approach to autobiography. Indeed, Ondaatje writes that, “this book could not have been imagined, let alone conceived, without the help of many people. . . . This is their book as much as mine” (175). Even when Ondaatje does speak about himself in the text, it is often through a blend of biography and autobiography. In this sense, Ondaatje usually has another person tell his own story, such as when his sister “Gillian begins to describe to everyone present how I used to be bathed when I was five” (114). As such, Ondaatje’s autobiography contains a great number of biographical interruptions describing the lives of various aunts, siblings, and (step)parents.

Ondaatje’s shift between autobiography and biography, between first person and third person, suggests a self made abjectly strange in the text. Indeed, in allowing others to routinely occupy its “I,” the text makes Ondaatje abject. As such, Ondaatje’s autobiography largely seems strange or unfamiliar to the author, a strangeness or

unfamiliarity he recreates in his reader. Ondaatje rarely situates or contextualizes moments of the text, so that speakers and topics remain largely unidentified. Consequently, Ondaatje's reader is subject to much the same disorientation in the text as Ondaatje is in his family. For example, during such chapters as "Lunch Conversation" – where many conflicting stories about Ondaatje's family history are told from multiple unidentified sources – the reader, as well as Ondaatje, is "trying to get it straight" (85), with perhaps both wondering, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, *when* is this happening?" (86 – emphasis original); "There seems to be three different stories that you're telling" (87); "That can't be right. Must be" (56). In expressing such autobiographical confusion, Ondaatje appears abjectly lost in his own autobiography, amid what Kristeva would consider "uncanny strangeness . . . it is a shock, something unusual, astonishment . . . uncanniness maintains that shred of unease that leads the self, beyond anguish, toward depersonalization" (Kristeva *Strangers* 188) – a depersonalization characterized by the author's surrender of his "I." As one so lost, Ondaatje seems to 'chase' rather than to recuperate his family history. This is further suggested when Ondaatje repeatedly refers to such history as a disorienting "maze" (18) and "labyrinth" (17). He is thus abject, as one "on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding" (Kristeva *Powers* 8 – emphasis original). Nicole Brossard supports a view of Ondaatje as largely confounded in his autobiography, saying that "his subject is constantly escaping him" (181). S. Leigh Matthews, in turn, contends that uncertainty lies at the heart of *Running in the Family*, which relies upon

the imprecise and various recollections of those members of

Ondaatje's family who participated in . . . long-past events. . . .

which together compose a complex, contradictory picture of . . . a time, and a place, known intimately by everyone and no one. Faced with this uncertainty, Ondaatje resorts to gathering the strands. (353)

Ondaatje himself concedes that his autobiography is far from authoritative, saying:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history . . . And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (176)

In only grasping at strands in the piecing together of his autobiographical family history, and thus undermining any notion of authority in his text – “I don’t know when this happened or how old I was” (149) – Ondaatje presents the autobiographical subject as an abjectly “uncertain self” (Kristeva *Strangers* 188).

Such uncertainty positions Ondaatje as largely ‘other’ in his own autobiography. Specifically, Ondaatje exhibits in his autobiography what Kristeva would describe as “sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (*Powers* 9). For instance, during the bath story told by his sister, Gillian, Ondaatje becomes metafictionally strange to himself, saying, “I am dreaming and wondering why this was never to be traumatically remembered. It is the kind of event that should have surfaced as the first chapter of an anguished autobiographical novel” (115). In saying this, Ondaatje has seemingly not only forgotten the childhood bath that is described, but also his position as author in the text, since the event *has* “surfaced . . . [in his own] anguished autobiographical novel.” Ondaatje thus exhibits an abject “forfeited existence” in failing to recognize his past and

even himself in the text, such that seemingly “nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (Kristeva *Powers* 5). Kristeva explains such disorientation or abjection as:

a crumbling of conscious defenses, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other – the ‘strange’ – with whom it maintains a conflictual bond . . . the clash with the other, the identification of the self with that good or bad other that transgresses the fragile boundaries of the uncertain self. (*Strangers* 188)

Indeed, Ondaatje is made just so “uncertain” in his “clash with the other” – with his familial relations, his childhood self and his homeland, each of which he writes about but which have nevertheless have become almost entirely unfamiliar and “strange” to him over the years, as “a childhood I had ignored and not understood” (16). As one abjectly forfeited in his own text, Ondaatje thus refers to himself with the pronoun “he” rather than “I”, an object position since “the stray considers himself as equivalent to a Third Party” (Kristeva *Powers* 5). For instance, in an opening scene describing Ondaatje’s return to Sri Lanka, the author writes, “For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms like this” (11). Though the identity of the “he” is unclear here, Matthews supports the view that it refers to Ondaatje, saying, “*Running* opens with an untitled and italicized section which refers to the writer-protagonist as ‘he’” (354). To this, Verhoeven adds that “Michael Ondaatje, the author, deploys a third-person narrator to represent the writer Michael Ondaatje” (8). Ondaatje’s occasional reference to himself in the third person suggests not only a biographical penchant in his autobiography – wherein the author writes biographically

about himself as though “he” is another – but also a self made abjectly strange or “depersonaliz[ed]” (Kristeva *Strangers* 188).

Ondaatje’s autobiographical self is also made abjectly strange or other in his frequent position as observer rather than as subject in the text. Specifically, in focusing so intently upon the stories of others in his own autobiography, Ondaatje emerges as a type of witness in his text, exhibiting what Milena Marinkova considers “haptic witness writing” (67). Indeed, Ondaatje confirms such a role in saying, “I witnessed everything” (59), rather than “I experienced everything”. By largely witnessing and recording the stories of others, Ondaatje is seemingly missing from his own autobiography. He is thus abject, since “[abject] lives are based on *exclusion*” (Kristeva *Powers* 6 – emphasis original). Rosalind Jennings observes the great extent to which Ondaatje is missing in his own autobiography, saying:

Running in the Family . . . [is] narrated by a person whose true self eludes their readers in the process. In Ondaatje's account of his family and his early boyhood in Ceylon, the one missing character in this exaggerated tall tale is Michael himself. This semifictional account may ‘make real’ for the reader the Ondaatje family and colonial Ceylon during its heyday, but it is far from realising any details about the author. Present only as a narrative voice, Ondaatje disappears into the polyphonic maze of the text. (27)

Such a “polyphonic maze” into which “Ondaatje disappears” as type of ‘witness’ is evident when the author conveys stories told to him by his elderly aunts, whose material provides the basis for much of the text. Ondaatje writes:

they knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in a sarong
 . . . their voices whispering over tea, cigarettes, distracting me from
 the tale . . . all disappearing into the river of bright sari or faded
 cotton print. (90)

One might feel that the aunts thus organize and tame the storied or “wild” Ondaatje history for their nephew by weaving it neatly together as though it is a garment. Yet, it might also be suggested that they only further alienate Ondaatje in the text. Specifically, rather than cohering their family history for the author, they are “distracting me from the tale,” just as “the abject . . . misleads, corrupts” (Kristeva *Powers* 16). The aunts’ stories also have an unwieldy, disorienting quality, with “each memory a *wild* thread” (my emphasis). The image of the aunts’ stories as “disappearing into the river of bright sari or faded cotton print” suggests an inconclusiveness or meandering that is further complicated by cultural connotations with which Ondaatje has long become unfamiliar, as symbolized by the Ceylonese sarong or print they produce. Rather than providing Ondaatje with material which might bolster his sense of self in the text, then, the aunts seemingly set him further adrift as abject witness, having him record their “scattered acts and memories with no more clues” (172). Ondaatje is thus seemingly abjected in his own text, wherein he routinely assumes the role of observer or witness, rather than as subject.

Just as Ondaatje is made strange in becoming a witness or observer – rather than subject – in his autobiography, he is also made unfamiliar by language there. Specifically, Ondaatje exhibits a postmodern view of language as insufficient to express the autobiographical self. Certainly, in undertaking the writing of an autobiography, the

author sets out to recover his Sri Lankan family history through language. He says, “I had already planned the journey back. . . . [to] those relations . . . who stood in memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words” (16). Upon now returning, then, there is a sense that Ondaatje might reanimate or restore his estranged family, something perhaps confirmed when he says “I was running to Asia and *everything would change*” (16 – my emphasis).

Nevertheless, Ondaatje makes explicit a misgiving about language. He says, “I am writing this book . . . at a time when I am least sure about words” (152). His concern about language stems, in part, from a perceived loss of meaning when something is articulated through language. For example, Ondaatje includes in his text what appears to be a note written to him by his sister, Gillian, after she has read some draft chapters of *Running in the Family*. The precise nature of this section is uncertain however, since, again, Ondaatje is rarely specific about who is speaking and in what context. Carol E. Leon concurs with a view of this particular speaker as Gillian however, saying, “in the chapter ‘Dialogues’ . . . a voice [is] probably his sister, Gillian” (101). It is plausibly Gillian, then, who is bewildered upon showing a friend Ondaatje’s writings about the family, since “they laughed and said what a wonderful childhood we must have had, and I said it was a nightmare” (151). Here again, Ondaatje surrenders the “I” of his autobiography to another, suggesting that language does not permit a writer to adequately articulate another’s experience, something that Hutcheon considers “his worry about the power of language” (311). Such a worry is perhaps justified by the dramatic contrast between the two siblings’ memory of the past – one as humorous and the other as a “nightmare” – a divergence that Ondaatje may have feared

misrepresenting if told exclusively from his own perspective. Alternatively, this scene might suggest that Ondaatje was unsuccessful in trying to express his own 'nightmarish' memories, which have been so misconstrued by language as to have seemed humorous.

Ondaatje also exhibits a misgiving about language when characterizing his writing as "idiot phrases mov[ing] east across the page as if searching for longitude and story, some meaning or grace that would occur *blazing* after so much writing" (70 – emphasis original). While Ondaatje is referring here to his early lessons in the Sinhalese alphabet, the moment also seems indicative of his attempt to write autobiographically. It is instructive that the word "east" is used, in this instance. Certainly, the word may merely refer to how one writes toward the right or 'east' margin of a page. It may also refer to Sinhalese as a language of the East. However, it may be argued that the word refers to Ondaatje's travels east, from Canada to Sri Lanka, in order to write autobiographically about his eastern Ceylonese childhood. From this perspective, Ondaatje suggests that language is unable to express the journey, since only "idiot phrases" (69) arise.

Ondaatje's misgivings about language are also rooted in his postmodern depiction of words as burdened with pre-existing cultural and historical meaning that would distort attempts at unique or precise expression. For example, he writes, "*Half a page—and the morning is already ancient*" (11 – emphasis original). Certainly, Ondaatje may merely be suggesting here that he has spent much time in producing only half a page of text. Yet, the sentence also suggests that Ondaatje's words are encumbered with former meaning, that they are "ancient" from the outset. J. Hillis Miller

explains such a weighted view of language in saying, “there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth” (443). Ondaatje further illustrates such a notion in saying that “no story is ever told just once” (19) and that “history is always present” (71) – in life and, ostensibly, in language. In suggesting that language is laden with historical meaning, Ondaatje may be seen as uncertain about the written autobiographical approach he undertakes.

In his postmodern view of language as an inadequate means of self-expression, Ondaatje seemingly abandons language for what Kristeva considers the ‘semiotic’. For example, Ondaatje seems to forsake language, at times, such as when he privileges a visual rather than a literary recording of a conversation with his elderly aunts. He says, “I would love to photograph this” (90). He also disrupts the conventional prose form of autobiography when resorting instead to poetry, stream of consciousness, and images. For Kristeva, this type of break from conventional prose – what she considers the “symbolic” (*Revolution* 26) – is a form of ‘semiotic,’ a rhythmic expression that is closer to “poetry, music, dance, theater—‘art” (*Revolution* 80). Kristeva goes on to say that “the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic” (*Revolution* 68). Such a ‘semiotic’ transgression is apparent when Ondaatje contemplates the impetus for his autobiography – a perceived duty to “write the histories” (152) of family members who came before him. In order to enact such a duty, Ondaatje seemingly turns away from language and toward the very relations for whom the words are necessary. Specifically, Ondaatje reiterates in this moment his postmodern skepticism about the adequacy of language, saying, “words such as *love*,

passion, duty, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning” (152 – italics original). He then appears to abandon such words, turning instead to his ancestors, as though conjuring them to provide another language for their communal story. He writes:

Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made
hazardous, who still loves you. I am now part of an adult's
ceremony, but I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time
when I am least sure about words. . . . Give the word. (152)

It may be argued that Ondaatje is merely hoping to receive a kind of family sanction here to go ahead with his uncertain autobiographical work – thus awaiting his family to “give the word.” Alternatively, it may be said that, in heavily relying upon family relations to recount his lost family history, Ondaatje is awaiting them to ‘give word’ of further stories. However, I argue that Ondaatje is exasperated here by “words”, thus imploring his lost family to initiate an alternative, perhaps more semiotic means of autobiography.

The ‘language’ Ondaatje seeks appears to be of a bodily, rather than of a literary nature, an approach that again mimics the Kristevan ‘semiotic’. For instance, Ondaatje says not that his text, but rather that “my body must remember everything, this . . . bite smell . . . sound . . . slow air” (173). Certainly, the author may simply be drawing attention to the tropical richness of his island homeland. Yet, there is also a suggestion that he wishes to physically, rather than textually, connect with his personal history there. Rather than *writing* about the day, for example, Ondaatje says, “I would wake and just *smell* things for the whole day” (59 – my emphasis). Such bodily engagement – particularly in relation to the family – is indicative of the semiotic, as “a preverbal functional state that governs the connections between the body (in the process of

constituting itself as a body proper), objects, and protagonists of family structure” (Kristeva *Revolution* 27). Such a state is apparent in how much is described by Ondaatje in a bodily manner, such as when “a hand cupped [a] heel . . . An arm touched a face. A foot touched a stomach” (40-41). In employing such bodily language, Ondaatje seemingly longs for and also summons his ancestors through physicality, saying, “Give me your arm. Let go my hand. Give me your arm” (152). Of course, Ondaatje is referencing *King Lear* here in a seeming identification with Edgar, who tries to assist Gloucester, the blinded father who banished him, across a stormy heath:

Edgar: “Give me your hand.” (4.6.2626)

Gloucester: “Let go my hand” (4.6.2629)

Edgar: “Give me your arm” (4.6.2672)

Because this scene from *Lear* deals with a son trying to grapple with family trauma, Ondaatje’s text also may be seen as having such a motivation, for which a bodily language seems the only answer. It may thus be argued that Ondaatje is attempting a semiotic bodily intimacy with family that cannot be expressed through ‘symbolic’ language. Butler’s work helps illuminate such a notion, particularly in her description of the body as a non-linguistic record of the self. She writes:

There is a bodily referent here, a condition of me, that I can point to, but I cannot narrate precisely, even though there are no doubt stories about where my body went and what it did and did not do. But there is also a history to my body . . . and there is as well a part of bodily experience- what is indexed by the word ‘exposure’ that only with difficulty, if at all, can assume narrative form. (“Giving” 27)

From this perspective, Ondaatje may view the body as silent witness to his past, something that mirrors his own silent witnessing in the text, suggesting neither can be adequately expressed through words. As such, Ondaatje may seek a semiotic or bodily language to express the self, a view supported by Hutcheon, who contends that, “the physicality of language, its concrete letters, is a recurring motif in the text” (310). An example of such physicality in language is apparent when Ondaatje chooses to sense rather than to write about the night in Sri Lanka, saying, “I get up, walk to the night, and breathe it in” (163). In another instance, he says, “the air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face, and this paper” (17). Physicality is privileged here over writing, with a draft disrupting written language – as symbolized by the “paper” – and instead drawing attention to the physical, to a breeze along the skin – “my arms, face” (17). In her afterword to the text, Brossard confirms a bodily approach in Ondaatje’s writing:

One might even say that the sensual environment of Ceylon – birds, insects, cobras, ‘flamboyant trees, rain, heat, and humidity – impels the body to remember everything, to transform itself into a *body of writing*.

(Brossard 182 – emphasis original)

Ondaatje’s seeming attempt at such a “*body of writing*” is perhaps most evident when he ascribes bodily attributes to words themselves. He writes:

I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. . . . The insect ink curves into a shape that is almost . . . eyelid. . . . The bones of a lover’s spine. . . . Years later, looking into a biology textbook, I came across a whole page depicting the small bones

in the body and recognised, delighted, the shapes and forms of the first alphabet I ever copied from [a] first grade reader. (69)

Ondaatje does not see words in the Sinhalese letters here, but bodily features: “[an] eyelid . . . bones . . . spine . . . the small bones in the body” (69). Such a bodily form of writing is also evident when Ondaatje attempts to describe the initial hours of his return to Sri Lanka. He says:

I write this at the desk of calamander looking out the windows into dry black night. . . . At midnight this hand is the only thing moving. . . . Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing. (162)

Here, Ondaatje is situated as disconnected from language, something suggested by the disembodied writing hand – it is “*this* hand” and “*the* hand”, as opposed to *my* hand. Ondaatje does not look to, or even mention, the pen that is ostensibly held by the hand, nor to the paper upon which it must rest. This suggests that Ondaatje seeks an unconventional form of expression – one ostensibly from the hand itself. His is thus perhaps a bodily inquiry, wherein one might physically “stumble” upon perception when feeling for an elusive “shape”. Such physicality would likely offer a synesthetic form of expression that would incorporate many senses simultaneously, such that he needn’t be obstructed by words during an experience “so rich I had to select senses” (59). A bodily, ‘semiotic’ language may thus do for Ondaatje what written language cannot – “*touch* [his family] into words” (16 – my emphasis).

Ondaatje not only sees language as so socially constructive as to require an escape through what may be deemed the Kristevan semiotic, but also the family as

socially constructive. Ondaatje says, for instance, “all of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us” (152), such that, “we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations” (152). Butler is again illuminating here, arguing that “the subject [is] . . . a relational being . . . we are formed in the context of relations that . . . seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency” (Butler *Giving* 20). The “context of relations” that constructs Ondaatje is undoubtedly that of the family, with the author writing that:

obviously it is from my mother’s side that [my siblings and I] got a sense of the dramatic, the tall stories, the determination to now and then hold the floor. . . . While from my father, we got our sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive. (142)

He adds, “It was [my mother] who instilled theatre in all of us” (144), while from his father he inherited a “secretive and slightly crooked humour” (143). Matthews concurs with the view of Ondaatje’s family as a socially constructive force, noting “the shaping force of [Ondaatje’s] familial and cultural past” (360). Ondaatje notes a similar conditioning among his siblings. He writes, “I watch my sister who alternatively reminds me of my father, mother and brother” (58). He also notes “the anger and argument which I see in myself, my brother, and my two sisters” (142). Ondaatje thus suggests the autobiographical self as not only constructed by language, but also by what he has inherited from family members, via what *runs in the family*.

Yet, Ondaatje suggests a self made abjectly precarious by familial conditioning. Julia Kristeva describes abjection as that which “disturbs identity” (*Powers* 4), such that it “annihilates me” (*Powers* 2). Ondaatje’s identity seems just so “disturb[ed]” by family

members, who seemingly overtake his autobiographical identity in largely comprising the focus and “I” of his autobiography, thus “annihilat[ing]” Ondaatje’s “me”. An example of such overshadowing by family may be seen when the author visits a church frequented by his ancestors. There, he comes across a large plaque in the floor, engraved with the Ondaatje name. Ondaatje writes:

to kneel on the floors of a church built in 1650 and see your name
chiseled in huge letters . . . it . . . eliminates the personal. It makes
your own story a lyric. . . . [a] smallness, of being overpowered. (55)

Rather than being inspired by his ancestral burial place, Ondaatje is seemingly overpowered by his titan family, something symbolized by the “huge letters” of the family name before which the author submissively “kneel[s]”. His sense of self – “the personal” (55) – is thus seemingly threatened here, since the author’s own story is reduced to “a lyric”. Such a threat to personal identity is also apparent when the author later writes, “after all these generations the coming darkness makes it necessary to move fast” (55). The author is referring here to the coming darkness of night, after having researched his family history in a churchyard and encountering the family plaque. Yet, this moment also implies that the author wishes to perhaps “move fast” in order to escape being further overshadowed or engulfed by his family, by “all these generations [and] the coming darkness” (55).

Ondaatje goes on to explain such a threat when describing the tenuous and suffocating nature of belonging to a large and storied family. He writes:

I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and
realize gradually I am part of a human pyramid. Below me are other

bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top. With cumbersome slowness we are walking from one end of the huge living room to the other. We are all chattering away like the crows and cranes so that it is often difficult to hear. . . . My grandmother lower down gives a roar of anger. . . . we are approaching the door which being twenty feet high we will be able to pass through only if the pyramid turns sideways. Without discussing it the whole family ignores the opening and walks slowly through the pale pink rose-coloured walls into the next room. (20)

Ondaatje is so enmeshed with his family here as to lose his individuality and, instead, become fused with the family structure, as symbolized by the pyramid. Though Ondaatje is “quite near the top” of the pyramid, suggesting perhaps dominance, he nevertheless seems to have little agency there. This is evidenced by how the pyramid moves him from below in an undemocratic manner, “without discussing it.”

Independent thought here seems as untenable as independent movement, with even one’s own voice becoming diluted amid “all [the] chattering . . . so that it is often difficult to hear.” The dissolution of boundaries between Ondaatje and his family thus situates him as abject, wherein “I behold a breaking down of a world that has erased its borders” (Kristeva *Powers* 4). Kristeva goes on to say that the abject “presents himself with his own body . . . as the most precious non-objects; they are no longer seen in their own right but forfeited, abject” (*Powers* 5). Ondaatje is in just such a depersonalized state in the family pyramid, which has him “see my own . . . body.”

Moreover, Ondaatje is reduced there to a Kristevan “non-object” of mere ornament – “a star” – “straining” to keep his footing atop a burdensome family structure that yokes him with “cumbersome slowness.” Matthews concurs with the idea that Ondaatje deteriorates within the family structure, indicating that, “in this state, the writer is displaced, marginal” (362). Marinkova further notes the precarious nature of the pyramid, writing that, “unlike family trees and genealogical hierarchies, this pyramid is not rooted; it staggers at the threshold of the living room” (75). This is evident in the disharmony within the pyramid, with its discordant “roar[s] of anger” from animalistic members below, “chattering away like crows and cranes.” Physical boundaries are as untenable here as personal ones, such that the family “ignores [them] and walks through . . . walls” (20). Ondaatje is thus constructed by the family structure to the point of abject fusion, an oppressive state that leaves no room for individuality, such that, “we were all so squashed” (28).

Ondaatje’s individuality as jeopardized by family is also apparent when the writer notes how his aunt’s “tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed” (92). The tenderness of the moment, of what may be seen as merely a close embrace, is offset by a threat of eclipse or inhabitation. Specifically, in relying so heavily upon his aunts for autobiographical material, Ondaatje is often overtaken or abjected by the aunts, who often assume the text’s “I.” Kristeva’s theories about abjection help situate such a reading. She writes:

I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead
of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an other with whom I identify and

incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and
 through such possession causes me to be. (10)

The aunt's "step[ping] into" Ondaatje may thus be seen as a type of "possession" or substitute of the author, where they 'settle in place and stead of what will be 'me' or 'I' – as "that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva *Powers* 1). Such possession by the aunts is also reminiscent of a family that absorbs its members into the family structure or 'pyramid.' In this respect, the aunt says to Ondaatje, "My advice you see is get on with everybody – no matter what they do. . . . I wish I could see you properly but my glasses are being fixed this week" (91). These words may simply be interpreted as advice from a myopic aunt to her nephew about how to lead an agreeable life. Yet, the aunt might also be seen as encouraging Ondaatje to further assimilate with the family. She thus wants him to "get on with everybody" and cannot see him clearly, because he is indistinct within the larger family structure or "pyramid". Such a view of this scene as one of familial construction is supported by the physical construction taking place in the background of the aunt's home. Specifically, Ondaatje notes that:

the conversation [between he and his aunt] is continually halted by a
 man lying just below the ceiling hammering nails into it – hoping to
 keep it propped up for a few more years. . . . she walks with me
 . . . under several ladders in her living room that balance paint and
 workmen. (91)

The workers' reinforcement of the home then comes to symbolize an active endeavour to strengthen the family 'hold' or home, and its corresponding 'hold' upon Ondaatje.

The abject threat and precariousness of such construction is further suggested by the many unlucky “ladders” under which the aunt leads Ondaatje.

The fear of having his personal identity abjectly overtaken by familial identity is also apparent when Ondaatje describes a nightmare he has before returning to Sri Lanka and embarking upon his autobiographical journey. He writes:

his nightmare is that thorn trees in the garden send their hard roots
underground towards the house climbing through windows so they can
drink sweat off his body, steal the last of the saliva off his tongue. (11)

The “roots” here suggest those of a predatory family tree, threatening to overwhelm and silence the author, to “steal the last of the saliva off his tongue” (11). As Lee Spinks contends, Ondaatje’s “inheritance, contact with the ‘hard roots’ of Sri Lankan soil seems to threaten a loss of voice and a retreat into sterility and silence” (1963). Such an interpretation of the dream seems tenable when Ondaatje refers to it again, saying:

I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were
screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke
me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in a jungle, hot,
sweating. . . . I had been weeping and my shoulders and face were
exhausted. . . . It was a new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia.
(15)

Because this dream occurs before Ondaatje’s return ‘home’ to Sri Lanka, during a preceding Canadian “winter”, he may be seen as abjectly threatened by the journey. Specifically, the author is already “weeping” and “exhausted” in his anticipation of the journey, in “already dreaming of Asia.” He is thus abjectly “apprehensive . . . sickened”

(Kristeva *Powers* 1), such that it “provoke[s] tears . . . increase[d] heartbeat, caus[ing] forehead and hands to perspire (Kristeva *Powers* 3). Consequently, Ondaatje may be seen as already abject in apprehension of his autobiographical journey.

Ondaatje’s dream about returning to Asia not only reveals a concern about his own abjection within a highly constructive family, but a similar concern for his father, Mervyn. Specifically, in the dream, Ondaatje’s father is “surrounded by dogs . . . screaming and barking.” This dream imagery relates back to a story Ondaatje is told about his father, wherein:

In one hand [my father] holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog. None of the five are touching the ground. He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength. Terrible noises are coming from him and from the dogs as if there is a conversation between them that is subterranean, volcanic. All their tongues hanging out. . . . He was a man who loved dogs. But this scene had no humour or gentleness in it. The dogs were too powerful to be in danger of being strangled. The danger was to the naked man who held them at arm’s length, towards whom they swung like dark magnets. (153)

The five dogs here may be seen to represent Mervyn’s immediate family – his wife and four children, including Ondaatje himself as a boy. The idea that the dogs represent Ondaatje and his immediate family is suggested by their likeness to Mervyn, whereby “terrible noises are coming from him *and* the dogs” (my emphasis), and where “*all* of their tongues are hanging out” (my emphasis). Mervyn and the dogs also seem to

share a common, unique language, with the suggestion of “a conversation between them that is subterranean, volcanic.” Also, Mervyn is said to hold the dogs “at arm’s length,” much as he made it difficult, in life, for his wife and children to get close to him, such that he remained, “always separate until he died, away from us” (146). That the dogs swing toward Mervyn “like dark magnets” echoes back to when Ondaatje refers to himself and his siblings as magnetic forces, saying that “magnetic fields would go crazy in the presence of more than three Ondaatjes. And my father. . . . The north pole” (146).

That Mervyn is made abject in this scene is suggested by the statement that “the danger was to the naked man.” Certainly, Mervyn may likewise be seen as an antagonist in this scene, treating his wife and children roughly during alcohol-fueled outbursts that deny them a solid familial foundation, such that “none of the five are touching the ground”. The presence of Mervyn’s alcoholism here is evident in the statement that “this scene had no humour or gentleness in it,” since earlier Mervyn is described as “humorous and gentle when sober” (47). Nevertheless, this scene implies a sympathy and a concern for Mervyn, as perhaps one also made abject by family conditioning. Specifically, Mervyn’s lack of clothing suggests that he is ill-*suited* for the role of ‘father,’ something Ondaatje contemplates earlier when asking if his father “was . . . locked in the ceremony of being ‘a father’” (152). Ondaatje’s concern is perhaps that this paternal role or social ‘norm’ was thrust upon an unwilling or unsuited Mervyn, as “abjection [is] . . . a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (Kristeva *Powers* 1). Ondaatje’s concern for his father extends to a sympathy for him as abjected by the family later in life, with Mervyn depicted as grieving for the

relations he drove away with alcohol. In this sense, it is later noted that the dogs “writh[e] free and escap[e]” (154), just as Ondaatje, his mother, and siblings leave Mervyn in Ceylon and scatter across the globe. Now alone, Mervyn still clutches to the ropes that held the dogs – “the lengths of rope dangled from his fist in the hot passing air” (154) – suggesting a sense of regret and abandonment by Ondaatje’s father, who, though largely estranged from his family, “longed to hold his children in his arms” (170) and “just wished he could kiss us all once again” (151). It is suggested that Mervyn is thus made abject by the role of ‘father’ in the family – “as radically separate, loathsome” (Kristeva *Powers* 3) – a role seemingly imposed upon his unsuited “naked” self and then confiscated when his wife and children are driven away by his “manic alcoholic consumption” (141)

The text’s intense focus upon Mervyn may be seen as an abject attempt by Ondaatje to recover his lost father. As Kristeva explains, abjection is a desire for “the return, or access, to the archaic . . . [which] brings me back to the lost foundation and the installations of destroyed habitats” (*Sense* 16). Kamboureli argues that Ondaatje not only seeks, but fulfills such a desire by effectively recovering his father in the text. She says, “the writer of *Running in the Family* betrays his autobiographical project: he does not discover himself; instead, he finds his father” (85). Indeed, Ondaatje describes his return to Sri Lanka as a means of locating his father. For example, when stretching out his legs precariously close to a fan while listening to an old friend talk about Mervyn’s past, Ondaatje says, “I could have lost a toe during one of these breakfasts searching for my father” (133) – an image that further suggests the abject hazard of Ondaatje’s inquiry. Moreover, Ondaatje’s references to *King Lear*’s Edgar and

Gloucester indicate an ambivalent son trying to come to terms with a volatile father. As Ondaatje writes, “I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens” (152).

Nevertheless, others argue that Ondaatje’s inquiry ultimately leads to a discovery of self. For instance, Verhoeven writes:

Kamboureli's conclusion that in *Running in the Family* Ondaatje sets out to discover himself but finds his father instead, should actually be reversed: Ondaatje sets out to discover his father, but finds himself instead. (9)

Certainly, Ondaatje expresses a fear of discovering that he is much like his father. For instance, Ondaatje’s silence in the text – his surrendering of its “I” to others – mirrors his father’s own long silences, “my father’s useful habit of retreating into almost total silence” (24). Ondaatje’s greatest worry, however, may be an inheritance of his father’s alcoholism, since Ondaatje is self-described as most comfortable when drunk.

Ondaatje writes, for instance, “a friend had told me that it was only when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted” (16). Indeed, the trip itself is one of drunkenness, in which, “we are slightly drunk with this place” (117). Also, it is when drunk that the author decides to make the journey home to Sri Lanka. Ondaatje writes:

In the midst of the farewell party in my growing wildness — dancing,
balancing a wine glass on my forehead and falling to the floor
twisting round and getting up without letting the glass tip, a trick
which seemed only possible when drunk and relaxed — I knew I
was already running. Outside the continuing snow had made the

streets narrow, almost impassable. . . . I had already planned the journey back. . . . It began with that moment when I was dancing and laughing wildly . . . Beside the fridge I tried to communicate some of the fragments I knew about my father . . . And then another wave of the party swirled me away. (15-16)

It is in a state reminiscent of his father's alcoholism, then, that Ondaatje decides to embark upon his autobiographical journey: "It began with that moment when I was dancing and laughing wildly." Specifically, Ondaatje's "growing wildness," his "falling . . . [and] twisting" mimics how his father would "swing wildly" (169) during moments of "manic alcoholic consumption" (144).

A comparison of Ondaatje to his father here seems feasible, since the author conjures him in the moment, in "try[ing] to communicate some of the fragments I knew about my father" (16). It is perhaps largely an identification with the father and a desire to learn more than just fragments about him that thus motivates Ondaatje's journey back. Ondaatje writes, "I never knew what my father felt of these 'things.' My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult. . . . He died before I even thought of such things" (152). As such, Ondaatje "knew I was already running" (16), simultaneously running *from* unsavory paternal traits he is already starting to exhibit – and which may thus *run in the family* – and *toward* a greater understanding of them. As Chelva Kanaganayakam contends about the text, "Running is as much about running 'in' as it is about 'to', 'from' or 'against'" (38).

The arduous nature of such 'running' is signified by the snowstorm taking place outside, which "had made the streets narrow, almost impassable" (16). While

Ondaatje's autobiographical inquiry focuses on many family members, there is special attention paid to his father, a Kristevan "lost foundation" (*Sense* 16) with whom he both yearns to become more acquainted and yet abjectly fears becoming.

Ondaatje's focus upon the father is so intent that he seems to abjectly merge with him at times. Specifically, the author describes in great detail one of his father's drunken episodes that could not have been witnessed by Ondaatje, since he had long since moved to Canada. Ondaatje writes of his father:

He saw himself with the bottle. Where was his book. He had lost it. What was the book. . . . In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor . . . A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. . . . He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company in the mirror. He sat down with his back against the wall and waited. The white rectangle moved with the busy arduous ants. Duty, he thought. But that was just a fragment gazed at by the bottom of his eye. He drank. There. He saw the midnight rat. (161)

Although this scene is ostensibly about Mervyn, it seems equally about Ondaatje. Of significance is the manner in which the pronoun moves earlier in the passage from "he", Mervyn, to "my" and "I" as Ondaatje himself:

He moved towards the porch, a case of liquor under his arm. . . . Into the bedroom, the bottle top already unscrewed. . . . The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea. (159-160 – my emphasis)

It is further suggested that Ondaatje merges with his father in this scene since the book at Mervyn's feet is open to the same page on which the scene was originally printed by Ondaatje in the first edition of his text, ostensibly an intentional metafictional moment: "It was page 189" (161 – emphasis original). Time thus folds in on itself in this scene, such that Ondaatje may witness a private moment of his father's past, while his father, in turn, can learn of his son's presence there by reading the future book at his feet. Leon supports such a view of father and son merging in this moment, saying, "In [this scene] . . . there is complete identification between father and son when the person of Ondaatje is superimposed on that of Mervyn" (102). To this, Matthews adds that, "the father and his accompanying chaos now inhabit the author's body" (360). The boundaries between self and other – Ondaatje and his father – thus abjectly bleed into one another in the text, whereby "I behold a breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away" (Kristeva *Powers* 4), thus experiencing "a possession . . . a being-there of the symbolic that a [lost] father might or might not embody" (Kristeva *Powers* 10). Such abjection further depicts Ondaatje as erased in his own text, by "bring[ing] us wholly within Mervyn's consciousness, this close focalization also has the effect of erasing Ondaatje from the narrative progression" (Bolton 236). Consequently, Ondaatje is "scared of the company in the mirror," for fear that it will not show his own reflection, but rather that of the "midnight rat" – of the family members, traits, and trauma he may

(re)discover there. Nevertheless, the autobiography does act as a kind of mirror for Ondaatje, through which he both loses and finds identity by gazing at his family. As Marinkova contends, "Ondaatje looks into the mirror of the book he is writing" (79). As such, it may be said that Ondaatje is referring to his own autobiography, and its focus on family members, as "the mirror he had been moving towards." As one highly constructed by his family as 'mirror', Ondaatje seemingly acknowledges the surrender of his text to them – its "I" – saying: "Where was his book. He had lost it. What was the book." Ondaatje seems to not only to focus upon and identify with his father in the text, but also to merge with him there, thus further suggesting how familial construction can result in abject identity appropriation.

The abject relationship between Ondaatje and his family may be seen as symbolized by his Ceylonese house, since "family and household are impossible to keep separate" (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 3). Marinkova supports an interpretation of the house as family, arguing that "[Ondaatje's] family history become[s] a tangible experience, reinforced by the house metaphor" (75). Much like the storied Ondaatje family history, then, the house is vast and meandering. Ondaatje writes:

I sit in the huge living room . . . The walls . . . stretch awesome distances away to my left and to my right and up towards a white ceiling. . . . The doors are twenty feet high . . . In spite of its internal vastness it appears modest from the outside . . . Here, in this spacious centre of the labyrinth . . . I sit on one of the giant sofas. (17)

The home's enormous labyrinth[ine]" (17) interior may be seen to represent "the maze of relationships in [Ondaatje's] ancestry" (18) that Ondaatje tries to navigate. As such, the

house may be seen to exhibit abject deception, with its modest exterior concealing a vast and snared interior, just as abjection is defined as “veiled infinity” (Kristeva *Powers* 14). The “awesome distances” that span the house and the manner in which Ondaatje is dwarfed “on one of the giant sofas” suggests the daunting nature of the author’s autobiographical inquiry. His aunts are instrumental here, shaping much of the text with their stories, and thus serving as symbolic guides through the domestic space – or ‘house’ – that is Ondaatje’s family history. Indeed, Ondaatje even characterizes his Aunt Phyllis as “the minotaur of this long journey back” (18), noting that both aunts “lead me through their dark rooms crowded with various kinds of furniture” (90). The abject nature of his family history is further symbolized by the house’s “haunted sections [which] are avoided for sleeping” (19). Specifically, the house is depicted as infected by an abject familial past that seemingly putrefies within. Ondaatje writes:

the house, is dark and supposedly haunted. Walking into [a] room’s dampness, I saw the mosquito nets stranded in the air like the dresses of hanged brides, the skeletons of beds without their mattresses, and retreated from the room without ever turning my back on it. (18)

Ondaatje’s ghostly depiction of the family home suggests a self ‘haunted’ by his familial past, by that which both compels and frightens, which he won’t ‘turn his back on’ and where “everything that is important occurs in shadow” (73).

As a type of labyrinth, the house suggests a ‘dead end’ or futility to Ondaatje’s search, something the author seems to acknowledge in saying at the text’s conclusion, “But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would

be able to fully understand you” (172). Not a protective space in which to nurture, the house is rather an abject void: “what to us had been a lovely spacious house was now small and dark, fading into the landscape” (48). Because Ondaatje is simultaneously drawn to, as well as abjectly constructed and threatened by, his childhood home, the house further exhibits abjection at work in the text. As Kristeva notes:

The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered. . . . The clean and proper . . . becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame. (*Powers* 8)

Indeed, Ondaatje searches for just such a “land of oblivion that is constantly remembered” – the “sought-after” familial past of which he is both familiar and unaware, by which he is both “banished [and] fascinat[ed].” Ondaatje’s childhood home thus may be seen as symbolic of Ondaatje’s abject, fading family history, since “there is very little now that separates the house from the garden” (91).

Ondaatje is further abjected by the liminal position in which he finds himself upon returning to Sri Lanka, as both foreign and native, same and other. Kristeva describes such a state of hybridity as abject, as destabilizing the self, in:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container . . . I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy.’ The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over

the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy. (*Strangers* 187)

Having grown up in Ceylon but relocating briefly to England and then permanently to Canada for his adult life, Ondaatje is thus made abject in his childhood homeland, being both familiar and strange there. He says, "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (65). As Kanaganayakam contends, "Michael Ondaatje, in *Running in the Family*, returns to a country he left twenty-five years ago . . . characterized by the duality of being both 'native' and 'foreign,' to a tenuous, middle-of-road position" (34). Indeed, Ondaatje famously maintains that, "I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres." (Ondaatje "Divided" n.p.). This leads Christopher McVey to support the idea of Ondaatje as a liminal subject, stating, "the mongrel figures as a tentative, interstitial space between — a hybrid body that belongs everywhere and nowhere at the same time" (141) Ondaatje is thus abject in this hybrid state, as "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva *Powers* 4).

Such abject liminality is symbolized when Ondaatje writes during the liminal hours between day and night in Sri Lanka, something suggestive of one who inhabits the in-between space of foreign and familiar, of one perhaps not quite at 'home' in his homeland. The author says:

I write this at the desk of calamander looking out the windows into dry black night. 'Thanikama.' 'Aloneness.' . . . Midnight and noon and dawn and dusk are the hours of danger, susceptibility to the 'grahayas' – spirits of malignant character. (162)

Though Ondaatje is rooted in his Ceylonese surroundings – something symbolized by the desk upon which he writes, which is made of a tree that is native to Sri Lanka – he nevertheless also identifies highly with the west. Such a grappling between two cultures is suggested by Ondaatje's incorporation of Sinhalese words into his otherwise colonial English text. He thus writes with “the voice of the expatriate, the exiled voice that it is both marginal and central” (Kanaganayakam 41). Ondaatje is seemingly at risk of abjectly falling into the crack between foreign and familiar, of losing himself in being neither one nor the other, a threat suggested by the “hours of danger” and the “spirits of malignant character” that characterize the moment. Kristeva describes such an abject space as:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. (*Powers* 2)

Indeed, the autobiographical writing Ondaatje conducts at the calamander desk is specifically of “an opaque and forgotten life” – the “frail memory dragged up out of the past” (111) of his former life in Ceylon. The abject “uncanniness” he experiences in such an endeavour is of being neither foreign nor familiar, what Kristeva might consider “a blank subject” (*Powers* 6), something that perhaps leads Ondaatje to focus here upon the words “‘Thanikama.’ ‘Aloneness.’”

As one abjectly foreign and familiar in his homeland and in his family, Ondaatje suggests a fear of falling into the role of colonizer in his autobiography – an oppressive role mimicked by Namjoshi and Kroetsch in their own autobiographies – a fear so great

that it may explain, in part, why the author is compelled to surrender his “I” to others. Such a fear of colonizing is suggested by the poem, “The Cinnamon Peeler.” In the poem, there is a likeness that may be drawn between Ondaatje and the ‘cinnamon peeler’ speaker, something harkening back to the ‘Thanikama’ chapter in which Ondaatje merges with his father. This is because, moments prior to this merging between father and son, Mervyn gives a ride to a nameless man who “was a cinnamon peeler and the smell filled the car” (159), suggesting that perhaps the cinnamon peeler is Ondaatje himself, about to merge with his father.

In the poem itself, a man tells a woman that, if he were a cinnamon peeler, he would leave his unmistakable scent upon her, so that everyone would know they were a couple. Though the piece reads as a love poem, it nevertheless contains elements of colonial violence, wherein, “the act of love” (79) is associated with a marking of one’s territory, “the pleasure of a scar” (79). The speaker of the poem positions himself among the lower *salagama* or cinnamon-peeler caste, who worked for colonizers by preparing cinnamon for trade. In an attempt to conceal his station so that he might be a suitable candidate for marriage, however, the man disguises himself, saying:

I buried my hands
in saffron, disguised them
over smoking tar,
helped the honey gatherers. (79)

Ondaatje may be seen as similarly concealing himself, when one considers how he subverts his position as the subject of his own autobiography by focusing instead on family members. For instance, Ondaatje frequently turns over the “I” of his text to his

“honey gatherer” aunts, who amass and weave much of Ondaatje’s content – much like the “Cinnamon Peeler” speaker hides his own ‘scent’ among “the honey gatherers” (79). Rather than expressing gratitude toward his aunts, however, Ondaatje suggests a predatory relationship, saying, “how I have used them” (90) – just as a colonizer might capitalize upon those native to a land. Likewise, “The Cinnamon Peeler” speaker is such a colonizer, telling his lover:

I would ride your bed
and leave the yellow bark dust
on your pillow.

Your breasts and shoulders would reek
you could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. (78)

In saying this, the speaker suggests a conquering of the woman by permanently marking her with his unmistakable scent.

Moreover, though what follows in the poem may be read as a tender love scene, it nevertheless may also be read as a further conquering of the lover, whose body is dissected by the poem’s speaker, much as a colonizer might partition conquered land – “the upper thigh . . . your hair . . . the crease that cuts your back . . . This ankle” (78). The poem’s speaker seemingly finalizes such colonization of his lover by redefining her, saying, “You will be known among strangers / as the cinnamon peeler’s wife” (78).

Spinks supports such a view of the poem, characterizing it as:

an erotic fantasy of possession . . . Wholly encompassed by her lover's possessive desire, the body of the beloved becomes an extension of his authority and mode of feeling . . . [in] resolutely breaking the body of his lover down into a series of erotic affects . . . the cinnamon peeler's mastery soon seems unassailable. (Spinks 134)

Ondaatje likens himself to such a colonizing force when noting how colonizers, "came . . . and overpowered [Ceylon] obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon," just as the author, upon returning to the former Ceylon, would "wake and just smell things for the whole day" (59). The idea of Ondaatje as a potential colonizer in his autobiography is bolstered at the end of the text, when the author seemingly wishes to return his family to their "frozen" state at the beginning of the text, as a Kristevan "access to the archaic, to . . . an impossible temporalizing . . . an ecstatic state where time seems suspended, time, supposed time, is always already there" (Kristeva *Sense* 16). The author writes:

But I do not turn on the light yet. I want this emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years ago, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven. My mother looks out of her Colombo window thinking of divorce, my father wakes after three days of alcohol . . . I stood like this in the long mornings of my childhood unable to bear the wait till full daylight . . . the wonderful long days . . . Bookcases I stood under . . . which were full of

signed first editions . . . All this was here before I dreamed of
getting married, having children, wanting to write. (174)

Alone in the dark, Ondaatje imagines his eastern homeland just as he left it at the age of eleven – in its ‘first edition’ – before his parents’ divorce and before his autobiographical inquiry. As Matthews contends, “Ondaatje seeks to . . . engender another self . . . his lost childhood self. . . . His desire to recover and reintegrate that lost childhood self” (361). Ondaatje thus seemingly desires to cast his own ‘scent’ upon the text, re-imagining his homeland without its complicated history, but rather as a blank slate – “this emptiness of a dark room” – onto which he might project only “the wonderful long days” in an abject Kristevan “state where time seems suspended”.

Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories help illuminate Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* as an abject attempt at reconciling with a family that is both highly constructive of his identity and yet foreign to him, as “a deep well of memory that is approachable and intimate: the abject” (Kristeva *Powers* 6). In his unconventional approach to autobiography, Ondaatje mirrors feelings of being alternately at home and at odds with family by penning a text in which relatives figure largely, but the author himself is essentially absent. Thus seemingly abjected from family, Ondaatje appears driven not only to understand more about them and how they construct one another – how “our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us” (152) – but also how to develop an intimacy through such knowledge, saying, “where is the intimate and truthful in all this? . . . I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover” (43). Autobiography seems posited as a means through which to establish such intimacy, as a type of ‘key’ to

reconciliation amid great dysfunction – as a textual means “to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of the Jacobean tragedies” (152). Ondaatje’s reference to *King Lear* is again instructive here when the author echoes Edgar’s password of “Sweet Marjoram” (152) to a mad king not unlike his own ill father, Mervyn. In conjuring this “tender herb” (152) known as a treatment for mental illness (Buchanan 347), Ondaatje seemingly extends through words a remedy otherwise unavailable in life. While reconciliation isn’t entirely suggested – “the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you” (172) – autobiography is nevertheless depicted by Ondaatje as a hopeful key or salve for what *runs in the family*.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I attempted to illuminate the postmodern autobiographical subject as engaged in a dialectical process of *reconstruction* amid *deconstruction* - as not merely negated to the point of meaninglessness or nihilism (as many current critics contend), but as renewed through a kind of written abjection. Presently however, postmodern autobiography is often viewed as merely a narcissistic exercise of literary delay, something that only further complicates today's post-truth world through a negation of conventional ideas about 'truth' and identity. As Hans Bertens contends, "for some critics, postmodern writing is apolitical and evasive: it is too self-absorbed, too preoccupied with form and formal tricks, and too ironic" (143). To this, Linda Hutcheon adds that postmodernism "proved to be politically naïve and even socially destructive" (*Politics* 11). As such, a postmodern approach to autobiography has largely been relegated to the annals of literary history. My hope is to invite a re-evaluation of postmodern autobiography as relevant still, especially when considered through the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Such an approach might then resituate the genre as an engaging form of heteroglossic self-renewal – of the self as not merely reduced to incomprehensible written fragments, but as also regenerated through a literary conversation with the other – a process that maintains a healthy "hermeneutics . . . of suspicion" (Ricoeur 30) amid a meaningful examination of self and community. Through such an examination, the postmodern written subject might be seen as extending beyond mere aesthetics to *ethics* – identifying not only with the self, but highly (albeit complicatedly) with the family, the body, and even with language –

such that, “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death” (Kristeva *Powers* 3). As such, the abject autobiographical subject may be seen as not merely negating, but rather as meticulously surrendering identity in order to reconstitute the self as ‘other’. My hope is that such a reinterpretation of postmodern autobiography might welcome a view of the self as not only influenced by, but also as indebted *to* and in service *of* the other, thus ushering in a nuanced sense of community in today’s pluralistic world.

In a larger context, my approach to postmodern autobiography from a Kristevan perspective is meant to complement and broaden the largely diminishing analysis of postmodernism, an artistic movement that has arguably come to a close. Nevertheless, I argue that postmodernism, when viewed as a regenerative process of abjection, still has much to offer through its deconstruction – and thus interrogation – of such matters as identity, sexuality, privilege, memory, and the family. Katrin Amian, a proponent of the postmodern movement, supports such an initiative, deeming criticisms of postmodernism as “simplistic, reactionary attacks on postmodern theory and culture” (10). As such, she heralds a reconsideration of postmodern thought, inviting “new ways of reading postmodernism(s) that might transcend the static language of classification and periodization altogether and push for dynamic interactions and new dialogues instead” (11). My interpretation of postmodern autobiography as a process of abjection heeds such a call, revisioning the genre as a means not only through which to destabilize conventional notions of identity, but as a political act, wherein identity is not merely posited as constructed *by*, but also as ethically accountable *to* one’s larger community. As Ondaatje indicates, “a literary work is a communal act. And this book

could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people. . . . This is their book as much as mine” (175 – emphasis original). Despite intense focus on the self, then – particularly on the difficulty of autobiographical representation amid the constraints of external systems, such as language – many postmodern autobiographers may be seen as outwardly focused on community, as well.

Through the lens of abjection, a postmodern view of the autobiographical self as multiplicitous may be seen as facilitating an ethical view of the other. Nevertheless, many critics maintain that a Butlerean postmodern multiplicity merely deconstructs the self to the point of oblivion – what Theo D’haen considers “functional man, broken up in disparate units, without any essence to him” (323). Yet, Betty Bergland and Chantal Mouffe argue that a postmodern heterogenous view of self allows for more meaningful engagement with an increasingly globalized world. As Bergland writes:

in the pluralistic American society we must challenge the notion of the humanist and essentialist self at the center of autobiography and recognize the multiply situated subject in autobiography . . . for exploring multiple subjectivities with implications for the larger culture. (134)

A Kristevan approach to postmodern autobiography facilitates such a view of the self as multiple. Specifically, a view of the self as a ‘stranger’ or as abjectly foreign encourages the embrace of other ‘strangers’ or ‘foreigners’. As Kristeva explains, “thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as *alter ego*, points it out to me” (*Powers* 10 – emphasis original). In so identifying with the foreigner *within*, then, Kristeva argues that one can no longer fear the foreigner *without*. As Whelan explains:

[Kristeva's work] arises from the heart of postmodernism, representing a deep desire to learn about and appreciate, not to fear, the other.

Underneath this desire is consciousness that in order for the world to have more unity, there is a need to be at ease with the stranger, including the stranger in ourselves (297-8).

Postmodern autobiography as an abject positioning of the self-as-other may thus be seen as a means of facilitating resolution between otherwise disparate entities.

Namjoshi typifies such a desire to reconcile with both the stranger in oneself and in the other, navigating multiple subjectivities from a diasporic perspective. Feeling "reject[ed]" (67) and categorized by east and west – assigned multiple descriptive terms by both, such as "woman . . . lesbian . . . brown-skinned person" (16) – Namjoshi's identity is so abjectly fragmented that she wonders, "I was not myself?" (80) Nevertheless, such multiplicity inspires her to appeal for reconciliation and tolerance between cultures. She writes, "I want so much to join the two halves of my existence . . . I want to bridge my two worlds so that at last there might be the possibility of reconciliation" (85). Her desire to "bridge my two worlds" is one of ethics, a means of sharing the positive aspects of various cultures. Such an aspiration is not, however, one of assimilation. By contrast, Namjoshi wishes to retain one's distinct individuality. This is evident in her response to boarding school classmates, who wish to assimilate her. Eschewing such assimilation, she refers to them as "the mob" (43), as:

reptiles pecking at their prey—like maenads. They were civilised little girls.

Who had taught them the tactics of gangs? Be! Be what? Be

heterosexual! Be Christian! Be American! Be! Be like them? (42)

Instead, Namjoshi aspires to amplify and to learn about one another's (albeit complex) multiplicities through "explaining the Fabulous West to the Mysterious East" (88) in the hopes of mutual understanding. As Goja says to the author, 'What you really want is a happy ending.' 'Yes,' I agree. 'Is that so unusual?'" (130) Consequently, an ethical multiplicity of self becomes apparent when postmodern autobiography is viewed as a dialectical process of abjection.

A Kristevan approach also highlights a call for tolerance and difference in postmodern autobiography, which is often mistaken as mere nihilism or negation. Mouffe concurs with such an ethical view of postmodern autobiography, emphasizing the importance of such an approach in an increasingly globalized and politicized world. She writes:

Society can no longer be defined as a substance having an organic identity. What remains is a society without clearly defined outlines, a social structure that is impossible to describe from the perspective of a single, or universal, point of view. . . . I think that such an approach is extremely suggestive and useful because it allows us to put many phenomena of modern societies in a new perspective. (33-34)

Viewing others as inherently postmodern or multiplicitous, she continues, invites "entirely new perspectives for political action" (35). Again, Namjoshi epitomizes the politics of such multiplicity in identifying not only as self, but also as deceased mother figures – "hav[ing] not one, but two, not two, but three / --three monstrous heads" (18). As such a multiple, she is neither singularly from the east nor the west, saying, "I belong to India and to the West. Both belong to me" (67). Her perspective is not one of mere

postmodern 'narcissism', but is rather political and ethical, simultaneously highlighting and celebrating various class and cultural backgrounds without undermining the complication of doing so. Postmodern autobiography thus may be seen as embracing the abject other in all its multiple iterations as a means of ethical reconciliation.

Consistent with a view of the self as multiple, many postmodern writers examine the boundaries or borders of self amid socially constructive external systems. Just as Kroetsch claims to "disappear" (118) in a language that can never express him – "what I have to say from here on is impossible to say" (Kroetsch 14) – G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg explain that the postmodern autobiographer is often engulfed by his own work. They write, "recent criticism, impelled by both theoretical and practical concerns, has seen the [postmodern] autobiographer in tension with larger cultural or ideological forces always threatening to engulf him or her" (3). Paul Smith explains such a view in describing the autobiographical subject as enmired – and thus overtaken – by external organizing systems, such as language. He writes:

An autobiographical narrative, a writing of the story of the self, is like any other discursive arrangement in that it is subjected to a necessary organization in terms of *discours* and *récit*. . . . [consequently] it can be suggested that there can be no 'subject' of the story, the *récit* . . . [since] the 'subject,' after all, appears only when the *récit* is uttered, enunciated from the place of language . . . [and] any specific mode of organising is, of course, pressured by the historical, the ideological. (104)

As such, Kroetsch argues that autobiographical writing can never be authentic or original, because language itself is always already full of prior meaning – thus even a blank page is ever already saturated. He writes:

We are marginalized by the unspeakably full page of our knowing.
History. Literature. America. Britain. Europe. The [blank] page
announces itself as jam-packed, unalterably full. (95)

Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir elaborates upon the challenge of writing autobiographically amid the constraints and borders of socially constructive systems, such as language, saying:

[postmodern] writers all in one way or another challenge our perception
of the role of fiction in autobiographical writing by transgressing borders,
thereby highlighting the existence of these borders and questioning
conventional modes of autobiographical practice. (8)

A Kristevan approach to postmodern autobiography buttresses such an examination, asking “how can I be without border” (*Powers* 4 – my emphasis), when “I behold a breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away” (*Powers* 4).

Kroetsch seemingly answers this question when discovering new forms of language soon after forsaking his own written language. Specifically, just as one who, “weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within” (Kristeva *Powers* 5) – Kroetsch extends beyond conventional notions of language to discover one of nature. This seems evident in his abject encounter with a boulder, discovering in their (albeit peculiar) kinship “a universe of grass and stone. Not I—we—touched. . . . We knew a rough and blind joining . . . We found our lovers’ talk” (50 –

emphasis original). Similarly, during his abject journey north with a near-blind boat pilot, Kroetsch again observes a language of nature, saying, “every shade of water meant something; every boil spot in its drift and violence spoke a language . . . the river . . . was a shifting narrative of itself” (38-39). Consequently, and despite his many protestations to the contrary, Kroetsch may be seen as not only highlighting the “limits of language” (93), but also as defying such limits by discovering new forms of language. Ondaatje, too, seemingly moves beyond the boundaries of the written word to a bodily language – smelling, hearing, and touching his way through Sri Lanka, thereby abjectly positioning his body as author. In this sense, he says not that his writing, but rather that “[his] body must remember everything” (173). Abjection thus complements existing scholarship on postmodern autobiography by helping illuminate the language(s) that are discovered, and not merely negated, in acts of self-representation.

My Kristevan approach also helps counter the notion of postmodern autobiography as nihilistic to the point of meaninglessness. As Linda Hutcheon explains, many now dismiss postmodernism because of a perceived “narcissistic and ironic appropriation of . . . images and stories and its seeming limited accessibility” (3). My usage of Kristevan theory is meant to highlight an optimism to postmodernism, wherein all is not merely destabilized through deconstruction, but also reconfigured there. As Winifred Whelan contends, abjection is ultimately a hopeful postmodern approach – one firmly grounded in an uncertain, often uncomfortable reality. She writes:

Not all of postmodernism is negative. [Kristeva’s] postmodern world looks with joyful openness to new discoveries and new possibilities for

the future, but at the same time there is unease, uncertainty, and despair whether the new will be better than the old. (289)

Kristeva's work may consequently be seen as embracing the abject deconstructed nature of postmodernism, such that "new discoveries and new possibilities" become apparent amid the "unease, uncertainty, and despair" that are inherent in constructed autobiographical self. Such an approach thus resituates postmodern autobiography as a kind of literary reincarnation, wherein the self does not merely dissolve into "a blank subject" (Kristeva *Powers* 6), but recuperates from such a state through a dialectical process of death and rebirth. For instance, Namjoshi, Nabokov, and Ondaatje may be seen as more than simply dwelling upon the dead of their past – as merely engaging in what Karpinski considers "ghost writing" (233) – but rather as reanimating and reconciling with what has been lost. In Nabokov's case, the author is able to continue relationships from a past of which he feels robbed – albeit a past highly romanticized and idealized by the author. For example, when Nabokov describes prolonging the time it would take his mother to put him to bed at night – saying, "I was merely playing for time by extending every second to its utmost" (83-4) – he seems equally to be speaking of his autobiographical endeavour, an act similarly intended to stall time, so that "nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (77).

For Namjoshi, in turn, autobiography facilitates meaningful discourse with her mother figures of Golda and Goji, something otherwise unachievable, even if they were still alive. The author writes, "during their lifetimes I never had the nerve to say anything to them. But now? Goja? Goldie? I would like if possible to make my peace" (76). Similarly, Ondaatje seeks reanimation and reconciliation through autobiography, saying,

“I had already planned the journey back. . . . [to] those relations . . . who stood in memory like frozen opera. *I wanted to touch them into words*” (16 – my emphasis). In doing so, he becomes more than he was, saying, “I realize I am part of a human pyramid” (20). An abject approach to postmodern autobiography thus facilitates a view of the self as not merely fragmented, but also as renewed and even enriched.

Many postmodernists are concerned with an ethics of challenging static metanarratives that construct and ostensibly stagnate their community or social world. As Hutcheon explains:

postmodernism’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ . . . are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us. (2)

Grealy and Kroetsch highlight language as just such an ‘unnatural entity’, noting “the impossibility of words” (Kroetsch 64), and how “language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler levels of meaning, but does that imply language *gives* meaning, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things?” (Grealy 43-44 – emphasis original). Such socially constructive systems are identified and undermined by postmodernists not merely for reflection, however, but also for revolutionary change – if ever modest. Specifically, Grealy and Kroetsch both attempt to subvert what they consider to be the confines of language, thus inviting a broadening of its usage to better write the self. This is evident when Grealy conducts “experiments with words, shredding their meaning through repetition” (44). This is not merely an intellectual exercise, however, but a

means of enhancement, such that “language itself, words and images, could be wrought and shaped into vessels for truth and beauty” (193).

Kroetsch, in turn, may be seen as abjecting “the great stories . . . what we call the master narratives—[that] are instilled in us from an early age on” (134) through the form of scraps or discards – a “waste” (*Powers* 3) that Kristeva considers abject. Specifically, Kroetsch presents the scrapbook as a means of thwarting dominating master narratives. He writes:

A scrapbook is made up of fragments—or, as its name insists, of scraps. . . . In keeping a scrapbook one faces first of all the matter of choice—what scraps to choose . . . By these processes, one either abandons one’s own story—or takes charge, takes responsibility, for the shaping of that story. (132)

In deconstructing or abjecting master narratives into scraps that might be reshaped, Kroetsch suggests that one might subvert dominant stories. He writes,

the scrapbook made room for the individual inside or even in resistance to the larger story. . . . It left us a space to write out own headlines . . . Scraps allowed us to participate in the story without being swallowed into invisibility. (135)

Kroetsch thus not only identifies the socially constructive nature of master narratives as an intellectual exercise, but also posits an ethical form of resistance through abject scraps, such that, “a scrapbook is a story; a story is about hope” (147). Joseph Fichtelberg supports an interpretation of the ethics of subversion inherent in postmodern autobiography, saying:

it is here that postmodern criticism of autobiography may make an important contribution . . . [By noting] the simultaneous effects of cultural dominance, authorial resistance, and critical practice. . . . It may also suggest an act of creative resistance. . . . For the autobiographer, subversion and creation coincide. (3)

Consequently, postmodern autobiography may be seen as more than just an intellectual exploration and victimhood of oppressive social systems, but also as an ethical means of subverting such systems.

A Kristevan reading of postmodern autobiography may be seen as rescuing the seemingly otherwise dissolved self, wherein the postmodern autobiographical subject is not merely eradicated, but also reconstituted by such eradication. Specifically, Nabokov is seemingly made immortal in his abjection, reincarnated as a “ghostly envoy” (98) now able to “steal into realms that existed before I was conceived” (20), such that:

I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence. (297)

Kroetsch too, is seemingly resuscitated through autobiography. He writes, “I cried and cried until I had cried out my life. After that I was empty enough to be a writer” (201). Consequently, though he loses his identity – “I had cried out my life” – he nevertheless regains it – “I was empty enough to be a writer.” Kroetsch even seems to acknowledge such a process of death and rebirth in his autobiography, describing it as both “life granting and fatal” (55).

Ondaatje similarly ‘disappears’ in his autobiography – rarely making an appearance as its “I” – only to be made more expansive in merging with his family, saying, “I realize I am part of a human pyramid” (20). In turn, Grealy is not merely a victim of disease or a deteriorating medical phenomenon, but one who resituates her identity as bodily, realizing a largely overlooked physicality in a fundamentally ‘ableist’ world, where “none of us understood that the body is a connected thing. . . . [so] I just wanted to lie there, becoming ever more intimate with my body” (57). Her newfound bodily identity not only involves agonizing brushes with death, however, but also with new life, such that:

Each breath was an important exchange with the world around me, each sensation on my skin a tender brush from a reality so beautiful and so mysterious that I would sometimes find myself squealing with the delight of being alive. (90-91)

Namjoshi, in turn, abjectly reincarnates as an “incubus” (11) for the dead, enjoying “a wakeful afterlife” (18) in abjection – in exacting a “repulsive gift . . . that [ensures] ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (Kristeva *Powers* 9). A postmodern approach to autobiography thus affords a positive means of salvation and renewal, such that “a sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades ” (Nabokov 77). Texts by Grealy, Namjoshi, Nabokov, Kroetsch, and Ondaatje thus prove not only to be exemplars of postmodern autobiography, but of postmodern autobiography as a dialectical process of death and rebirth – as abject.

The purpose of my dissertation is to highlight not only the literary value of postmodern autobiography, but its continued relevance from personal, political, and ethical perspectives, specifically when considered as a process of renewal or abjection. Many contemporary critics, however, contend that postmodernism is an endless, redundant delay of literary signification for intellectualism's sake. As Michael Martin maintains, "'To analyze' for many postmodern critics, especially those following Derrida and Foucault, often means 'to destroy'" (84). Yet there are many moments of "hope" (Kroetsch 147), reconciliation" (Namjoshi 85), and even "truth and beauty" (Grealy 193) in a genre that seemingly eschews such notions. When viewed as a process of abjection, postmodern autobiography does not merely deconstruct to the point of oblivion, but rather may be seen as sacrificing the self in order to identify and commune with the other. Lucy Grealy, Suniti Namjoshi, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Kroetsch and Michael Ondaatje each exhibit a type of death and rebirth through abjection in their autobiographical works, suggesting that autobiography, like abjection, is a "repulsive gift . . . that [ensures] 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in . . . sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" (Kristeva *Horror* 9). Postmodern autobiography is thus repositioned not only as a process of negation, but also an ethical act of becoming.

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