

## Writing at, writing to, the lover, the other and the possibility of conversation

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I'm writing a piece called *Mourning of the Lac Women*. In it I'm trying for something I call extreme writing, seeking the limits of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in language, trying for language as discourse— from *discurrere*: to run about, range widely, wander off course – in search of conversation, communication, the constellation of intersubjective becomings.

In order to think about/think with this possibility or impossibility, in this essay I turn to two texts—Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* and Ingaborg Bachmann's *Malina*, as enacting widely differing approaches to the problem 'of interpretation, of the relation of the subject to the object, of crisis, of the concealing power of tradition' (Megill 1985, 268). I'd like to think about Barthes's *Discourse* as a sentimental, nostalgic construction of phallogocentric subjectivity and set it alongside Bachmann's enactment in *Malina* of intersubjectivity as Deleuzian becoming. In doing so I hope to clear the way for a process, in *Mourning of the Lac Women*, in which 'reading and writing become "originary" operations: they involve not the "discovery" of truth but its invention' (Megill 1985, 269).

For Barthes, subjectivity is structured in and through language and thus the transcendental subject is impossible; there is no place beyond the interplay of discursive representations. Language (or discourse) is 'the absolute horizon of intelligibility for thought and knowledge' (quoted in Payne 1998, 147). This position is elaborated further by Lacan with regard to intersubjectivity, the unconscious and desire. There is no way to access the unconscious except through language, through the transference discourse between analyst and analysand, where 'desire is distinguished from straightforward (instinctual or physical) need by its entanglement in precisely those structures of discourse—transference and deferred meaning—which prevent it ever coinciding with its object in a moment of

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achieved equilibrium.’ (quoted in Payne 1998, 146). This is the conceptual context in which Barthes has written *A Lover’s Discourse*.

In his preface to *Discourse*, ‘How this Book is Constructed,’ Barthes says, ‘What is proposed, then, is a portrait – but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak’ (3).

In *Mourning of the Lac Women* I also intend to create a ‘discursive site’ but one in which I open a space in which the lover, the other *can* speak. Barthes says, ‘But isn’t desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn’t the object *always* absent?’ I want to try to make this other present even in the light of this supposed impossibility. Perhaps this is what I mean by extreme writing/finding the limit – trying to find rat holes of possibility, how to *not* have an absent object, an absent other; how not to allow the Other in myself to be absent from me. How to acknowledge that for a mature adult, the fort/da game with a cotton-reel doll is a melancholic, infantile, neurotic site? The discursive site Barthes is operating within seems to me an old-fashioned, romantic, of Mills and Boon idea of love in which there is no real place for the other. It’s a place where there is a masochistic and melancholic faux-wishing for the other, the lover, the Mother. Effectively and affectively, though, this is mere posturing in order to engage in the dubious, narcissistic pleasures of verbosity and erotic imaginings; the other is a justification of a theorisation trap.

In *Discourse* the loved object doesn’t speak; this is the deal struck in order to be able write in the language space afforded by the fort-da-gap/slash game.

Absence persists – I must endure it. Hence I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence: the child has made himself a doll out of a spool, throws it away and picks it up again, miming the mother’s departure and return: a paradigm is created). Absence becomes an active practice, a *business* (which keeps me from doing anything else); there is the creation of a fiction which has many roles. (16)

Here we have Kristeva’s semiotic chora with its oscillations and rhythms and undifferentiated space between the child and the mother and the child’s attempts, in the fort/da game elucidated by Freud, at achieving mastery over abandonment, absence and ‘death.’

Barthes seems to me to be stuck in one of Deleuze and Guattari's 'great dualism machines' (1987), situating himself in the schism, the gap, the liminal space, the slash between fort and da (fort/da), in the slash of the binary between the Kleinian good breast and the bad (good/bad); he relishes the pulsations and rhythms of the Kristevian semiotic chora, Desire seems to be fully situated in the linguistic pleasures of the fort-da-gap/slash game. There are moments when the potential for this loved other to move from objecthood to subjecthood is tentatively considered and then dismissed:

I divine that the true site of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself. It is the originality of the relation which must be conquered' (35) ... I see the other with a double vision: sometimes as object, sometimes as subject; I hesitate between tyranny and obligation. Thus I doom myself to blackmail ... I am condemned to be a saint or monster: unable to be the one, unwilling to be the other: hence I tergiversate: I show my passion a little. (42)

'Conquered'? 'Saint or monster?': no other options? Barthes clings steadfastly to a 'discursive site' which is also a space of humour, hilariously narcissistic, solipsistic, infantile and there can be no doubt that he is aware of this—that he is writing of a 'trivial, childish, sophisticated, obscure incident occurring to a comfortable subject who is merely the victim of his own Image-repertoire'. (49). But this is abject humour, flaunting its discursive production. (Who is laughing with him? Is he just laughing at his own jokes?) It is a site of 'unbecoming-animal,' a masochistic site: 'I shall punish myself, I shall chasten my body' (33). '[T]he anxiety of waiting, in its pure state, requires that I be sitting in a chair within reach of the telephone, without doing anything' (39). It is a site of emotional blackmail: 'I raise before the other the figure of my own disappearance, as it will surely occur, if the other does not yield' (33). It is also a theatrical site in which the lover is the producer, writer, director, actor and dramaturg: 'There is a scenography of waiting ... This is then acted out as a play' (37) ... an amorous oblation without a final theatre: the sign is always victorious' (43). Such a site, however, can only produce a monologue, not even an Oedipal three-hander. It is a melancholic site. The whole book is a performance, a theatre, a dramaturgy of 'love.'

Is it possible to escape the dualism machine in which one can speak or be spoken, but one cannot converse with the other and the Other? Is it possible to rescue the other and the Other from the paralysis of atopia and

from the violence and invisibility of being projected upon, from falling off the top of the Christmas tree and having the glitter scratched off 'the tip of the nose,' in other words from the dead silence of objecthood? How to enter Levinas's site of ethical responsibility, face to face, and recognise the other as human and not advance pointing to my mask? How to jump over that Oedipal garden wall and run as Deleuze and Guattari say in *Anti-Oedipus*? How to go beyond what they call 'binary logic and biunivocal relationships that still dominate psychoanalysis' (1987, 5) to create the rhizome and multiplicity? How to negotiate the binaries of gender, sexuality, 'race'? Is it possible to use that which escapes and subverts these binaries as excesses and resistances, in the service of extreme writing?

What happens when the object, the other, attempts to speak? What happens when she, the lover, the other—a woman—speaks and requires conversation, communication? What is blasted by this speech—what is achieved? Winnicott says that there is no such thing as a child, the child is a *relationship* between itself and the good-enough Mother or parent/carer. What are the technologies, faiths—active listening strategies, tokens of good faith, applications of a Human Rights declaration, encouragements? There is theorising on how language works and there is the theorising on how conversation, communication can happen or if it's possible. Can an extreme writing/finding the limit achieve conversation?

Ingaborg Bachmann's *Malina* is a fictional text written by a woman genuinely attempting to speak/not speak to her male lover or lovers (Ivan and Malina). Bachmann mobilises the father rather than the mother; she doesn't ceaselessly mourn the absent Mother (of course this has its own pitfalls), does not situate her discursive site in the fort-da-gap/slash but, 'In order to stay sane spit in my father's face, but there is no saliva left' (118). The site she is writing within is one of erotic love, child abuse and gender violence and difference, and, rather than making a linguistic/literary meal of it her trajectory of escape energises her writing and the controlled, desperate *necessity* to write, to speak herself out of this site in order to communicate to her lover Ivan, makes it extreme writing for me:

I lie down beside my father, amid the devastation, for my place is here next to him who is sleeping, limp, sad and old. And although it disgusts me to look at him, I must, I have to know what danger still is written in his face, I have to know where the evil originates. (135)

Bachmann remembers the moment of her loss of innocence to gender violence, when she becomes aware of her gendered place in the world, her

potential pleasure in it, the hailing of the other, its immediate destruction and the profound effects of this violence on the integrity of her subjecthood.

... the two little boys ... the older one ... called out: You, hey you, come here, I've got something for you! Neither the words nor the boy's face have been forgotten, my first vocal challenge, so important, nor have I forgotten that first wild joy, the stopping, the hesitating and the first step towards another person ... and all at once the hard clap of a hand on my face: There you go, now you've got it. ... someone who was once me trotted home with measured steps, for once not counting the pickets along the edge of the path, having fallen amongst humans for the very first time. (10)

One of the points of importance for her in her relationship with her beloved Ivan is that, for some reason, the relationship begins to heal these ruptures, heal her: 'At last I'm able to move about in my flesh as well, with the body I have alienated with a certain disdain, I feel how everything inside is changing' (18) 'I lie awake in the night and think how happy I was, happy, and after all I did promise myself I'd never complain again, never accuse anyone, if I might be happy just once' (210). She articulates just why Ivan is so important to her: 'I should bestow on him the highest distinction – the absolute highest – for ... rediscovering me as I once was, my earliest layers, for retrieving me from underneath all the rubble' (18). In the aftermath of this rediscovery of herself she realises she wants, no needs, to 'recreate a taboo' (15). In the hypervigilance of her self-awareness, her closing of doors and lowering of curtains when Ivan is with her reveals this to her: 'I am not trying to keep us hidden,' she says. 'I want to recreate a taboo'(15).

What she means by this recreation of a taboo, I believe, has important ramifications for extreme writing. She wants to recreate a limit, a boundary, the innocence of the ruptured hymen as it were. In her apparently incestuous, ravaged relationship with the patriarchal father and the post-war, misogynist and patriarchal society and culture of Vienna, this limit, this boundary was blasted. She shows that a limit is not necessarily a barrier, something to be breached and overcome; some limits are a necessity for safe subjectivity and the blasting of them constitutes a trauma; a traumatic event. This safe limit is language, speech, the liminal tissue of communication, relationship and so, finally, the text, the book itself. Is this extreme writing: is this finding the limit?

How will she do this? She is specific in her methodology, articulates the practical linguistic, textual strategies and tactics she has found necessary to employ, linguistically and visually.

... he has come to make consonants constant once again and comprehensible, to unlock vowels to their full resounding, to let words come over my lips once more to solve problems and recreate connections long since disrupted ... I will align and superimpose our identical, high-pitched first initials we use to sign our little notes, and after our names unite we could begin with the first words ... we take care not to touch each other in public, nor do we look into each other's eyes except furtively, because Ivan first washed my eyes with his own, removing the images which landed on my retina before his arrival. (15)

And she continues in her clear-eyed way to articulate the difficulties around communication.

We have a lot of head-sentences, hoards of them ... but we're still missing a lot of sentence sets, we don't have a single sentence about feelings, since Ivan never pronounces one and since I don't dare create the first, but I wonder about this far-off, absent set of sentences, despite all the good sentences we already know how to make.' (26)

Later in the book she seems to realise the impossibility of ever finding 'this far-off, absent set of sentences':

We'll never understand each other, we're as different as day and night, he is inhuman with his whispering, his silences and the questions he omits ... I have only complicated a part of my life with my silent stares, my notorious bad playing, my confessions constructed out of fragmented phrases.' (211)

Even the minutiae of parsing, syntactic relations and punctuation are mobilised in this recreation of a taboo:

A shower of words starts in my head, then a flickering, some syllables begin to glow, and brightly coloured commas fly out of all the dependent clauses and the periods which were once black have swollen into balloons which float up to my cranium. (310)

It's not a matter of expressing herself in intuitive verbiage, glossolalia; she consciously crafts and considers, she struggles, not just to articulate in her

own solipsistic discursive site but to communicate even in the face of the impossibility of this. 'I'll find the right phrases, forget the black magic of words, for Ivan I shall write in all artlessness ... I will petition for a reprieve, like the condemned who will receive no pardon' (95).

Still, in the face of all this work, she knows what she is writing: 'Suddenly, on top of the pole from which there is no return, I am able to shout: A book about Hell! A book about Hell! ... I gather all my strength since I must call people in the proper hierarchy, for the sequence is the counterspell' (115–16). She is writing, performing survival, in an illocutionary speech act: 'So you'll never again say: War and Peace. ... never again. It's always war. Here there is always violence. Here there is always struggle. It is the eternal war' (155). 'Once one has survived something then survival itself interferes with understanding, and you don't even know which lives came before and which is your life of today, you even mix up your own lives' (146). 'I don't think about growing old, just about one unknown woman who follows another unknown woman. ... I have not grown any closer to myself. I have only watched one unknown woman slide further and further into another' (194). And, most tellingly and poignantly of all, in her identification with the *clochard* Marcel, who died when he was being give a shower in a social offensive to clean up street people, she says:

When someone is living in the vapours of his happiness, when he no longer has many words at his disposal, simply 'God bless you,' 'May God reward you,' then people should not attempt to wash him, should not wash off what is good for him, should not make him clean for a new life which does not exist. (186–87)

In writing this nameless woman in *Malina*, this survivor of trauma, Bachmann's narrative strategies could be a sampler for theory of trauma and the crisis of survival in the use of nightmares and their literalness, unbidden flashbacks, the belatedness of the memory of the traumatic event which is not fully experienced consciously at the time of occurrence, the numbness and blankness around the memory of the event i.e. the void, the abyss, the gap in the psyche, repression replaced by latency, repetition phenomena. These attributes are of particular pertinence in my attempts at elucidating a methodology of extreme writing/finding the limit as is the necessity, discussed by Caruth in her introduction to *Trauma: explorations in memory*, that a new kind of listening, of witnessing is necessary; a different kind of knowledge, of knowing. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth says: 'In ... relating trauma to the very identity of the self and to one's relation to another .... the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of

human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an *ethical* relation to the real' (92).

The woman in *Malina* goes to extremes of 'masochism' in her sense of what she has survived: 'I try to imagine myself as a fly or a rabbit being abused in some laboratory experiment, or a rat, which has been injected but which still starts jerking and jumping out of hate' (184). 'I worship animals in the night, I lay violent hands on the holiest icons, I'll clutch at all lies, I'll grow bestial in my dreams and will allow myself to be slaughtered like a beast' (81). But what is this 'masochism', really?

I think of Deleuze and Guattari's 'Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible' in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

[F]ewer stupidities would be uttered on the topic of pain, humiliation, and anxiety in masochism if it were understood that it is the becomings-animal that lead the masochism, not the other way around. There are always apparatuses, tools, engines involved, there are always artifices and constraints used in taking nature to the fullest. (260)

Perhaps, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, this bearing 'witness to an inhuman connivance with the animal' is an attempt at avoiding the 'Oedipal symbolic community' (1987, 274). Do these becomings-animal, even, eventually becomings-imperceptible (in the end, the woman in *Malina*, totally disappears) offer insights, techniques for extreme writing/finding the limit (recreating a taboo for instance) by offering ways out of the Oedipal symbolic community, itemising specific politics of becomings-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-child? Psychoanalysts 'see the animal as a representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it is an affect in itself, the drive in person, and representing nothing' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 259). According to Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis only understands domesticated animals, 'the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little baby brother behind them' (1987, 240). What Deleuze and Guattari argue is that 'Becoming produces nothing other than itself ... What is real is the becoming itself' (1987, 238).

I contend that the woman in *Malina* (and probably Bachmann herself) – despite her counterspells, her 'masochistic' attempts at becoming-animal, her linguistic and creative tactics and strategies, her profound understanding of the violence of the Family and Society ('Society is the biggest murder scene of all' (182)), despite her attempts at alliance,

association – has never found her pack, her assemblage. Her animals have not infected her, contagion has not occurred: she has never become the sorcerer-writer. ('If the writer is a sorcerer, it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-world etc' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 240). Would her border, her taboo have been recreated if she had discovered her bordering in the terms Deleuze and Guattari lay down when they say: 'The anomalous is a ... phenomenon of bordering' (1987, 245)?

Her alliance is always with the men, with Ivan, with Malina—or rather a looking—towards them to try to understand them. Even the father is still a veritable curse in her attempts to escape his thrall. Perhaps her damage, the violence and her analytical understanding of it was too profound.

Perhaps she can't escape the velocity, ferocity, centrifugal force of patriarchal heterosexual society even though she sees and articulates the horror? In a bitterly and profoundly feminist statement, worthy of the most radical lesbian separatist, she says: 'Part of it is that men aren't normal, but people are incapable of imagining all the ramifications of the male disease, so accustomed have they become to men's mistakes in judgement and their phenomenal lack of instinct' (180). Yet, in the throes of her struggles to understand her love, eroticism and attraction, she says of Ivan: 'as long as I want you. I don't want myself, just you' (193). And her final understatement: 'Something must have gone astray with the primates and later with the hominoids. A man, a woman ... strange words, a strange mania' (220).

Alternatively, in *Malina* has she, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, in the final analysis, in the final disappearance of the woman, become-imperceptible on the plane of consistency? One could also ask the question Caruth poses in her work on trauma theory: 'Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived?' (1996, 7). Caruth goes on to speak of a 'double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and a *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival' (1996, 7).

Here is what Drucilla Cornell in her *Philosophy of the Limit* says of *Malina* and the style Bachmann has had to create in order to attempt speech:

[T]he smothering of women by the definition of objects demands a new experimental style which does not just redefine what women are. In order to let the object speak, this time, woman as object, the

system of definition must be broken open. The seemingly jarring style of the novel is what allows for the woman's experience to be decoded beyond the definition imposed upon her by her lover Ivan. (186)

So, to rearticulate, for my own extreme writing purposes, Bachmann's strategies, tactics: as well as articulating her dreamworld most effectively, as a good and clever analysand should, she tries to recreate a taboo; she becomes sensitised to language and to her own voice – sensitised to words, syllables, punctuation, she makes consonants constant, she unlocks vowels to their full resonance, begins to use words very consciously to solve problems and recreate connections; she re-images her Image-repertoire, she wants to create new sentence-sets about feelings; she tries to become-animal, rhizomic, Body Without Organs and employs psychic mechanisms that perform trauma and its survival.

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## Author Biography

Kathleen Mary Fallon's most recent work is a four-part project exploring her experiences as the white foster mother of a Torres Strait Islander foster son with disabilities. The project consisted of a feature film, *Call Me Mum*, the script of which was short-listed for the NSW Premier's Prize, an AWGIE and was nominated for four AFI Awards winning Best Female Support Actress Award. It was screened at the Australian Embassy in Paris for NAIDOC Week and for Sorry Day at ACMI. The four-part project also includes a novel *Paydirt* (UWAPublishing, 2007); a play, *Buyback*, which she directed at the Carlton Courthouse in 2006 and a MA (Murdoch). Her novel, *Working Hot*, (Sybylla 1989, Vintage/Random House, 2000) won a Victoria Premier's Prize and she has written an opera with the composer Elena Kats-Chernin, *Matricide – the Musical* (produced by Chamber Made Opera, 1998). She wrote the text for the concert piece, *Laquiem* for the composer Andrée Greenwell. *Laquiem* was performed at The Studio at the Sydney Opera House. She holds a PhD (UniSA) and was the co-recipient of the John Oxley Memory Award, State Library of Queensland in 2013. She lectured in the creative writing programme at the University of Melbourne for eight years. Her collection of short stories, *A fixed place: the long and short of story* (UWAPublishing) is to be launched in June 2019.

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