

**THE TEXTUAL INSCRIPTION OF SELF:
PLACE IN THE RETROSPECTIVE CHILDHOOD**



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Table of Contents:

<u>Abstract</u>	1
<u>Introduction</u>	2
<u>Chapter One:</u>	
Frank McCourt and Limerick	30
<u>Chapter Two:</u>	
Harry Crews and Bacon County	46
<u>Chapter Three:</u>	
Wole Soyinka and Aké	68
<u>Chapter Four:</u>	
Maxine Hong Kingston and China / Kyoko Mori and Kobe	89
<u>Conclusion</u>	108
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	110
<u>Select Bibliography</u>	111

Abstract:

This thesis is a study of five retrospective childhoods; namely, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*, Harry Crews' *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, and Kyoko Mori's *The Dream of Water: A Memoir*. I refer to them as retrospective childhoods in order to collapse the distinction between the memoir and autobiography, because, as Philippe Lejeune points out, as soon as the author allows the child to speak with his own voice, all autobiographical texts regardless of labels, are seen to "enter the space of fiction" (Lejeune, p53). What is more, this fictional space, is, according to Richard N. Coe and James Olney among others, necessarily a mythical space, metaphorically and indeed poetically inscribed by the individual in an effort to understand on his own terms, his human origins. I have chosen as a platform for my research, Gaston Bachelard's essay, "Reveries toward Childhood", in an effort to first establish the retrospective childhood within a (poetic) literary tradition, and second, to formulate from his discussion of archetypes, images and places, a method of reading such texts as extended reveries, or more precisely, as stories. Further, I will explore the correlation between the activity of storytelling and the child's eagerness to fill spaces, mentally as well as physically, and how intimate knowledge of spaces gives rise to the concept of place. In structuring my argument regarding space and place, and the manner in which the child has symbolically taken over the role of the traditional centres of power, I rely principally on the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Yi-Fu Tuan.

Introduction:

“Let us leave to psychoanalysis then the task of curing badly spent childhoods”

While obviously not designed for such a purpose, Gaston Bachelard’s essay, “Reveries toward Childhood”, nevertheless provides the perfect vehicle with which to navigate the often unique, unconventional, and indeed poetic nature of childhood autobiography as an emotional response to the repressive mechanisms of the societal, as experienced by an individual during his own lifetime, and by humanity itself over the span of generations. Clearly there is historical motivation for the application of Bachelard’s theory. Uniquely situated in both the Romantic and post-Freudian (largely Jungian) literary traditions, its importance to the study of childhood autobiography is underlined for instance, by Richard N. Coe, who pinpoints the rise of this sub-genre - which he simply calls the “Childhood” - as occurring roughly in these moments: first, with the decline of the pastoral in the eighteenth century, and then, with added momentum, during the rise of individualism in the post-World War II period¹. In principle, what the theorist describes as poetico-analysis², equates to a neo-Romantic worship of the unbound solitudes of the dreaming child. This then, is to understand the child as counter evolutionary, and the one symbol of permanence (and redemption) in an age of rapid social change and dissension. Thus, he tells us that there exists

¹ In his book *When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*, Coe develops “the idea [introduced by Peter Marinelli] that there is a direct connection between the decline of the pastoral in the closing years of the eighteenth century, killed by utilitarianism and industrialisation, and the rise of the Childhood during the same period” (Coe, p240). Later, he also notes: “During the period which has elapsed since World War II, Childhood autobiographies have proliferated on an unprecedented scale; and during the last decade or so, critical studies of autobiography as a literary genre have also multiplied ... Both reflect that unparalleled upsurge of individualism which, paradoxically, is the by-product of socialistic levelling” (Coe, p274). Further, Peter Coveney adds weight to this argument, revealing in his book, that “the child in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [was] ... the Romantic symbol of growth, the innocence, the pathos, the nostalgia, the regret, the withdrawal, the ‘death’ - the child-image contains not only the response of the artist to his condition, but the response of a whole society, to itself ... as a means of establishing human values in an increasingly secular age” (Coveney, p340). Thus, it is possible that what we have naturally come to associate with the child’s personality - his innocence, rebellions, possessiveness, and inventiveness - as the product of social change, or alternatively, as a reaction to social change. If this is the case, an examination of Bachelard’s essay should, theoretically anyway, reveal to some degree the fundamental character of the child within childhood autobiography.

² Bachelard describes his theory against psychoanalysis as poetico-analysis, for in order to carry out its objective “it would be necessary to be both poet and psychologist” (Bachelard, p123).

... within the human soul the permanence of a nucleus of childhood, an immobile but ever living childhood, outside history, hidden from others, disguised in history when it is recounted, but which has real being only in its instants of illumination which is the same as saying in the moments of its poetic existence (Bachelard, p100).

As such, poetico-analysis equates to a poetic reappraisal of psychoanalytical thought, but operates in such a way, as to set itself up as its antagonist³. In short, he attributes to the short unfortunate history of psychoanalysis, the phenomenon of the unhappy childhood, advising the reader: "Let us leave to psychoanalysis ... the task of curing badly spent childhoods ... There is a task open to poetico-analysis which would help reconstitute within ourselves the being of liberating solitudes" (Bachelard, pp99-100). Bachelard's child is not a predecessor to the adult, compelling his neuroses and complexes, but rather his contemporary⁴, who steers his libidinal drives away from the perverse task of narrative identity and towards the realisation of archetypal human pleasures in what Bachelard terms the cosmos. Bachelard's reveries toward childhood are in fact reveries toward a pre-Oedipal sanctuary, where one may escape the aggressive strategies of the ego and superego. These are aspects of the human psyche he dismisses as the legacy of "objective" adult educators (Bachelard, p107).

This means that cosmic reverie is expressive of an irrational - or to put it more accurately, contra-social⁵ - desire to escape the motivation of a gendered, historicised, culturally specific, physically shaped, time-bound adult consciousness - what we may define as the self⁶ - in order to "dream at the frontier between history

³ In condemnation of psychoanalysis, Bachelard says: "Softening, erasing the traumatic character of certain childhood memories, the salutary task of psychoanalysis, returns to resolve those psychic concentrations formed around a singular event. But a substance does not dissolve into nothing" (Bachelard, p128).

⁴ A similar comment is made by Yi-Fu Tuan, who writes: "the child is father to the man, and the adult's perceptual categories are from time to time infused with emotions that surge out of early experiences" (Tuan, p20).

⁵ Bachelard informs us that the cosmic child operates in indifference to what we may term rational social concerns. Thus, his solitude is not so much anti-social as contra-social: "His solitude is less social, less pitted against society, than the solitude of men" (Bachelard, p108).

⁶ Eakin arrives at similar conclusions, stating: "the self is itself a developmental, time-embedded construct" (Eakin:1992, p198).

and legend” (Bachelard, p101). In effect, it represents a counter impulse to individuation, and one that inspires language to ever grander visions of common ancestry made possible by the anonymity and universality of what we may call cosmic signifiers, the currency of the archetypal childhood. He explains: “Too minutely noted circumstances would prejudice the profound being of the memory. They are paraphrases which disturb the great silent memory” (Bachelard, p120). Furthermore, Bachelard identifies the happy childhood as conditional upon the recognition of what he terms archetypes, images, and places. This effectively means that archetypes, images, and places collectively work to confer upon the unconscious, a surrogate identity as absolute space; and here I refer to the theories of Henri Lefebvre who writes in his book, *The Production of Space*:

... Considered in itself - ‘absolutely’ - absolute space is located nowhere. It has no place because it embodies *all* places, and has a strictly symbolic existence. This is what makes it similar to the fictitious/real space of language, and of that mental space, magically (imaginarily) cut off from the spatial realm, where the consciousness of the ‘subject’ - or self-consciousness - takes form ... It consecrates, and consecration metaphysically identifies any space with fundamentally holy space: the space of a sanctuary is absolute space (Lefebvre, p236).

As if in confirmation, Bachelard insists that all cosmic reverie derives and descends from an origin in archetypes which find expression in our own poetic images, confirms us within all poetic images, and in turn “allows a condensation, into one single place of the ubiquity of the dearest memories” (Bachelard, p121). Thus invested with a function consistent with the Jungian collective unconscious⁷, the childhood place is not a specific geographical location within a person’s personal or collective history. Instead, it operates as an internal register formed momentarily at the intersection between memory and imagination where ideally, all reveries toward childhood will ultimately lead the reader. But for the theorist, childhood appears to represent a unity without a (communal) structure, and subjectivity without a subject,

⁷ Jung writes of the collective unconscious: “In so far as no man is born totally new, but continually repeats the stage of development last reached by the species, he contains unconsciously, as an *a priori* datum, the entire psychic structure developed both upwards and downwards by his ancestors in the course of the ages. This is what gives the unconscious its characteristic “historical” aspect” (Jung, pp279-280).

and it is through these apparent contradictions, that he attempts to make concrete a cosmic totality. Indeed, neither verified as either malicious or benign, Bachelard's child is purely a living elemental Gestalt that facilitates the identification and communication of poetic images and its archetypes within a secret language of the unconscious, alternatively the "pre-conscious" or "post-conscious"⁸, that we refuse to relinquish to anyone - at least, consciously:

... To understand our attachment to the world, it is necessary to add to a childhood, our childhood to each archetype. We cannot love water, fire, the tree without putting a love into them, a friendship that goes back to our childhood ... When we love all these beauties of the world now in the song of the poets, we love them in a new found childhood, a childhood reanimated with that childhood which is latent in each of us (Bachelard, p126).

In fact, to do otherwise, in Bachelard's mind, would be to relinquish territory, and eventual sovereignty of the human psyche to the ego. Herein lies Bachelard's first significant departure from Jung. For Bachelard, the child is not simply an archetype, he is a mysterious entity behind the composition of the greatest and most intimate archetypes⁹.

The theorist's self-appointed task, is to pursue "images which a child could make, images which a poet tells us that a child has made" (Bachelard, p100). Hence, poetico-analysis scours images for the archetypal playgrounds, landmarks and households that could function as the habitat of a child alter ego, rather than looks for an image of the child himself. To put it more precisely, he evacuates the happy childhood of the organic principles that originally informed it - namely, those derived from the body. As he outlines in *The Poetics of Space*: "my problem is to discuss the images of a pure, free imagination, a liberating imagination that has no

⁸ Jung explains: "Psychologically speaking, ... the 'child' [archetype] symbolises the pre-conscious and the post-conscious essence of man. His pre-conscious essence is the unconscious state of earliest childhood; his post-conscious is an anticipation by analogy of life after death" (Jung, p178).

⁹ Bachelard informs the reader: "The great archetype of life beginning brings to every beginning the psychic energy which Jung recognised in every archetype. In our reveries toward childhood, all the archetypes which link man to the world, which provide a poetic harmony between man and the universe, are, in some sort, revitalized" (Bachelard, p124),

connection with organic incitements” (Bachelard: 1994, p225). As far as Bachelard is concerned, to recognise the body is to place childhood in the “lesser” context of sexual drives and human evolution. This would be to understand the child purely from the perspective of the adult, retrospective of his burdensome experiences in a rational world of perpetual disappointments and (Oedipal) complexes. It naturally follows then, that cosmic reveries are so to speak, without human origins and destinations. Existing purely for the poetic moment, they are portals into absolute space, searching out the centres (or rather, the ultimate centre) in a cosmically charged unconscious. This goes against Jung who suggests there is no correlative centre in the unconscious, to that conscious centre the ego: “I would hardly venture to assume that there is in the unconscious a ruling principle analogous to the ego. As a matter of fact, everything points to the contrary” (Jung, p276)¹⁰. Bachelard then, is not so much writing about childhood, as weaving his reveries around it, uncovering the catacombs of imaginative possibilities, and inviting the reader’s participation in his daydreams.

Given this evidence, it may be suggested that in order to talk directly about childhood - to attempt the child in the round, if you will - we must first consider the body, and the physical sensations originating from that body¹¹. Unlike the adult body which has grown to strange proportions not anticipated by the child and occupies a finite space, the infant body, because of its limited motor capacities, floats through vague moments in non-space caused by being held, moved about, attended to, and fed. Perhaps this is why Bachelard writes: “Childhood is a human water, a water which comes from the shadows” (Bachelard, p112). The infant’s supple bones and even softer skin, mimic to an extent, the properties of water, as does his relationship to the people and objects in his world, wholly defined as it is by the ebb and flow of sensations. Indeed, at this unconscious moment, the infant is

¹⁰ Although Jung admits: “under certain conditions the unconscious is capable of taking over the role of the ego”, he cautions that “[t]he consequence of this exchange is insanity and confusion, because the unconscious is not a second personality with organised and centralized functions but in all probability a decentralized congeries of psychic processes” (Jung, p278).

¹¹ On this subject, Lefebvre suggests: “Like (supposedly) primitive peoples, the child, who, doubtless on account of its unproductive and subservient role, is mistakenly viewed as a simple being, must make the transition from the space of its body to its body in space. And, once that operation is complete, it must proceed to the perception and conceptualization of space” (Lefebvre, p294).

in perfect synthesis with his environment. Tuan in fact tells us:

... The infant has no world. He cannot distinguish between self and external environment. He feels, but his sensations are not localised in space. The pain is simply there, and he responds to it with crying; he does not seem to locate it in some specific part of his body ...

During the first weeks of life the infant's eyes cannot focus properly ... even in his fourth month the infant shows little interest in exploring the world visually beyond the range of three feet (Tuan, p20).

This "un-self" if you will, is yet to understand that his sensations originate from the body, indiscriminately (and instinctively) feeds off his world. He comprehends neither the external nor internal mechanisms behind the impulse, or for that matter, behind its satisfaction. Regardless of these factors, there is nevertheless one recognised focal point to his existence, and that is the mouth: an orifice with which he derives a concentration of pleasures when at the mother's breast. "An infant explores the environment with his mouth", Tuan explains, but what is more,

... The mouth adjusts to the contour of the mother's breast. Sucking is a most rewarding activity, for it requires participation by the different senses of touch, smell, and taste ... The stomach distends and contracts as food is taken in and digested. This physiological function, unlike breathing, is consciously identified with alternating states of distress and bliss. "Empty" and "full" are visceral experiences of lasting importance to the human being (Tuan, p21).

In light of this, there is need to refine the argument through several interrelated points. First of all, the un-self does not simply reside in non-space, as that would in effect, require him to be eternally empty.

Instead, (and secondly) in his happy moments, he lives in anti-space, for the mouth is so to speak, a vacuum that operates in anticipation of being made full, complete, or whole by the breast. Taken to its very extreme, or rather, to cosmic

proportions, sucking is an activity that invites the collapse of space (and time) to the point of infinite density. It is in this (irrational) idea perhaps, which lies the origin of the universal childhood place; an “immortality” later bestowed almost instinctively, to the objects, people, and landscapes of a particular region of the world, so that it becomes in the end, an absolute space. Tuan adds: “As the child grows he becomes attached to objects other than significant persons and, eventually, to localities. Place, to the child, is a large and somewhat immobile type of object” (Tuan, p29). Thirdly, we may interpret the infant’s relationship to his “world” as symbiotic. This is to acknowledge that the infant derives purpose and place from an organic merger with the intimate objects of his world. He appends himself first and foremost to the breast (because of its promise of milk), but thereafter, to other things such as toys and fingers that he may fit, and experience in the mouth. In other words, by closing the mouth around an object, the un-self explores its contours, textures and tastes as aspects of his being - as grand “geographical” features - simulated for an instant in the interior of the mouth. Subsequent to this analysis, an immediate parallel can be drawn between the nature of the infant, and the urban power-bases of absolute space, acknowledged by Lefebvre to be similarly symbiotic:

The town and its site lives off the surrounding country, exacting tribute therefrom both in the form of agricultural produce and in the form of work in the fields ...

Thus the town - urban space - has a symbiotic relationship with that rural space over which (if often with much difficulty) it holds sway. Peasants are ever prone to restlessness, and as for herders, nomadic or semi-nomadic, the town has always found it hard to contain them - they are, in fact, ever potential conquerors of the town (Lefebvre, p235).

Indeed, the infant, and oftentimes the young child, naturally presume with what is later revealed as unfounded complacency, their rightful authority over the care giver. Thus, the child’s hold on power, is at best, illusory, and being withheld a certain privilege, or denied a particular wish (no matter how trivial it may seem to the adult), finally culminates in the dismissal of absolute space into the deepest recesses of repressed memory. In essence, the greatest difference between the ruling elite and

the young child, is that the ruling elite has, as the vehicle of their reign, the resources to implement threats of punishment, or promises of rewards - that perfect balance of Machiavellian traits - designed to keep subordinate the peasant population to their will. In comparison, the child's arsenal against the parent, includes only verbal demands and tantrums, actions which, more often than not, impacts negatively on his condition, motivating the parent to reprimand him in some way. Lastly, it can be concluded, that the satisfaction of his primitive pleasures nurtures a sense of *belonging*, both as a value accruing to him, and as a generic principle underlining human existence. Intimacy, it would appear, is a concept measured by the absence of space; but despite this, and somewhat paradoxically, even the infant can be said to involve himself in the production of space as part and parcel of his psychological development.

If we explore the early stages of childhood development in greater detail, we find that body is a term that is readily interchangeable with cosmos. But more significantly, this body cosmic is suspended between the finite, as represented by feeling full, and infinite, by feeling empty¹². Therefore, manifested along with the cessation and revival of appetites, are absolute values embodying the polar concepts of pleasure and "unpleasure"¹³, that determine for the infant, a personal agenda, at times converging with, but nevertheless independent of, the forces of socialisation. To put it simply, it is an inner drive towards the filling up of holes (or spaces) in pursuit of place - a drive that ideally, sustains an imagined autonomy in a private universe (an interior space), throughout his early childhood, and possibly even beyond. The infant, in other words, strives not only to purge emptiness within the body cosmic, but with added mobility, and the gradual ownership of his body, the vacant spaces that begin to "appear" in his external surroundings (and social

¹² Again, we can draw another parallel with absolute space, because "absolute space", Lefebvre says, "embodied an antagonism between full and empty" (Lefebvre, p49).

¹³ In the opening lines of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud reveals: "In the theory of psycho-analysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension - that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure" (Freud:1961, p1).

fabric), in perfect proportion to his own diminutive body¹⁴. The symbiotic impulse is thereby redirected, from being projected vaguely inward, to being projected ever outward, creating in the process, little hide-away places where the child may reside. Subsequently, just as objects are, so to speak, magnified by the tongue, these holes that caress, embrace, or cradle the body - communicating “roundness” (because “everything round invites a caress” [Bachelard: 1994, p236])¹⁵ - emerge as expressions of cosmic centrality. Tuan writes of place(s):

... If we define place broadly as focus of value, of nurture and support, then the mother is the child's primary place. Mother may well be the first enduring and independent object in the infant's world of fleeting impressions. Later she is recognized by the child as his essential shelter and dependable source of physical and psychological comfort ... The mother is mobile, but to the child she nonetheless stands for stability and permanence ... A strange world holds little fear for the young child provided the mother is nearby, for she is his familiar environment and haven. A child is adrift - placeless - without the supportive parent (Tuan, p29).

In short, childhood places function as organic shelters for the body, regardless of whether they are natural or man-made. Further, it seems the mother's body, or indeed any adult body possessed of intimate localities, such as a mouth that kisses him, arms that stroke him, a lap upon which he sits, can accordingly be deemed a place. However, adults who are mobile, and more importantly, engaged in their own activities (unrelated to the child's needs and wants) become cloaked in mysterious forces, and are, in my opinion, consumed by non-space, and an emptiness beyond the periphery of childhood perceptions and influence. For example, if the adult is standing and the child cannot convince him or her to sit, there is in effect no lap he may occupy. Place then, only feels permanent and immobile during the moment of

¹⁴ “Do they [children] feel a need to be in places that conform to their own size?”, Tuan asks, “Hints of such need do exist. Infants for example, are known to crawl under the grand piano, where they sit in an apparent state of bliss. Older children in their play seek out nooks and corners both in man-made environments and in nature” (Tuan, p32).

¹⁵ In “The Phenomenology of Roundness”, Bachelard tells us: “images of *full roundness* help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside. For when it is experienced from the inside, devoid of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round” (Bachelard: 1994, p234).

the child's residency (and indeed for the moment of reverie); between the recognition of a cosmic space he may fill, until the time he has to leave, and oftentimes, only begrudgingly. This naturally leads to speculation about whether or not the child can form a more lasting relationship with the inanimate objects of his world. I suspect, that initially he could, but even "the primitive immensities" (Bachelard, p102) of trees, rocks and rivers are capable of treachery, secretly "shrinking" in the child's absence, so that by the time he reaches adolescence he can no longer find in them a sufficient space that will accommodate him. To summarise in brief, the child from his infancy, instinctively creates (absolute) space in order that he may "inhabit" new places. However, he is does this, as previously stated, under the illusion that his desires will always be satisfied. Therefore, for a desire to go unsatisfied, creates a new kind of space which works to "un-centre" him, and override his cosmic impulses. Therefore, this "uninhabitable" exterior space, this void if you will, in which the only beacon of existence is the Other, signals the demise of his imaginative independence in interior spaces. It ensures, in the words of Bachelard, "that the child will follow closely in the path of the lives of others" (Bachelard, p107). To put it another way, to attempt the child in the round, is to recognise exterior space and the child as a (small) isolated body in motion within that space. It must be noted, that imprisoned in such a reality - and this must be recognised as the (auto)biographer's reality - the child's inner core is seen to shrink, and his imaginative impulses distend into exterior space, in one final burst of imaginative life in search of a cosmos without, before disappearing into the shadows of adulthood.

In any case, this all goes to prove that the production of space plays an integral part in the realisation of place and the formation of childhood identity. And by implication, adult identity, and resurrection of childhood place and identity. Moreover, its importance to the human condition is further underlined when one considers that even the one-month-old infant, visually impaired, and immobile excepting a few uncertain gestures, can already perceive and even manufacture, in some vague way, different kinds of space in the body cosmic. Let us take for example, the evidence presented by Tuan:

... An infant a few weeks old has already learned to heed human presence. He begins to acquire a sense of distance and direction through the need to judge where a grown-up may be. Toward the end of the first month of life an infant is likely to follow with his eyes only one distant precept - the grownup's face. A hungry and crying baby calms down and opens his mouth or makes sucking movements when he sees an adult approaching (Tuan, pp22-23).

Thus evident in this most primal ritual, is an innate understanding on the part of the infant, concerning his centrality inside a space as evidenced by his limited vision and his crying. The un-self, existing by the short lifespan of his appetites, knows the mother is not present because he cannot sense her or see her face. But despite this, he anticipates that if he cries, she will fill his space, inviting its dissolution. Visual space in this instance, has very imprecise points of reference - no absolute values - measured as it is, rather superficially, between not being able to see the mother and crying, and being able to see her again and calming down. Therefore, it must be noted that the infant's visual experiences, merely supplement his oral experiences. After all, if, for whatever reason, he does not cry when he is hungry, there is in truth, no guarantee of feeding, even if the mother already occupies his visual space at the time. Thus, even before the infant learns to manipulate his voice into the distinct shape of language, he employs it most effectively, to control the supply of nourishment, and in the process, the actions of the mother, making her conform to the tyranny of his appetites.

What is more, while “[h]is visual space lacks structure and permanence. Objects in it are impressions; hence they tend to exist for the infant only so long as they in his visual field” (Tuan, p21); the often repeated rituals of the mouth, complemented by touch, confirms a familiarity and permanence to objects that would otherwise be transitory and superfluous. Perhaps I oversimplify matters, but what significance is a mother's face, without intimate knowledge of the breast or its equivalent? In addition, what would motivate the older infant to crawl towards the mother (marking out and filling territory in exterior space) if it were not for her face

and breast? More importantly, there is indeed a certain symmetry and logic to all his oral experiences (and basic biological functions), that seem to indicate to the infant, the growing dimensions of a largely symbolic space that he will in time, come to fill. In this regard, the mouth is, metaphorically speaking, the one vanishing point aiding the production of space based upon a system of inverted perspective. Thus, instead of space becoming smaller the further away it gets, it is seen to grow larger, and more immense. At this infant stage, the nature of symbolic space is based, for want of a better term, on scientific principles. After all, the infant derives its dimensions from undeniably linear (bipolar) id based impulses, the primitive but vital facts that govern his being. But for the older child, who has the ability to lapse effortlessly into daydream, thinking about adulthood and about taking up adult roles - as shown his declarations that he wants to become a policeman, doctor, postman et cetera when he grows up - clearly establishes such a space in his mind.

In comparison to that of the child, it is harder to define the role of symbolic space in regard to the life of the infant. However, if we define space very simply as an interval between two or more points - which in the case of the infant, are basically full and empty - suffice it to say, that the in-between times created by space, introduces him, above other things, to the notion of leisure and indeed solitude, arguably the root of all invention. As Bachelard himself announces: "In solitude, it [childhood] can relax its aches. When the human world leaves him in peace, the child feels like the son of the cosmos" (Bachelard, p99). Ultimately, this means the infant is awakened to the manifold possibilities of imaginative exploration, long before he begins to contemplate with any real conviction, physical ones¹⁶. What is more, this would locate the heart of the cosmos, not at the extreme moments in prehistory (understood as full and empty), but during in-between times, somewhat outside the immediate concern of his physical appetites. The theorist in fact appears in agreement with this appraisal, informing the reader in "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside": "man is half-open being", adding:

¹⁶ Tuan writes: "An eight-month-old child is aware of noises, particularly animal and human noises, in the next room. He attends to them; his sphere of interest expands what is visible and of pressing concern. However, his behavioural space remains small. He seems easily discouraged by perceived barriers" (Tuan, p23).

But how many daydreams we should have to analyze under the simple heading of Doors! For the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open. In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptations to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings (Bachelard: 1994, p222).

For Bachelard, it poses such a temptation. Cosmic reveries presents to its readership, a half-open door into the cosmos, allowing those that choose to enter, to dream again as the child. By the same token, psychoanalysis, in a similar fashion, presents to us a half-open door. However, unlike poetico-analysis, it advises that we enter in order to vanquish our demons, at the same time warning us that should we decide not to, or attempt to close the door in an effort to repress its contents, it will instead invade our conscious reality as neurosis. In short, this is evidence that Bachelard, in "Reveries toward Childhood", perhaps fails to recognise - but more likely, decides to purposefully overlook the truth - that the monsters in the closet are as much a part of childhood imagination as tranquil, monumental landscapes. This raises the question: is the theorist despite his declarations of liberated happy childhood, simultaneously in a state of repressed unhappy childhood? Whatever the answer, his objections to unhappy childhood is no doubt centred on its apparent dependence on conscious reality. In other words, the monsters of deeply rooted unpleasure, can only be remedied - if in fact, they can be at all - when acknowledged in the harsh light of what Lefebvre terms abstract space; which, he tells us, emerged "historically" at a "time that productive activity (labour) became no longer one with the process of reproduction which perpetuated social life" (Lefebvre, p49). As such, it accelerates the demise of self-consciousness in the emptiness of mechanised motion (as opposed to ritualised motion), and adds greater urgency to the realisation of post-conscious reality.

This underlines the fact that the human being - or at least, modern man - is a creature prone to overlook his present circumstances in pursuit of ever greener pastures. Just as the child looks toward adulthood as the fulfilment of his being, the adult it appears, searches for an afterlife or as it happens, its likeness. The poetical, it

can be said, denotes an organic - but disembodied - principle of childhood evoked in pursuit of spatial coherence, which, the human condition having exhausted the sanity-saving potential of the political, religious and historical, is now dependent upon for direction and purpose:

... The physical analogy, the idea of an organic space, is thus called upon only by systems of knowledge or power that are in decline. The ideological appeal to the organism is by extension an appeal to a unity, and beyond that unity (or short of it) to an origin deemed to be known with absolute certainty, identified beyond any possible doubt - an origin which legitimates and justifies. The notion of an organic space implies a myth of origins, and its adduction eliminates any account of genesis, any study of transformations, in favour of an image of continuity and a cautious evolutionism (Lefebvre, p275).

The very idea of the organism then, is symbolic of an intense and intimate sense of belonging and community, that goes beyond the short lifespan of a child's natural appetites, and beyond that of cultural monuments and architecture. To put it simply, the child is a creature of appetites staking out in whatever limited capacity, territory in socio-poetic space made barren and destitute - hence abstract - by aggressive capitalist forces motivating urbanisation, industrialisation and individualism. For Bachelard - and it must be said that his position, unlike his methods, is not unique - the pre-conscious childhood restores to the human being a poetic post-conscious future, by invoking an secular origin wholly separate from the abstract and artificial. As a result, the adult, figuratively speaking, is returned to his infancy to discover again the body cosmic in bits and pieces, in order that he may of his own accord reclaim full ownership of his body on an absolute, and indeed mythical level¹⁷. It naturally follows, we must accept the pleasure principle toward the poetical, to accommodate those sadomasochistic drives that have long engaged Freud and his

¹⁷ "How is the human being related to the earth and the cosmos?" Tuan asks herself, and in reply she proposes two answers: "In one schema the human body is perceived to be an image of the cosmos. In the other man is the center of a cosmic frame oriented to the cardinal points and the vertical axis. We have two attempts to organize space, ... to gain a sense of security in the universe" (Tuan, p88). Thus, we must consider the young child's initial exploration of his body - imaginative, sexual or otherwise - as the foundation stones of cosmic understanding.

predecessors, but in order that we may transcend them upon reaching the poetical. This means then, for the self-conscious adult casually looking back on his past - that is, the adult trapped in the denaturalising machinery of the societal - the child is a small insignificant figure in the distance existing upon a landscape in utter ruin¹⁸. In contrast, the (day)dreamer, both poet and autobiographer, can again become the child, and witness the world grow ever beautiful and immense before him, hence enjoy once more the perfect evolution of the organism from its infancy.

Such evidence stands in testimony of the theorist's declaration: "what a spiral man's being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral! One no longer knows *right away* whether one is running toward the center or escaping" (Bachelard: 1994, p214). In light of this statement, is the theorist himself truly escaping adulthood, or simply inscribing himself deeper inside its infrastructure? After all, it is impossible for self-consciousness to disappear completely with the rise of poetico-analysis. Instead, it has been reconstituted inside a new (cosmic) consciousness. This is due to the fact that the only stage upon which the theorist's reveries can leave an impression is still erected upon the societal, but more precisely, within language. We can therefore state that archetypes feature in language, as an undefinable signified in a discourse of boundless preexistence, that employs the poetic image as its signifier, and place as sign.

Reveries as a rule, are woven around, and emerges out of, the mere suggestion of a centre; for as soon as you fix a centre, you create a space with formal dimensions which quickly begins to depreciate in value: "This image does not transpose a reality. It would be ridiculous, in fact, to ask the dreamer its dimensions. It does not lend itself to geometrical intuition, but is a solid framework for secret being" (Bachelard: 1994, p228). In brief, to embrace human life in all its beauty and wretchedness is to be imprisoned by the constraints of mortality. Individual childhood images then, are like stray photographs accidentally discovered in someone else's attic: they have the potential to remind us of our own hidden

¹⁸ Bachelard reveals early in his essay: "Memory is a field full of psychological ruins, a whatnot full of memories" (Bachelard, p100).

childhood when collectively reinvested in place, but will not make us recount names, dates, or events, because they are impersonal and detached from our own conscious sense of the historical. Defined purely in that moment of unconscious discovery - which equates to a suspension of narrative purpose and design - the image has the power to surprise even the poet engaged in its composition: "It has reflected an astonished face. Its mirror is not that of a fountain. A narcissus can take no pleasure there" (Bachelard, p114). To go further, the poetic image is similar in concept to a parabolic mirror: it harnesses the psychic energy of childhood reflected upon its surface so that the "fire ... becomes a light" (Bachelard, p124) of an almost blinding - and binding - intensity. This eventuates in the language of reverie achieving a total reflexivity so that it embraces all of humanity in its childhood remembrance. Reveries as a result, can be said to stimulate a semi-consciousness, perhaps better phrased as metaphysical consciousness. The poetic images gently guide the reader into his own private daydreams to begin his excursions into absolute space, but they cannot by themselves compel him to dream "well". In short, the reader must conduct himself as a poetico-analyst. As Bachelard admits: "Such images lack stability. As soon as we depart from expression as it is, as the author gives it, in all spontaneity, we risk relapsing into literal meaning" (Bachelard:1994, p228). In other words, to apply a literal interpretation to the image, is to reduce it to a finite and empty spaces inside of social discourse. Thus, to truly appreciate the image, the reader must comprehend it as a metaphorical snapshot of the unknowable qualities of the cosmos. In this manner, it functions correlatively to the retrospective child, which can also be understood as a metaphorical snapshot, but conveyed via the self¹⁹. Therefore we may regard the self in this instance as a literary construct - or alternatively, a construct within language - standing in for the actual author. As such, it exists purely to fill the body of a text (an interior space, and organic shelter), and consequently, will not recognise in anyway, the outside world. In fact, as soon as he is scripted, the self awaits direct conveyance to the reader's psychological interior, circumventing external spaces - and by the same

¹⁹ James Olney writes in "A Theory of Autobiography": "Metaphor says very little about what the world is, or is like, but a great deal about what I am, or am like, and about what I am becoming; and in the end it connects me more nearly with the deep reaches of myself than with an objective universe" (Olney: 1972, p32).

token, the author - altogether²⁰. Unlike Bachelard's reveries however, the autobiographical text has a double life, allowing the reader to discover the poetics of a childhood (the cosmos), alongside the facts²¹ of a childhood whatever form they may take.

At its core, the struggle between childhood and adulthood as outlined by Bachelard and by the autobiographer, embodies a bitter antithesis between absolute and abstract space. For the adult, his childhood may be so far removed from his present condition - so surreal, tragic, or magical - that retrospectively, it appears to belong to an unreal abstract space. While from the child's perspective - located as he is in his own absolute space - the activities of adults (in which he has no part), may be considered so strange that it is rendered abstract. In any case, it seems that in our modern isolation, there is a growing consensus the child is the sole proprietor of absolute space, a mythical space no longer born out of necessity (namely, out of labour and social imperatives²²), but at leisure - in solitary reveries.

Absolute space it can be said, owes its original inception to a communal consciousness, formed through ritual practices that worked to inscribe a psychic and accumulative centre to human existence. In other words, it carved out a niche (a social space) within nature, and in the process, erased from its premises all but the symbolic - and by the same token, idealised - representations of nature. In short, its dimensions were redesigned by human hands to perfectly "house" the human body. "The paradox here" Lefebvre says, "is that it continued to be perceived as a part of nature" (Lefebvre, p234). But with the near total erasure of communal

²⁰ Roland Barthes concludes in "The Death of the Author": "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, p118). While I do not take such an antagonistic stance against the author, Barthes comment does embody an essential truth: that even the autobiographical text has a life wholly separate from its author, and an intimate relationship with the reader, the author cannot share in. Further, if we regard childhood autobiography or memoir as a form of extended reverie, then we could locate the text's sole origins in a "cosmic scriptor", to adapt Barthes' term.

²¹ By this I mean basically the when, where, what, and hows of a childhood.

²² Lefebvre writes: "Absolute space, religious and political in character, was a product of the bonds of consanguinity, soil and language, but out of it evolved a space which was relativized and historical. Not that absolute space disappeared in the process; rather it survived as the bedrock of historical space and the basis of representational spaces (religious, magical and political symbolisms) (Lefebvre, p48).

values in Western society, where presently “[h]istory is experienced as nostalgia, and nature as regret” (Lefebvre, p51), childhood remains the only memory in our personal or common experiences, that we can examine without a corrosive cynicism. “Ah!”, Bachelard sighs, “how solid we would be within ourselves if we could live, live again without nostalgia and in complete ardor, in our primitive world” (Bachelard, p103). Herein lies the guiding philosophy of poetico-analysis: the child, when rendered by the (auto)biographer’s pen, or for that matter, remembered in adult recollection, can only fuel a deep and lasting regret: a regret that is located in, and confined to, an individual lifetime, or to state it more minutely, an individual adulthood. In order to sanctify the child as godhead, he cannot be lamented for his passing, or analysed in his various social guises²³. Hence self-consciousness is viewed principally as the unhappy vehicle for loss, and to enjoy any true measure of happy childhood, an individual must be blissfully unconscious of himself, as a self. It must be noted however, that the self Bachelard laments, is in actuality, very different from its counterpart - its immortalised alter ego if you will - in the autobiography, for it is a polymorphous and terminal creature caught between the spiralling fortunes of exterior (abstract) spaces and the compelling, but imprisoning aesthetic of the Lacanian mirror image.

Although Lefebvre suggests that young children can happily occupy abstract space:

... Perhaps young children can live in a space of this kind, with its indifference to age and sex (and even to time itself), but adolescence perforce suffers from it, for it cannot discern its own reality therein: it furnishes no male or female images nor any images of possible pleasure. Inasmuch as adolescents are unable to challenge either the dominant system’s imperious architecture or its deployment of signs, it is only by way of revolt that they have any prospect of recovering the world of differences - the natural, the sensory/sexual, sexuality and pleasure (Lefebvre, p50),

it seems that our initial introduction to the mirror, and our continued social

²³ Bachelard informs the reader that “[t]he solitude of the child is more secret than the solitude of the man” (Bachelard, p107), and observing him at play or posing questions will not necessarily reveal his true character.

dependence upon it, breeds a similar - but more intense - kind of unreal pleasure. Never once in our ritual visitations to its frame, do we derive from the image any measure of time, age, or for that matter, sexual identity. These are (abstract) concepts that have become familiar to us during the course of our education into adulthood. This is to recognise first of all, what Lacan calls the “Ideal-I” (Lacan, p123) as a sexless, or more accurately asexual image. After all, for how can an image be “ideal” if it already informs us during our infancy of our limitations and cumbersome social roles? Secondly, our moments before the mirror are so fleeting, regulated, and rehearsed that they qualify neither as self-examination nor as space, but perhaps only as abstract fragments of space. For all intents and purposes, the mirror is a two-dimensional canvas that imprisons the self in an image without depth or scope, forcing an individual into a passive - thus traditionally feminine - role. What is more, the inverted image positions the observer in the role of the Other. Thus, when we groom ourselves in front of the mirror, we are in fact preparing our image “objectively” so to speak, into aesthetic values for another’s conscious appraisal. We are therefore, called upon to adorn a social disguise, to transform the Ideal-I into a recognisable sexual identity. Conversely, ritual dependence upon the mirror disadvantages girls in particular, who are instructed by patriarchal conventions to meet the often high expectations set by the male gaze, or effectively face erasure. Feminine virtue it appears, is fully represented in the frame of the mirror. We could further claim that all gender prescriptions carry us into abstract space, which, like the mirror’s surface, is incapable of conveying the true complexities of one’s psychological interior. Outside of any true system of belief, abstract space has very real implications as the platform for psychoanalysis. In abstract space,

... fertility and fulfilment are identical ... The representation of space, in thrall to both knowledge and power, leaves only the narrowest leeway to representational spaces, which are limited to works, images and memories whose content, whether sensory, sensual or sexual, is so far displaced that it hardly achieves symbolic force (Lefebvre, pp49-50).

This then, is to recognise the ego as unstable, and prone to constant abstraction depending on the nature of our associations with the Other²⁴. Abstract space is not “real”, that is, not concretely real, in the manner of the fully realised poetic image. By this, I mean to make the distinction between what is *felt* to be real, and what one is coerced (by the Other) into believing is real. As Bachelard similarly relates: “Seeing and showing are phenomenologically in violent antithesis. And just how could adults show us the world they have lost!” (Bachelard, p127).

In the context of Bachelard’s theory, acceptance of the socialised space contained within the frame²⁵ of this metaphorical mirror (with the self in the foreground clearly delineated from the Other in the background), is symbolic of a reversal of psychic trends that occurs within the mind of the child during the course of his education into family and society; a process by which “he loses his absolute right to imagine the world” (Bachelard, p107). Unable to avert his gaze from this complete (and compelling) image of himself that consequently imposes boundaries, scale, distance and other such artificial limitations upon his psychology, the “premature man” (Bachelard, p107) as Bachelard refers to him, finally forsakes his extensive private life of childhood solitudes and silences his natural reverie in order to function as a self contracted into community. In other words, the child’s imaginative instincts for the poetic are retarded and indefinitely suspended by the inevitability of social purpose and the ever diminishing capacity for solitary flight into the cosmos. However, it can just as easily define the cosmos of poetico-analysis, which can only be glimpsed momentarily for the duration of the image. But perhaps all images operate to imprison the mind in some way. In fact, the exact same criticism can be laid at Bachelard and his theory of poetico-analysis as it seems to reduce childhood experience²⁶ to pleasurable (libidinal) sensations, which

²⁴ In the opening talk-story to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, Tang Ao is physically and psychologically turned into a woman by having his feet bound, ears pierced, facial hair plucked and face covered in make-up. She writes: “He served a meal at the queen’s court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swivelled because of his shaped feet” (Kingston: 1981, p10).

²⁵ According to Bachelard, the pure memories of childhood can never be “framed images” (Bachelard, p115), for our imperfect memories are in a sense blurred and extend into the infinite.

²⁶ “Experience” for Bachelard, is itself a reductive term as it designates a mode of perception only adopted in adulthood. He writes: “In the child’s reverie, the image takes precedent over everything else. Experiences come only later” (Bachelard, p102).

has no claim to agency - or point of reference - outside of the language of reverie. In truth, the only obvious differences between reverie and social discourse lies in the fact that reverie purposefully maintains and even promotes psychic concentrations around a singular universal childhood (as opposed to event), and anticipates “the oneirism which has no preconditions” (Bachelard, p106), while discourse a self with preconditions (although these preconditions may not be immediately apparent to the recently initiated subject).

Bachelard’s child then, is seen to operate in two exclusive and irreducible modes of discourse in order to preserve his solitudes and subjectivity as systems of identity. As a direct consequence of this, the child has no choice but to maintain a split personality which comes to be reflected in a bisexual psyche²⁷. Employing terminology once again borrowed from Jung²⁸, Bachelard explains that cosmic reverie fills the child with “*anima* happinesses ... of the imagined life” (Bachelard, p105), allowing him to entertain his manifold and impossible fantasies and desires without the threat of censorship from either superego or Other. Biography on the other hand, which embraces the *animus*, the historical and the objective, is thought to expose him to “masculine brutalities” that disturb “the natural peace of our *anima*” (Bachelard, p128), and defines for him a world that is “completely colorless” and in perpetual lack for want of imaginative embellishment (Bachelard, p103). The *animus* supplies the child with memories that are specific and small; and organised as events in linear progression that continually intersect with the life of the Other who is seen to provide validity and purpose to his existence. Bachelard writes: “it is the task of the *animus*’ memory to tell the facts well in the objectivity of a life’s history. But the *animus* is the outside man, the man who needs others to think” (Bachelard, p105). The *animus* in essence, makes the child destructive and confrontational, while the *anima* makes him inventive and peaceful. Thus, despite Bachelard’s claim that poético-analysis “should constitute itself in a

²⁷ Freud however tells us: “The distinction is not a psychological one; when you say ‘masculine’ you usually mean ‘active’, and when you say ‘feminine’ you usually mean ‘passive’” (Freud:1964, p114).

²⁸ However, he uses them quite differently to Jung, who writes: “in the unconscious of every man there is hidden a feminine personality [*anima*], and in that of every woman a masculine personality” (Jung, p284). Bachelard describes them as occurring in the one child, denoting his psychic impulses toward the social or the cosmos, employing italics to accentuate their distinction to that first introduced by Jung.

complementary doctrine of psychoanalysis” (Bachelard, p128), we must take the more extreme view that they are two violently opposed and uncompromising ideologies that occupy opposite ends of a bipolar spectrum.

In a sense, the child’s private life (in the nothingness of limbo) and public life (in the numbing uniformity of the social sphere) form within his mind, psychic tumours, that inadvertently prove erroneous to his continued presence in language for he can no longer distinguish himself from the cosmic or the societal. His public duties for instance, position him deep within “the zone of family, social and psychological conflicts” (Bachelard, p107) enveloping him in the mass psychosis of communal memory; physically manifested in a series of regressive, and I would also suggest polymorphously perverse, events that describe the typical “state of repressed childhood” (Bachelard, p107). Reverie on the other hand, drives the child into feminine silences and passivity in an attempt to achieve psychic communion through the poetic essentialism of “non-event situations ... which gets rid of accidents” (Bachelard, p119), and is thus dependent on a complete withdrawal from society, lapses in judgment and wills self-negation or alternatively, negates self-will. In effect, Bachelard has constituted happiness and unhappiness as impersonal figures within language that the child cannot adequately append to the unpredictable uniqueness of his psychophysical being which in autobiographical writing seems manifested in an intimacy with place.

For the autobiographer, the childhood place is not simply *place-of-imaginative-solitudes* but also *place-of-other-people* interwoven in a narrative that fills the vacant and uncertain psychic spaces left over from the formation of poetico-analytical and psychoanalytical concentrations; in the process reversing the effects of these polar childhoods. However, if we continue to interpret place as an extended metaphor of images, illuminated and perpetually suspended in the duration of reverie, then the autobiographical narrative can be said to provide the final stage in the evolution of “[t]he great *once-upon-a-time (autrefois)* which ... is precisely the world of the *first time*” (Bachelard, p117) that is revived in reverie. In short, Bachelard’s “reverie [which] shifts blocks of thought without any great worry about following a thread

of an adventure” anticipates “the dream that always wants to tell a story” (Bachelard, p106).

Reverie in other words works to systematically distil the complexity of individual being to an expression of perfect beginning in a single place of childhood²⁹. In brief, this is the drive toward the psychic centres of the cosmos, that, as previously noted, recognises neither human origins or destinations, and consequently converts the child into the well of poetic life. This is what Bachelard describes as the “consciousness of tranquillity” that is maintained to the exclusion of all other psychological considerations. He tells us: “The poetics of reverie no longer has to determine anything but the interests of a reverie which maintain the dreamer in a consciousness of tranquillity” (Bachelard, p128). Reveries then are a kin to daydreams, and unlike the nightmare visions formed in the throws of a deep and lasting dream (the consequences of which he leaves for the psychoanalyst to ponder), are fashioned from short peaceful *anima* interludes before a gentle awakening of the *animus*. It naturally follows that images are received as almost static inner visions, for movement and action of its archetypal figures: “Our father was ... there in the evenings before the grate when the tea kettle was singing” (Bachelard, p122), are restricted to small ritualised motions that will gently inscribe a sense of place deeper within our psyche with our every visitation through reverie. Bachelard explains:

To meditate on the child we were, beyond all family history, after going beyond the zone of regrets, after dispersing all the mirages of nostalgia, we reach an ... original human life. And this life is within us ... remains within us ... The memory does nothing more than open the door to the dream (*songe*). The archetype is there, immutable, immovable ... And when one has made the archetypal power of childhood come back to life through dreams, all the great archetypes of the paternal forces, maternal forces take on their action again. The father is there, also immobile. The mother is there, also immobile ... Both live with us in another time (Bachelard, p125).

²⁹ Bachelard informs us: “When I read passages like those by Bosco, ... I proceed to impossible syntheses of the places of dispersed dreams in the happy homes along the course of my years ... as if all those whom we have loved were, at the summit of our age, supposed to live together, remain together” (Bachelard, p121).

It seems somewhat paradoxical for Bachelard to acknowledge the presence of family in his cosmic childhood; especially when reverie appears to will the collapse of narrative distinctions such as self and Other, time and space. However, if we consider reverie a kin to wish fulfilment projected upon the societal, which gathers around the child the beloved characters of his childhood in a single place to emphasise his centrality and uniqueness (as opposed to differences and lack), then can we not define reverie as a poetic discourse that flatters the child's sense of ego and *animus* as much as his id and *anima*? Reverie after all is initiated in the shadows of the historical in an attempt to override its effects, to overtake it, and one would assume to subordinate it, and Bachelard readily admits that “[w]ithout the substance of melancholy, this tranquillity would be empty. It would be the tranquillity of nothingness” (Bachelard, p128). Nevertheless, despite having returned all the privileges of the *anima* to the child he once was and is again through reverie, Bachelard never wills the completion of his childhood story by extending his influence into the social sphere. In fact, despite his expressed desire for “flight” (Bachelard, p100), Bachelard hesitates to venture beyond the safe and secure confines of his well cultivated pastoral garden and household to release his *anima* or *animus* into the ever vast psychophysical wilderness that awaits exploration and conquest. Bachelard's child it must be noted, is more cultural artifice than universal myth. His fanciful reflections on summer bouquets and great calm lakes revealing Bachelard's origins in the Romantic tradition (ironically, the legacy of adult educators), rather than a world of timeless archetypes.

Place for Bachelard is largely a conceptual reality of unfulfilled desires, and can be said to closely resemble what Kyoko Mori describes in her collection of essays as “home”: “a childhood place where everything seemed clear and simple ... this place [that] ... is more mythical than actual” (Mori: 1997, p257)³⁰. In addition to being the template for personality, the home place is the measure of our every subjective response, the total sum of who we imagine ourselves to be and wish to

³⁰ Mori tells us: “When I miss home now, it is the place itself I miss more than anything ... The landscapes of childhood are imprinted on our memory. Many of us, miles, oceans, and years away from our first homes, return to them in our dreams ... All new places, perhaps, points us back home” (Mori: 1997, pp252-253).

project on all other places we inhabit through the course of our life. In the case of Bachelard, an analysis of place reveals a man of later years (“In the last quarter of life one understands the solitudes of the first quarter” [Bachelard, p108]). Who, anxious over approaching death, finds himself attracted by the illusion of immortality in a return to childhood (“The terms ‘life’ and ‘death’ are too approximate. In a reverie, the word ‘death’ is vulgar” [Bachelard, p111]). As Eakin (on the initiative of Pike) explains in “Autobiography and the Structures of Experience”³¹:

... From the perspective of the autobiographer [in this case the theorist] looking back, ... the seeming timeless world preceding the formation of self may represent an idealized shelter from the mutability of experience and the burdens of narrative, a fantasy locale in which lost wholeness can be restored in a unstoried continuum of maternal love [and for Bachelard also paternal love] (Eakin:1992, p200).

It seems that for Bachelard, recognition of more than one childhood place, of in-between-times between happinesses and accepting the masculine influence of the *animus*, somehow dilutes the potency and momentum of the archetypal childhood. As a consequence, place remains a cluttered and manic psychic scrapbook of happy childhood images, for what must be fear of initiating a narrative - and a geography - he is unable to predict or contain. Vera Newsom writes in a similar vein:

Memories in childhood are like snapshots or picture postcards, more like slides than a continuous film. Out of sleep or darkness, come moments of illumination. Sometimes what presses the shutter and exposes the lens can be traced - excitement, fear, a sudden flash of colour, but it is difficult to give a date to all these snapshots or arrange them in the proper order. We have to hunt for clues (Newsom, p121).

³¹ Eakin takes up Pike’s evidence that owing to the slow development of the child’s ego, childhood is enveloped in the timelessness of the Freudian unconscious. The fascination of childhood for the autobiographer then, is as a symbol of immortality, of escaping one’s place in time, and as a symbol of death, which is also timeless (Eakin:1992, pp199-200). Indeed such ideas about childhood are not unique. Jung in fact makes similar comments in “The Psychology of the Child Archetype”: “It [the child] is ... both beginning and end, an initial and terminal creature. The initial creature existed before man was, and the terminal creature will be when man is not” (Jung, p178).

Poetico-analysis then, simply eliminates the need the need to organise images in their “proper order”, making childhood effortless, outside the concepts of labour and production, and directly communicable to the human being regardless of individual circumstances. In cosmic reverie, the child is simply the conduit for unconscious energy that accelerates poetic expression to the “commerce of grandeur” (Bachelard, p102). Reverie is thus “contra-receptive” to the child who is possessive, restless for action and the rituals of play, and in all seriousness impregnates place with his unique sense of childhood understanding: his own myth of origin. Interestingly, Bachelard seems to address this very point when he makes the observation, in a manner quite contrary to the general trend of his essay:

Every childhood is ... naturally prodigious. It is not that it lets itself be impregnated, as we are tempted to believe, by the ever so artificial fables which are told to it and which serve only to amuse the ancestor doing the telling ... But the child being born malicious stirs up a mania for storytelling, the eternal repetitions of romancing old age. The child’s imagination does not live from these fossil fables ... The child finds his fables in his reverie, fables which he tells no one. Then the fable is life itself (Bachelard, p118).

Can we not state on this evidence that Bachelard the “ancestor” is attempting to impregnate the child he was with his own “artificial fables” of peaceful reverie? The theorist after all acknowledges that the child of his own accord “stirs up a mania for storytelling” and “finds fables in his reverie”. Fables, which must at least stir residual motions toward the happiness of new discoveries and childhood adventures that engages both *anima* and *animus*, giving rise to a *happily-ever-after* of a story, to consummate the *once-upon-a-time* begun in reverie. In other words, the *anima* bears witness to a world of absolute values (“soul values” [Bachelard, p117]) that is only ever a vague allusion in language; while the *animus* allows archetypes, images, and place to be reconciled within a narrative tradition of childhood - whether it be labelled memoir or autobiography - as markers of a psychic origin that prefigures, overwhelms, and redirects language to a subversion of the historical in a child’s perfect and poetic syntheses of stories, imagination and

memory.

As is the case with reveries, storytelling is a childhood instinct that “surrounds the real with enough light for the picture taking to be ample” (Bachelard, p120). However, the images that it produces is not simply a poetic moment, but the extended metaphor of place which evolves as a result of the culturally charged process of language acquisition, as precipitated by events inside spaces both absolute and abstract. This then, is to understand the child protagonist as a terminal creature scripted out of memory alongside the adult narrator into an ultimately fictitious space³², and rendered whole - or full - for the duration of a story. In short, storytelling defines (in concrete terms) the place inscribed at the heart of the self. It is a discourse of psychophysical completeness; a means of affirming and reaffirming autonomous identity in a ritualised narrative that is cyclical, and predicated on perpetual beginnings and endings. Where one story ends, another begins. Storytelling therefore conveys the same poetic certainty of non-events that Bachelard identifies as the sole preserve of reverie. But contrary to reverie, storytelling extends beyond the prelapsarian, makes counter motions against the happy poetico-analytical childhood toward the unhappy psychoanalytical childhood (for childhood it must be noted, is a time of extreme emotions), to acknowledge the effects of approaching adulthood and other external forces that colour a child’s perceptions on the world³³.

I intend to examine over the course of four chapters, five retrospective childhoods; each in its way, an intimate study on the human condition as defined by the child, and the community (or as it happens, communities) of which he is a part. In the opening chapter, I will discuss the text that appears to establish itself as an obvious antagonist to poetico-analysis, namely, retired Irish school teacher Frank McCourt’s memoir *Angela’s Ashes* (1996). However, I will prove through my analysis, that the adult narrator involves himself in an oral tradition that is a kin to

³² Lejeune, deduces in “The Ironic Narrative of Childhood: Vallès”, “it is the voice of the adult narrator that dominates and organises the text ... To reconstruct the spoken word of the child, and eventually delegate the function of narration to him, we must ... enter the space of fiction” (Lejeune, p53).

³³ “The primary myth ... of childhood autobiography is loss”, McCooey notes, “The main impulse of modern autobiography is elegiac: that a past, and those who occupied it, are no longer” (McCooey, p135).

the poetico-analytical reveries, and similarly draws its substance from a myth of childhood, albeit a regional one that is undeniably miserable, indicative of a communal consciousness formed essentially of paranoid (hence abstract) delusions and apathy. Thus, it is the possessive child who emerges to make language his own - oftentimes, quite literally - that gives direction to place and to storytelling by inscribing an accumulative centre (and absolute space) against the tide of his oppressive Catholic education and declining family situation in the sanctity of his mind. Hence he maintains likewise to Bachelard's child, a bisexual psyche, nurturing his love of language in his natural *anima* reveries, while conveniently abandoning to communal consciousness, his unwanted *animus* experiences. By so doing, young Frank effectively reinvents the oral tradition as his own private property that he may take with him back to America as living testament to his individual being - a luxury never afforded the Southern novelist Harry Crews, whose memoir of rural American childhood is the subject of the second chapter.

Crews, in *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978), is in fact helplessly caught in the tunnel vision of a communal consciousness which determines the human condition as an abstraction, existing perilously in the shadows of the natural - and brutal - order of place, a felt *animus* reality. Individual being then, begins not within the boy's psychological interior, but solely within man-made (*animus*) structures of family and individual homes that preface his arrival, and erected on (absolute) social spaces forcibly, but not convincingly, confiscated from nature. Therefore, I have labelled the activity of storytelling for the child and adult alike, as psycho-synthesis, a means of rediscovering one's lost origins in the collective unconscious of place. This is to recognise that storytelling and labour are identical, each a production of space geared to surround the real with as much (human) detail as possible. Subsequently, it is a method that is contrary to poetico-analysis, but designed to achieve a similar end: the memory of a single place of childhood.

In the third chapter, I will examine *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), the autobiography of African dramatist Wole Soyinka, the solitary example of the unconditionally happy childhood. Hence the boy, left alone to entertain his *anima*

drives in imaginative solitudes, is a symbiotic organism convinced of his uniqueness and centrality in the absolute space of household and parsonage, consigning communal consciousness - a blend of Christian and Yoruba religions - to the periphery, taking from it only what he requires, and purely on his own terms. Thus I find curious, theorist James Olney's description of *Aké* as a historical document of African communities, "that ... records ... the life of a whole people, specifically including the past, the present, and the future of that people" (Olney: 1983, p81). Beyond the obvious evidence of a privileged Western upbringing, the text is, in my opinion, only ever stylistically African; a narrative style employed in order to bind together the disparate memories of the happy child suspended in care-free play, and embittered adult rendered senseless in meaningless abstraction, existing at either end of historical space.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the works of two female writers, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1981), and Kyoko Mori's *The Dream of Water: A Memoir* (1995). I have chosen to do this, because they appear perfectly complementary in their descriptions of the female condition, which, as a result of their equally divisive cross-cultural experiences are refused fulfilment in traditions and the family unit. Hence Kingston and Mori are suspended between two unknowable extremes, namely, the domestic sphere, and the uncontainable immensity of external space. In any event, with the *animus* bonded to the conventions of patriarchy, their *anima* existence is necessarily one of psychophysical displacement, self-expression restricted to the space of the body. In short, having no hand in the production of space, a distinctly masculine activity, all space to varying degrees are alienating and abstract.

Chapter One:

“It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while”

In a manner quite contrary to Bachelard who chooses to dismiss the “*indurate childhood* which oppresses the psyche of so many adults” (Bachelard, p100), Frank McCourt writes in celebration of his miserable past, stating in the often quoted opening passages of his childhood memoir *Angela’s Ashes*:

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead they returned to Ireland when I was four ...

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived it all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood (McCourt, p1).

Given this premise, McCourt’s ideas about what constitutes a worthwhile childhood story appear completely incongruous with a fundamental precept of poietico-analytical theory: which is that an individual can only experience *anima* happinesses during his daydreams about the permanent childhood: its potentiated landscapes and equally grand monuments. Bachelard we must assume, does not - or rather, is unwilling to - allow for the possibility that a writer such as McCourt can delve into his miserable past and discover anything other than an unnaturally - thus historically - terminated childhood. To put it another way, he believes that the cosmically conscious child cannot survive a prolonged interrogation of his unconscious depths in the (consciously) constructed space of the text. Poetic images are, in the theorist’s mind, impossible to make concrete in a cold and impersonal linguistic system, which in the words of Barthes, is “a field without origin” (Barthes, p116)¹. By the same token, Bachelard’s theory is itself in

¹ Barthes, in explaining the scriptor, the disembodied entity that emerges with the writing process, tells us: “language ... ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (Barthes, p116).

constant danger of being perceived as reducing childhood to the level of poetic convention, or to take one step further, literary cliché; as it appears to propagate images of childhood as contrived as the ones of rosy-cheeked cherubs that enjoyed widespread circulation in the Victorian era. Alternatively we could allege, the theorist has neither a personal interest in, nor patience for, the autobiographical genre and its many twists and turns. The reason being, figuratively speaking, such texts take too long to get to the point, namely, a cosmic centre. Bachelard writes as if to validate this view: “We ... risk being bored by writing that is incapable of condensing the intimacy of the image” (Bachelard: 1994, p228).

Despite this, upon closer inspection, the differences between McCourt and Bachelard’s literary projects are soon eclipsed by their undeniable agreements. Indeed, it is only when one considers the facts, that McCourt’s miserable childhood appears a haphazard collage of the bizarre and the regrettable, forcibly merged inside a virtually uninhabitable abstract space which leads him to take a step back and exclaim: “I wonder how I survived it all”. In any event, McCourt’s story can be said to begin life in the fashion of poetico-analytical poetry, that is, as a retrospective reverie towards childhood. By this I mean that it is reverie formed in the mind of the adult, in poetic language saturated with his accumulated knowledge, as opposed to language that mimics the imperfect form of a young child’s oral expressions and thoughts. Hence he speaks - as Bachelard speaks - on behalf of the child, instead of *as* the child, and around the child, instead of about him. McCourt and Bachelard therefore, can be said to mythologise childhood. While Bachelard regards as a lost Eden where each and every one of us “knew an existence without bounds” (Bachelard, p100)², McCourt’s sweeping statements, if taken literally, can be seen to endorse another less familiar myth: namely that of the miserable Irish

² In his theoretical discussions, Coe makes a similar point, claiming the Childhood and the pastoral have “common roots in nostalgia for the simplicities of a vanished garden of Eden” (Coe, p241). McCooey also points out: “Eden is important not just as a place, but as a state of mind. Eden is place that exists in the state of innocence, and is lost with the gaining of experience” (McCooey, pp135-136).

Catholic childhood³. He declares:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred years (McCourt, p1).

The adults of his early years are thereby translated into soul values, into archetypes belonging to the “Irish version” of the permanent childhood. To put this in poetico-analytical terms, his reverie is seen to rise from the “ashes” of an individual past, into full poetic flight inside the (collective) unconscious. Because of this, the adult McCourt effectively relinquishes his childhood to a space of discourse inscribed by a cultural consciousness laced with humour, cynicism, and witty one-liners, that has, so to speak, evolved out of the organic - and organising - principle of Limerick’s “total season”⁴. Hence the unrelenting rain and dampness suspends the city described rather morbidly as “a gray place with a river that kills” (McCourt, p238), in the idleness of the poetic moment, and sanctifies every aspect of his miserable existence (circumscribed by poverty, the father’s alcoholism, illness, et cetera), as elemental signifiers:

Out of the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the river Shannon and settle over Limerick ... It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks ...

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes

³ Arguably this is a myth of childhood origins first introduced to modern literature by James Joyce in his semi-autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In fact, McCourt employs a similar narrative style to Joyce - a minimum of punctuation and a stream of consciousness technique - in an effort to capture for the reader the mind of the child. In addition, Joyce and McCourt describe a similar sequence of traumatic but critical events in their respective texts based around a suffocating Catholic upbringing, a spiritual crisis and a liberating (although anxious) departure from Ireland.

⁴ Bachelard remarks in his essay, that the phenomena of cosmic reverie are universal, cyclical, but most significantly, stamped by the seasonal: “The pure memory has no date. It has a *season*. The season is the fundamental mark of memories ... They are associated with the universe of a season which does not deceive and which can be called the *total season* ... Winter, autumn, sun, the summer river are all roots of total seasons. They are not only spectacles through sight, they are soul values, direct, immovable, indestructible psychological values. Experienced in the memory they are always *beneficial*” (Bachelard, p116).

never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things ... In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odour of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his weeks wages.

The rain drove us into the church - our refuge, our strength, our only dry place ...

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain (McCourt, pp1-2).

The weather in other words, serves to under-pin - and also accentuate - both literally as well as figuratively, the apparently irresistible forces that have so far “held” its inhabitants helplessly in their place: “He [Mr Hannon] says the rain makes everything heavier but what’s the use of complaining. You might as well complain about the sun in Africa” (McCourt, p299). For the people of Limerick, the real and fabricated actions of the traditional enemy prove as potent a reminder of their inescapable burdens as the unrelenting rain that “makes everything heavier”.

Upon entering the classrooms of Limerick, young Frank finds himself shackled to the historical, and unable to exercise free will for fear of persecution from schoolmasters, church authorities, and ultimately God. This loss of liberty, it appears, is parodied most effectively by McCourt in his account of the family’s departure from the shores of America:

The ship pulled away from the dock. Mam said, That’s the Statue of Liberty and that’s Ellis Island where all the immigrant’s came in. Then she leaned over the side and vomited and the wind from the Atlantic blew it all over us and other happy people admiring the view. Passengers cursed and ran, seagulls came from all over the harbor and Mam hung limp and pale on the ship’s rail (McCourt, p43).

In what can be described as a comic inversion of an immigrant’s first tantalising view of his new home and the symbols of his new-found independence, McCourt relinquishes his private *place-of-imaginative-solitudes* to the language of unfulfilled desire, and by implication, neuroses. The boy tells us earlier in the

memoir: "I'd rather have my father telling me Cuchulain stories and Margaret chirping and Mam laughing when Dad dances with two left feet" (McCourt, p34). However, the intractable succession of miserable events following the death of his infant sister, culminating in their relocation to Limerick, drives his memories of New York underground to become conflated with the picture-perfect celluloid world of Hollywood films: "if I were in America I could say, I love you, Dad the way they do in films but you can't do that in Limerick of fear you might be laughed at" (McCourt, p239). In effect, his daydreams cease to have depth in the confused dream world of American movies and early childhood, where everything is contained in the frame of the projected image. Thus, it is composed on a flat canvas that is utterly directionless and without dimensions, excepting its allusions to geography, as embodied in the idea of one day returning to America. "Absolute space does have dimensions", Lefebvre says, but what is more, "[d]irections here have symbolic force: left and right, of course - but above all high and low" (Lefebvre, p236). In Limerick however, high and low are defined by heaven and hell, which he is told, are concepts beyond his mortal understanding. In short, his *anima* instincts are slowly eroded by the increasing demands upon his *animus* to accept unquestioningly, Catholic dogma and political beliefs, which have been taken to such extremes that they render themselves a grotesque caricature of absolute space. For the young boy, church and state are not sacred institutions or in any way a sanctuary, but represent abstract spaces perched precariously between martyrdom and eternal damnation.

The many signifiers of McCourt's storytelling function as psycho-linguistic triggers which, when activated, compel stories within stories which at times seem anecdotal and episodic, but are nevertheless collectively a metaphor of the self. Just as "summer remains the bouquet season" (Bachelard, p117) for Bachelard, each and every word or image invokes for McCourt, an expression of a particular total moment in personal as well as collective history that together form a network of narrative identity. For instance, as McCourt begins to tell the story of his mother and father and how they came to meet in America, the revelation that his father fought for the IRA and "wound up a fugitive with a price on his head" triggers the

humorous anecdote that “[w]hen I was a child I would look at my father, the thinning hair, the collapsing teeth, and wonder why anyone would give money for a head like that” (McCourt, p2). Thus he appends the adult’s figurative statement regarding the price on the father’s head to the child’s literal interpretation of its meaning, which in retrospect is ironical. Next, these two narratives provoke the story told to him by his paternal grandmother concerning the father, and how he was, as an infant, “dropped on his head ... and you must remember people dropped on their heads can be a bit peculiar” (McCourt, p2); and, as if to confirm his grandmother’s assertions, he tells us of his Uncle Patrick who was also dropped on the head and “grew up soft in the head with a leg that went one way, his body the other” (McCourt, p4). Then, having established a link with his mother’s family, McCourt begins to reveal the background of Angela McCourt. As a result, the adult narrator gives the impression that he is “distracted” from telling a straight narrative by the many subsidiary stories surrounding his father’s head, thereby recreating the dynamics and unpredictability of oral storytelling, and also the mechanics of human thought which is not designed as Bachelard tells us for “exact memory”: “We are far from having an exact memory (memoire) which could keep the memory (souvenir) pure by framing it” (Bachelard, p115). In storytelling as in reverie, the “goal [is not] ... to fix a point in history” (Bachelard, p115), but to allow the pure memory to establish its own points of reference, which in McCourt’s case can be referred to as narrative convergence points, that link otherwise disparate memories into an expression of ideal selfhood in a purely poetic space within the mind. The guiding force of the text therefore is not chronology (or geography in the literal sense), but the developing drama of overlapping narratives that erodes all distinction between what was, is, and should have been.

However, this leaves the adult narrator permanently stranded in what John Barth - or to put it more accurately, his character - in *On With the Story*, describes as the Ground Situation or GS: “The GS is some state of affairs pre-existing the story’s present action and marked by an overt or latent dramatic voltage, like an electrical potential” (Barth, p36). In short, the GS is a precursor to the narrative force of a story, given the separate title of Dramatic Vehicle. To explain, the adult narrator’s

promise to reveal the most miserable of childhoods (the GS), sets the scene for the child protagonist to speak with his own unique voice (the Dramatic Vehicle). In other words, storytelling is a theatre driven by expression, staged for an audience enticed by the illusion that neither the child nor the adult is fully comprehending of the often traumatic and surprising events that are seen to unfold. The difference between them being, the former is inside of lived space, while the latter is clearly outside of it⁵. To put it another way, the GS and adulthood, are premised by events, while the DV, together with the child, anticipates fulfilment in events, and renders events contemporaneous, through the synchronised activities of storytelling and reading. After all, the reader engages with the self scripted out of memory, not the narrator, or the author himself, who stands uncelebrated, alongside the reader in external space.

McCourt's autobiographical text is arguably a ritual catharsis, and the culminating act in a series of actions undertaken to purge himself of the trauma of his early years, because, as Eakin explains: "the past as past is never over and done with but is always in the process of being redefined by a constantly revisiting present, a present suffused with memories of the past" (Eakin:1992, p209)⁶. While Bachelard requires both the reader and writer of reverie to be passive spectators, McCourt works to integrate the reader in the culturally charged process of language acquisition. For instance, when we as readers engage with the lines: "Cuchulain. Say it after me, Coo-hoo-lin. I'll tell you the story when you say the name right. Cuchulain" (McCourt, p13), we are in fact accepting the words of the father as oral utterances⁷. Hence by learning to pronounce, so to speak, the name of Cuchulain alongside the child, we are actively participating in completing the small self-affirming ritual required for the father to begin his story, itself a form of self-affirming ritual.

⁵ Lefebvre writes: "The user's space is lived - not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of the users is ... subjective. As a space of 'subjects' rather than of calculations ... it has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardship, its achievements, and its lacks" (Lefebvre, p362).

⁶ Frank McCourt in a radio interview with Brian Edwards admits that it has taken him many years to develop any semblance of self-esteem and "find out about myself".

⁷ This illusion is successfully staged, Philippe Lejeune tells us, "by the use of the narrative present, which has given us the illusion of a direct enunciation" (Lejeune, p54).

For the young boy, the Cuchulain stories are part of his regular routine which observes more or less a predetermined and familiar narrative path, and one that inscribes through repetition, the happy times of *anima* simplicity. Thus, although the boy waits in eager anticipation of each and every word, the true significance of his father's storytelling lies not with what is enunciated, but with the act of enunciation itself which fulfils in a sense, a verbal compact precipitating his triumphant announcement: "That's my story. Dad can't tell that story to Malachy or any other children down the hall" (McCourt, p13). It can be stated therefore that the intimate ritual enunciation that begins with young Frank asking his father to tell him about Cuchulain, are part and parcel of a symbolic process by which he claims ownership of *his* story, and *his* father in the morning by the fire. Therefore, while Bachelard is decidedly unimpressed with the storytelling efforts of his "ancestor": "What a lot of grandmothers take their grandson for a little fool!" (Bachelard, p118), the storytelling father is for Frank, the accumulative centre, and principal commodity of the permanent childhood.

Cuchulain then, is a private *anima* discourse between Frank and his father, and to share its secret pleasures with anybody else is to compromise, and possibly even destroy, his sense of place. Hence he feels a fundamental need to selfishly guard Cuchulain from Freddie Leibowitz and even his other siblings. Despite his father's assurances that "Jewish is people with their own stories. They don't need Cuchulain. They have Moses. They have Samson", Frank remains unconvinced and highly suspicious of the motives of Freddie Leibowitz: "I'm going down the hall to ask Freddie about Samson, to see if Samson is as good as Cuchulain, to see if Freddie has his own story or if he still wants to steal Cuchulain" (McCourt, pp28-29). To put it simply, the boy believes very strongly in the right of an individual to claim fragments of spoken language, whether packaged as a phrase, song, poem, story or even a single word, as his own private property: "I say Oy but no one laughs and I know Oy belongs to Malachy the way Cuchulain belongs to me" (McCourt, p29). But beyond simple ownership, Frank's childhood sensibilities effectively introduce the concreteness of images to all childhood

experiences, transforming every event into an unconscious spectacle. In fact, even death, when explored through Frank's boyhood imagination, achieves poetic life:

... He can't have Margaret anymore because she's like the dog in the street that was taken away. I don't know why she was taken away. My mother she told me she died in her pram and that must be like getting hit by a car because they take you away (McCourt, p34).

In this manner, death is continually reevaluated by the boy, every new discovery appropriated as a narrative convergence point. Hence his evolving consciousness does not negate in any way his original beliefs, but instead adds to their potency as an expression of individual being even after death is understood in the more conventional metaphors of cultural experience.

By virtue of McCourt's declared anonymity in the symbolic "natural" order of an archetypal childhood, Limerick has been declared, for all intents and purposes, a *place-of-other-people* - "selflessly" proclaimed public property - in the distancing language of the third-person. Thus, the city is disenfranchised from spatial values, and no longer "conforms with and caters to his [man's] biological needs and social relations" (Tuan, p34). To put this another way, McCourt refuses to accept Limerick as absolute space, and has accordingly disowned it⁸. In the context of the retrospective childhood, absolute space is inscribed in the text concurrently with the aggressive - and potentially destructive - strategies of a tyrannical child, who believes he holds a monopoly on power, and has the ability to make the world his. To clarify, the production, commodification and naturalisation of spaces are parallel processes by which the child comes to understand, and in turn, jealously guard by whatever means, his intimate place in the cosmos. Hence, this is the same as saying that each and every human being from his infancy, cultivates, shapes and conserves "nature" - and in the urban environment of Limerick, it is

⁸ Lefebvre writes that absolute space "[a]fter the fashion of a cathedral's 'nave' or 'ship', the invisible fullness of political space (the space of the town-state's nucleus or 'city') set up its rule in the emptiness of a natural space confiscated from nature. Then the forces of history smashed naturalness forever and upon its ruins established the space of accumulation (the accumulation of all wealth and resources: knowledge, technology, money, precious objects, works of art and symbols)" (Lefebvre, pp48-49).

nature already twice removed - into their own private psychic centre distinct from the societal. Place lies at the root of self-consciousness, and is, as a result, a concept deeply embedded in the psyche of the Western - and Westernised - child⁹.

In a child's mind, place is not defined by geographical location, but by objects and people with which he shares an intimate bond. First of all, we must presume that Frank, only one year older than his brother on his arrival in Ireland, is incapable of comprehending the family's relocation to another country any better than the three-year-old Malachy who has no knowledge of priests, sheep or cows, and fully expects to rediscover the familiar world of Classon Avenue in Dublin: "Dad, dad, where's the playground, the swings? I want to see Freddie Leibowitz" (McCourt, p49). Furthermore, even as Frank matures, he is made to constantly feel out of place because of his background as the American son of a no good drunk from the North of Ireland. For McCourt, the GS it seems, has a separate existence outside of storytelling, as poetic images, as reveries. But if all reveries are indeed platforms launching a reader's daydreams, can we not interpret all poetic images as suspended in the GS of childhood?

Limerick is not so much a childhood place, but an often confusing adult world that the boy struggles to reinvent on his own terms. The recurring message of his Irish Catholic education is the virtue and merits of self-sacrifice, epitomised by the idea of dying honourably for either Ireland or the Catholic Faith leaving him to "wonder if there's anyone in the world who would like us to live" (McCourt, p124)¹⁰. Beyond the impossibility of dying for both causes ("I want to tell them I won't be able to die for the Faith because I am already booked to die for Ireland" [McCourt, p211]), the boy cannot understand - nor is he allowed to understand - these adult demands. Subsequently, Frank quickly learns that "big people can ask all the questions they like and write in notebooks, especially when they are wearing

⁹ On this subject, Tuan notes: "Children, at least those of the Western world, develop a strong sense of property. They become strongly possessive ... Much of the child's combative possessiveness, however, is not evidence of genuine attachment. It arises out of a need for assurance of his own worth and for a sense of status among peers ... This is not to deny that people young and old, feel a need to anchor their personality in objects and places" (Tuan, p32).

¹⁰ Conversely, in the Limerick of childhood, death appears the only event truly worthy of celebration: "There's nothing like a wake for having a good time" (McCourt, p193).

collars and ties and suits” (McCourt, p114); while being a child involves accepting without question what is openly declared by schoolmasters and church authorities as the literal truth. As the persecution of Question Quigley and the church doors that are twice slammed in his face - denying him the opportunity to become an altar boy, and acquire a secondary school education - make all too apparent, power and knowledge are the privilege of a small group of adults. Therefore, young Frank resigns himself to the fact that any attempt to try and understand things he is not supposed to know are exercises in futility, as he discovers when he tries to extract the meaning of the word “Virgin” from the dictionary; his search leading him from one cryptic word to another, and thus ever further from his original inquiry. He writes:

... The dictionary says, Virgin, woman (usually a young woman) who is and remains in a state of inviolate chastity.

Now I have to look up inviolate and chastity and all I can find here is that inviolate means not violated and chastity means chaste and that means pure from unlawful sexual intercourse. Now I have to look up intercourse and that leads to intromission, which leads to intromittent, the copulatory organ of any male animal. Copulatory leads to copulation, the union of the sexes in the art of generation and I don't know what that means and I'm weary going from one word to another in this heavy dictionary ... all because the people who wrote the dictionary don't want the likes of me to know anything (McCourt, p333).

Thus, the unofficial doctrine that “everything is a mystery and you have to believe what you are told” (McCourt, p284) prevents self-examination through a system of fear and intimidation operating to subordinate the boy's impressionable mind and bodily impulses. In the process, language is robbed of its inner life to become entrenched in abstract space where “everything is openly declared: everything is said or written. Save for the fact that there is little to be said - and even less to be 'lived', for lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is 'conceived of” (Lefebvre, p51).

In order to preserve a private life of *anima* reveries separate from his public life of miserable *animus* experiences, the boy comes to maintain - in the manner of Bachelard's child - a bisexual psyche. By so doing, Frank also conveniently abandons to communal consciousness the typically Irish father who returns home drunk singing Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry songs, absolving him in the process, of all personal responsibility for his great crimes against the family. In other words, by considering his father's actions as part and parcel of the regressive nationalism that uniformly affects Irish male psyche¹¹ he can rationalise "the bad thing" as a cosmic disaster that is unavoidable and fated; leaving him free Frank to express his unconditional love for the father in the morning by the fire. "I feel sad over the bad thing", Frank confesses, "but I can't back away from him because the one in the morning is my real father" (McCourt, p239). Because the good father is too often the rare phantom of childhood, the mother, the one stable parental influence, is left to anchor all his experiences and single-handedly preserve the structure of family. Hence she is, so to speak, the self-validating Other to the boy's developing sense of *animus* identity. Thus, she is declared by the boy to be public property without a recognised private life, just one of a generation of women who "grew up ignorant in Limerick, ... knowing feck all about anything and signs on, we're mothers before we're women" (McCourt, p70). In happy times, Frank takes comfort in the fact the mother will sing her song and make plans for the father's wages; while during hard times, when the father is conveniently absent, he is assured of seeing her sitting by herself, staring hopelessly into the ashes of the long dead fire. McCourt at such moments is left "speechless" so to speak, in silent tribute to her endurance and fortitude. It must be noted then, that revisiting the father with the stories in the morning by the fire is for McCourt akin to wish-fulfilment for parental affection, and indicative of a childhood so starved of open displays of love that the father's spontaneous kiss during his time at hospital sends in him into joyous rapture that temporarily eclipses his very serious illness: "He looks at me, steps away, stops, comes back, kisses me on the forehead for the first time in my life and I'm so happy I feel like floating out of bed" (McCourt, p218).

¹¹ Indeed, "if you find a man that won't drink or smoke that's a man that's not interested in girls and you'd want to keep your hand over your arse" (McCourt, p404).

Appropriately, it is puberty, which begins a natural curiosity for “Girl’s Bodies and Dirty Things in General” (McCourt, p125), that signals a major point of rupture within an already traumatised psyche, because to own and act upon his sexual urges is to be complicit with the Devil. However, it is the belief that he has damned not only himself but the innocent Theresa which finally propels McCourt into a deep spiritual crisis centred on the body, resulting in a deep and bitter self-loathing: “Theresa is tormenting me ... I feel the sin growing inside me like an abscess and if I don’t go to confession soon I’ll be nothing more than a an abscess riding around on a bicycle” (McCourt, p386). Ironically, this trauma restores to McCourt, a semblance of free-will, the presumption of his sinful state, a will to separation from the (sinless?) general populace. Wanting to be absolved of sin but unable to face the accusations and condemnation he would surely face in the confessional, McCourt’s chance encounter with a kindly Franciscan priest finally provides the psychological release he was craving, compelling him to retreat momentarily into the *anima* simplicity of early childhood: “I’m a child and I lean against him, little Frankie on his father’s lap, tell me all about Cuchulain, Dad, my story that Malachy can’t have or Freddie Leibowitz on the swings” (McCourt, p402).

This experience with the priest confirms again what the boy has instinctively known all along: when physically outside the household, the symbolic sanctuary of the self (where the mother sings her song, and the father tells him stories), the only refuge is in his mind. He writes: “It’s lovely to know the world can’t interfere with the inside of your head” (McCourt, p229). Indeed, from the child’s perspective, place is

... a mental space into which the lethal abstraction of signs inserts itself, there to pursue self-transcendence (by means of gesture, voice, dance, music, etc.). Words are in space, yet not in space. They speak of space, and enclose it. A discourse on space implies a truth of space, and this must derive not from a location within space, but rather from a place imaginary and real - and hence ‘surreal’, yet concrete. And, yes - conceptual also (Lefebvre, p251).

As the boy grows up and comes to acknowledge formative influences other than the father, the boy finds an unlikely ally in the oral enunciations of his Irish friends and relatives that give expression to the emotions and desires otherwise unfulfilled in language. Hence the boy reconstitutes the abstract into his private cosmos of the half-open. Unlike the distancing language of his religious education, the rich and vibrant nature of these oral enunciations are immediately coherent and invigorating to young McCourt's developing sense of self. He tells us: "Mikey's father ... is like my uncle Pa Keating, he doesn't give a fiddler's fart what the world says and that's the way I'd like to be myself" (Mccourt, p128). Similarly, the phrase: "The English quality wouldn't give you the steam of their piss", engages his imagination, "[a]nd I think, Steam of their piss. I'll keep that for myself. I'll go around Limerick saying it, Steam of their piss, Steam of their piss, and when I go to America some day I'll be the only one who knows it" (Mccourt, p182). The appropriation of these expressions within his common vocabulary allows him to shape and control language in the metaphors of cultural experience without recourse to the written word. McCourt, after all is not interested in the primal pleasures of the contra-social cosmos. In fact, for young Frank the idea of not being able to communicate, to not "have the words [is] ... the worst thing in the world" (Mccourt, p86).

Storytelling then, is both a child's initiative and cultural phenomenon that gives voice to "things that happened, things that never happened and things that will happen when we go to America" (Mccourt, p374). Indeed, it is because he has recourse to imaginative expression and absolute spaces of care-free play, that Frank does not envy Aunt Aggie whose home is the height of luxury in comparison to the squalor of the his many homes: "we had a grand time out in the country ... and then the lovely fire up in Italy. You can tell she never has grand times like that. Electric light and a lavatory but no grand times" (Mccourt, p285). At the close of the memoir, the young man leaving apprehensively for the shores of America achieves a small but vital psychological victory over the Church; his brief sexual encounter with the married woman at the party making him realise that his life is no longer

bound to selfless servitude in Limerick's religious or political structures:

oh God oh Theresa do you see what's happening to me at long last I don't give a fiddler's fart if the pope himself knocked on this door and the College of Cardinals gathered gawking at the windows oh God the whole inside of me has gone into her and she collapses on me and tells me I'm wonderful (McCourt, p424).

McCourt is now free to pursue, not just imaginatively, a life for himself, and, like is Uncle Pa Keating, not "give a fiddler's fart" what other people think. Theresa has arguably become for McCourt the secular equivalent of a patron saint through her "martyrdom". In other words, her death and its consequences are of fundamental importance to his sense of self, as they collectively signify a moment of separation from the suffocating hold of mother Ireland, which facilitates his leaving with a clear conscience, and with perfect opportunity for emotional growth. The text appropriately ends with the self-affirming word "'Tis" which makes up the whole of the last chapter¹². This is a possible allusion to a better life in America that remains to be written (at least in context of this memoir), indicated by the almost totally blank page. Moreover, it is obviously a good humoured, amusing, and understated, yet poignant way to end a book that is stylistically a reflection of the oral culture of Ireland rather than the conventions of memoir.

¹² It is also the title to his recently released sequel which ends with the middle-aged McCourt bringing "Angela's ashes" back to Ireland for burial thereby finishing a narrative cycle begun in the first memoir.

Chapter Two:

“Wounds or scars give an awesome credibility to a story”

In the case of *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* written by the Southern novelist Harry Crews, storytelling can appropriately be described as a process of psycho-synthesis. This is to acknowledge that storytelling for Crews is a means by which his individual psychology is made subordinate to the greater truth of place and its people. It follows, that his stories are born of a communal consciousness which translates the harsh physical conditions of Bacon County, Georgia, into the living embodiment of absolute values, attitudes and beliefs, grounded in superstitions and the supernatural. “When I was a boy”, Crews says, “stories were conversation and conversation was stories. For me it was a time of magic” (Crews, p101). Storytelling, as the only viable form of social interaction, and indeed discourse, was, in a very real sense, the enduring vehicle of their shared redemption. Subsequently, it allowed Crews and his people to rationalise the irrational, and reconcile contradictions within themselves and the world they live in, as expressive of cosmic forces beyond the scope of human influence, perceptions and understanding. As he reveals in the opening pages:

... Nothing is ever allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all - the good and the bad - carted up and brought along from one generation to the next. And everything that is brought along is colored and shaped by those who bring it.

If that is so, is what they bring with them true? I’m convinced that it is. Whatever violence may be done to the letter of their collective experience, the spirit of that experience remains intact and true. It is their notion of themselves, their understanding of who they are. And it was just for this reason that I started this book, because I have never been certain of who *I* am (Crews, pp21-22).

Place, it can be said, is endowed with its own persona and temperament, culminating in a malicious personality that is unrivalled, destructive and infinite. Like the sacred child of poetico-analysis, Bacon County is largely an unknowable presence, which

at times appears to conspire against the people who inhabit it, making survival difficult, and often beyond their control. Nevertheless, as far as the community is concerned, God is indistinguishable from place, and regardless of its apparent vindictiveness, must be respected as well as feared: “in Bacon County you don’t curse the sun or the rain or the land or God. They are one and the same thing. To curse any of them is an act of blasphemy” (Crews, p170). Bacon County then, has a double life as a cultivated, denaturalized and demarcated space produced by labour, and organic monument to the collective unconscious. Hence social space as outlined by the body, farm and county, is under constant threat of being repatriated, in full or in part, inside the living elemental Gestalt - or alternatively, body cosmic - of place.

A more immediate concern for Crews, the son of a tenant farmer, is that Bacon County, to his great frustration, illustrates little more than a potential to be absolute space. Indeed, with his memories chaotically scattered within and without the geography of Bacon County, he can never be certain of his identity. Thus, place is like a festering wound which can never be properly diagnosed, and consequently infects the whole of his psychophysical being with an awesome yet impossible sense of destiny and purpose towards self-realisation in the painful absence of an unknown father, and a single house he can call the home place. Crews declares:

And in that very fact, the importance of family, lies what I think of as the rotten spot at the center of my life or, said another way, the rotten spot at the center of what my life might have been if circumstances had been different. I come from people who believe the *home place* is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart. It is that single house where you were born, where you lived out your childhood, where you grew into young manhood. It is your anchor in the world, that place, along with the memory of your kinsmen ... and the knowledge that it would always exist, if nowhere but in memory.

Such a place is probably important to everybody everywhere, but in Bacon County - although nobody to my knowledge ever said it - the people understood that if you do not have a home place, very little will ever be yours, really *belong* to you in

the world ...

... Bacon County is my home place, and I've had to make do with it. If I think of where I come from, I think of the entire county. I think of all its people and its customs and all its loveliness and all its ugliness (Crews, p31).

This is to recognise the only accumulative centre afforded the human being in Bacon County, is ultimately founded on the family, because "a large family was the only thing a man could be sure of having. Nothing else was certain" (Crews, p30). Therefore, in the manner of Lefebvre's abstract space,

... its only immediate point of reference is generality: the family unit, the type of dwelling (apartment, bungalow, cottage, etc.), fatherhood and motherhood, and the assumption that fertility and fulfilment are identical. The reproduction of social relations is thus crudely conflated with biological reproduction (Lefebvre, p50).

Crews and his people rely on the machinery of human (re)production - as defined by sexual, sadomasochistic, hence libidinal drives towards subsistence - to mark, either visibly or mentally, their presence on the landscape, for want of an alternative measure of identity that will appeal to their sense of self. This then, is to understand farming as a ritual that is decidedly sadomasochistic, for it requires a farmer to forcibly inscribe traumas upon a body of land (in order to prepare it for planting), well aware that violence will unavoidably be visited upon the body, by place and its traditions. Crews in fact, similar to McCourt, reveals an essential human truth when he makes his statement: "Wounds or scars give awesome credibility to a story" (Crews, p37), because outside the tangible markers of a felt *animus* reality, the storytelling discourse lacks motivation and design to carry out its task of character formation. It must be noted, although it may seem paradoxical, the community is symbolically abstract. To explain, all man-made structures in Bacon County, are built in order that they may function as an exterior shell, a form of self-defence against the totality of place. In short, the production of space is a means of containing place in manageable portions, which they may then fill, and by way of labour, establish - albeit temporarily - an accumulative centre on their own terms.

For Crews, storytelling is a process of restoration and recovery through which he explores the collective memory of a people in an effort to reconstruct, in every conceivable detail, the home place missing from his own personal recollections in which to house his fragmented sense of self¹. We can therefore state that Crews shares with poetics-analysis the idealistic vision of a single place of childhood:

In that little sharecropper's house of Luther Carter's they [his parents] lived with Uncle John Carter and Aunt Ora, who was my daddy's sister. Uncle John Carter was no kin to Luther Carter, but they were in Cartertown, where most people had that last name. The house had a wooden roof that leaked badly, no screens and wooden windows. There were ten-by-ten bedrooms and a shotgun hall that ran the length of the kitchen, and Uncle John and Aunt Ora had one room to live in and the use of the half-partitioned kitchen. Daddy and mama had the same arrangement on the other side. Mama had a Home Comfort, Number 8, wood stove to cook on. There was a hot-water reservoir and four eyes on the cast-iron top of the stove, but it was a tiny thing, hardly more than three feet wide and two feet deep (Crews, p41).

His text is principally an investigation of self through the voice of the Other, as indicated by the statement: "I have had to rely not only on my memory but also on the memory of others for what follows here: the biography of a childhood which necessarily is the biography of a place, a way of life gone forever out of this world" (Crews, p22). Biography then, equates to a conscious reality of place, a reality circumscribed by violence. It is a violence they inflict upon each other and the land they inhabit, but to a greater measure, visited upon them by the unknowable qualities of place, drawing them ever closer to the certainty of death. Crews' boyhood imagination, thus saturated with cosmic fatality, can only conceive of human limitations and frailties. In his mock sermon before the mother and older brother, the boy preaches: "We all of us made of dirt. God took Him up some dirt and put

¹ Unfortunately for Crews, it is a vision that is not fully realised as he explains in the introduction to his collected works: "I thought if I could relive it and set it all down in detailed, specific language, I would be purged of it. I wrote *A Childhood* in the most specific and detailed prose I could summon and relieved it all again. It almost killed me, but it purged nothing. Those years are still as red and raw and alive in memory as they always were" (Crews, p15 -16).

it in his hands and rolled it around and then he spit in the dirt and roll it some more and out of that dirt and God spit, he made you and me, all of us” (Crews, p75). According to his understanding of Christian doctrine, human beings are but an insignificant fabrication of an all powerful and unforgiving God, extracted from the soil - albeit temporarily - and existing solely for His entertainment. The body by itself, is no measure of identity, for it is nothing more than an uncelebrated fragment of place. The human condition, for the people of Bacon County, describes a futile struggle against the natural order, in which the people’s minor victories and accomplishments can neither compensate for their suffering, nor prevent their eternal damnation. He writes:

... Hell was at the center of any sermon I had ever heard in Bacon County. In all the churches, you smelled the brimstone and the sulphur and you felt the fire and you were made to know that because of what you had done in your life, you were doomed forever. Unless somehow, somewhere, you were touched by the action of mercy and the Grace of God. But you could not, must not, count on the Grace of God. It probably would not come to you because you were so sorry (Crews, p75).

Helpless to resist the certainty of misery and death in every aspect of their lives, Crews and his people are denied relief from the anxiety of living at the frontiers of human existence where hope, and indeed *anima*, are best suppressed to ensure their survival. This is a communal attitude best summed up by the mother’s response to young Harry’s pleas to return to the farm: “Wish in one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first” (Crews, p129). Young Harry learns early in life that emotional attachments can only detract from the practical necessities of rural life. For instance, when confronted with the declining health of Sam, his childhood companion, the boy unquestioningly accepts the inevitable: “I felt how useless it was to cry. If you couldn’t cure an animal, you killed it ... If constant and unrelievable pain was the alternative, death was right. There wasn’t anything to talk about” (Crews, p109).

This means therefore, that if we delve into Crews’ childhood in search of a

single human essence, we will not discover, as Bachelard suggests, a cosmic energy that guides a memory to a poetic resolution in solitudes, but a desperate unabating animalistic drive towards subsistence that overrides all other aspects of character. “I’m afraid I do not have a high opinion of the disguised human being”, Crews confirms in an interview,

... “disguised” meaning his identity, his family, where he came from, what he believes in. When all of that disguise is gone, he then becomes a thing that none of us can be proud of or be pleased with (and I think it’s in all of us). You can call it a form of mass hysteria, if you want to, but, you know, good men, and I mean large numbers of good men, have done absolutely atrocious things for no other reason than that they were caught up in the lack of identity. And when you get caught up in that frenzy, then you revert to the cutting edge of the front teeth and the grinders in the back (Crews, p145).

The meagre circumstances of Bacon County serve as a most graphic illustration of the human condition at its primal, and thus most potent, perverse and archetypal state in which social order endures, not as a result of the mediating influence of a superego, but as a result of a shared belief in the destructive potential of place and economic co-dependence. “In the days before tobacco”, Crews discloses,

... they grew everything they needed and lived pretty well.

But tobacco took so much of their time and energy and worry that they stopped growing many of the crops they had grown before. Consequently, they had to depend upon the money from the tobacco to buy what they did not grow. A failed tobacco crop then was a genuine disaster that affected not just the individual farmer but the economy of the entire county (Crews, p43).

Formed of communal delusions, society seems predicated on a mass psychosis from which the only release appears a self expression in violent actions against family members and neighbours. Occurring frequently, without restraint and at the slightest provocation (“Men killed other men oftentimes not because there had been some offence that merited death, but simply because there had been an offence, any

offence” [Crews, p26]), physical violence is arguably more deeply entrenched and instinctive than the correlative rituals of farming, giving further credibility to Crews’ suggestion that the often brutal impulse toward self-preservation “which is in us that we deny, ... seems to me more what we really are than what we would have people believe we are” (Jeffrey, p145). It is for this very reason that the author does not seek to incriminate the man who stole the meat from the smokehouse following his daddy’s death. A person he claims was still a friend of his daddy’s, despite his contrary actions:

He was one of my daddy’s friends. I do not say he was *supposedly* or *apparently* a friend. He *was* a friend, and a close one, but he stole the meat anyway. Not many people may be able to understand that or sympathise with it, but I think I do. It was a hard time in that land, and a lot of men did things for which they were ashamed and suffered for the rest of their lives. But they did them because of hunger and sickness and because they could not bear the sorry spectacle of their children dying from a lack of a doctor and their wives growing old before they were thirty (Crews, p57).

The theft is not viewed by Crews or his mother as a personal betrayal, but as part and parcel of an ongoing cosmic tragedy precipitated by an irresistible human drive toward survival that overrides all psychic motivation for a moral register. Moreover, a social conscience can be interpreted from Crews’ comments, as the culmination of “highly controlled” (hence abstract) adult experiences, and a luxury only afforded those able to maintain the illusion of individuation: “We make our bread, we earn our living, we do whatever we do in some form of isolation, and it’s highly controlled. We all have these facades, these images of ourselves” (Jeffrey, p145).

In Bacon County, where communal insecurities and paranoia breed a nullifying insularity stemming from an emotional, economic, as well as organic dependence upon place, there appears little latitude for autonomy outside the ritual motions of farming and storytelling. So much so that place, or rather social space within it, is effectively the template for adult personality which compels an almost pre-Oedipal attachment of its inhabitants, that in the end proves simultaneously detrimental and

essential to any evolving notion of selfhood. With their *anima* fantasies stored away so to speak, in the pages of the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, place merges with the regressive momentum of their perverse libidinal drives as manifested by the oppressive machinery of socialisation. In fact, social identity outside of storytelling and blood ties, seems measured purely in terms of fenced boundaries: “In that time, a man’s land was inviolate” (Crews, p40), and to a lesser extent by crops grown in straight rows: “And the feeling was that a man who didn’t care enough to keep his rows straight couldn’t be much of a man” (Crews, p124). Hence a sense of place is basically interchangeable with, and not simply a metaphorical representation of, a self in language.

The land is as a consequence, the crude manifestation of social order upon which each and every farmer is called upon to physically inscribe his name and biography with as much permanence as his economic, physical and mental resources would allow - a necessary burden understood more conventionally as a lifelong obligation to God, women, and farming. Place then, is a living historical document that is constantly being erased and rewritten in accordance with the success or failure of the tobacco harvest, but given momentum and direction through the common vision of community:

... A farm in Bacon County took a man’s name, not always the first man who owned it, but some man’s name, and once the name was taken, it held the name as long as it stood, no matter who lived there. It was a tradition that gave direction to the county ... It gave people’s lives a point of reference (Crews, p51).

Such traditions give a sense of history and purpose to the people of Bacon County. Nevertheless, place can hardly be considered the most practical canvas for social inscription. First of all, it is a qualification of identity that is not transportable and requires the subsistence farmer “to start building all over again” (Crews, p51) with his every and most frequent relocation. But more significantly, it appears to will the destruction of the people by visiting upon them every conceivable evil - and usually in quick succession:

... The world that circumscribed the people that I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always bought something else down with it. It was a world in which survival depended on raw courage, a courage born out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives (Crews, p54).

Having committed the whole of their psychophysical being to the cultivation of place, in both the literal and figurative sense, the inhabitants are helpless to resist the often painful realities of place, for to do otherwise would be, in effect, suicidal. For Ray Crews, the dedication of all his inner and external drives in pursuit of autonomy within place, causes him to exceed the physical limitations of the body and work himself towards an irrational (yet heroic) early death as a result of a heart attack “so massive and so sudden that he didn’t move enough to wake his wife” (Crews, p55). Crews explains early in his memoir:

... Whether on shares or on standing rent, they were still tenant farmers and survival was a day-to-day crisis as real as rickets in the bones of their children or the worms that would sometimes rise out of their children’s stomachs and nest in their throats so that they had to be pulled out by hand to keep the children from choking (Crews, p26).

Bacon County places its inhabitants in a double-bind; they face either a slow and lingering demise in the “poor and leached out” fields (Crews, p30), or the incurable pain of separation in the dehumanising confinement of “the little shotgun row houses ... in the Springfield Section [of Jacksonville, Florida]” (Crews, p132), for which the only permanent solution short of returning to the home place is the emotional release of death. Watching a man die of his own accord in a butcher shop in Jacksonville, the boy tells us: “The knife had calmed him down. I remember thinking it was like medicine. He’d run in here hurting, but he slipped that blade into his chest and the pain went away” (Crews, p143). As this chance encounter proves to Crews, a person who is denied the certainty of belonging in a childhood place (“It ain’t nair nail left in the world left where my hat was welcome” [Crews,

p144]), has in essence, no mechanism within the human psyche to sustain his momentum through the trauma of events.

To elaborate further, Jacksonville is for the people of Bacon County, the Other that operates in dramatic contrast to their notion of collective self as validated by the boundaries of regional existence. But regardless of its foreign and unnatural ways, it is “a fact of their lives” (Crews, p131) and embedded in the discourse of place as firmly as their stories of rural hardships and violence. Crews writes:

I knew absolutely, without knowing how I knew it, that something called the Springfield Section of Jacksonville was where all of us from Bacon County went, when we had to go, when our people and our place could no longer sustain us.

... Everybody had to do it. Sooner or later everybody ended up in the Springfield Section, and once they were there, they loved it and hated it at the same time, loved it because it was hope, hated it because it was not home (Crews, p131).

Conversely, Crews and his people seem to have a love-hate relationship with Bacon County for the opposite reason: they loved it because it was home, but hated it because it was not home. Jacksonville however is not an inversion of the home place, but an isolated outpost that stands wholly separate from the rituals of place and the unbound mysteries of the cosmos. In short, it is a false idol to the capitalist cause “[w]here a man can make a dollar” (Crews, p131). Born of an unnatural and manufactured system of subsistence, and nurturing neither community nor direct relationship with place, Jacksonville is a vacuum devoid of narrative agency except in the minds of those having returned to Bacon County to tell of their ordeals. Because of this, it does not even register in the boy’s mind as a place, but as a collection of half-dreamed memories gathered from the stories he had often heard been told of the city: “The vague shape of streets and houses and buildings and factories began to filter down behind my eyes. I knew I had never seen any of it before but if I concentrated, I could see all of it” (Crews, p131). Thus, it is no more permanent or tangible than the small makeshift townships he witnesses from the bus window on the way to the city: “everything looked temporary, as though it

might all be taken down during the night and hauled away” (Crews, p130). In other words, it is essentially a non-place that leaves its inhabitants empty of itself and bonded to the maintenance of an artificial construct that is offensive to the principles of their rural upbringing. Furthermore, urban life denies Crews and his people, all access to the land - its animals and its many characteristic odours: “pine saps rising in trees, the tassels of corn popping out, the hard, clean bite of frost on dead and broken cotton stalks” (Crews, p132) - by imprisoning them in a cluttered and manic cityscape where they feel their senses polluted and overridden “with the odour of combustion ... They could smell it vaguely in their clothes; they could taste it in the food ... It hung about over the streets, a blue fog, undulating and layered” (Crews, p132). And although Crews and his people hunger for its many modern comforts “the way only the very poor can” (Crews, p132), city life cannot contribute in any way to their sense of identity. In Bacon County, buildings, fence lines and family ties, complement an identity founded in the shadows of a place. Jacksonville however, is an abstraction upon abstraction, informed by synthetic as opposed to organic principles, and hastily built around the economic centre of the factory.

Suicide for the disillusioned man in the butcher shop (who is permanently caught outside place in the intangible and erroneous urban spaces constructed to supply labour to the factories), is the sole means of gathering about his bankrupt and senseless state of being the energy and drive for self-expression: “He had told himself a story he believed, or somebody else had told it him in which the next thing that happened - the only thing that *could* happen - was the knife” (Crews, p144). The man’s actions can therefore be interpreted as a culmination of self-destructive impulses born of an unresolved infantile fixation with the now forbidden territory of place. From this evidence we can further suggest, that both the boy and man of Bacon County are in a similar emotional bind. Because they are unable to overcome their attachment to place, which to their continued frustration they cannot rightly claim, their every action is expressive of wish-fulfilment whose satisfaction is equally their greatest desire and fear.

In other words, place is a signified that guides an otherwise fragmented and unsustainable narrative identity towards an imaginative resolution in stories. He writes: “It all made perfect sense to me. Fantasy might not be the truth as the world sees it, but what was truth when fantasy meant survival?” (Crews, p98). As Lefebvre tells us: “There is a sense in which the existence of absolute space is purely mental, and hence ‘imaginary’. In another sense, however, it also has a social existence, and hence a specific and powerful ‘reality’” (Lefebvre, p251). In fact, it is because Crews does not have a clear sense of this “specific and powerful ‘reality’” but only what informs it, that he feels caught in the frenzy of the lack of identity. In response to the assembled men in the store who declare: “It’ll take a lot of doing to fill your daddy’s shoes. He was much of a man”, Crews comments: “I didn’t think to fill’m. It’s trouble enough to fill my own” (Crews, p35). Crews, by participating in the rural storytelling tradition, is symbolically surrendering the role of author to place and its people.

This is why he begins his memoir, not with his own story, but with that of the unknown father Ray Crews: “My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew” (Crews, p19). His father is the one immovable archetype in a series of paternal forces - the others being his stepfather Pascal and Uncle Alton, crucial influences during early childhood and adolescence respectively - that have guided him towards his own ascendancy in the narrative cycle of place. Hence his own childhood story only begins in the fourth chapter:

It has always seemed to me that I was not so much born into this life as I awakened to it. I remember very distinctly the awakening and the morning it happened. It was my first glimpse of myself, and all that I know now - the stories, and everything conjured up by them, that I have been writing about thus far - I obviously knew none of them, particularly anything about my real daddy, whom I was not to hear of until I was nearly six years old, not his name, not even that he was my daddy (Crews, p58).

What Crews’ “awakens” to on this particular morning is not the totality of an

“Ideal-I” (Lacan, p123), but an understanding of himself as being housed within a place, and familial structure. Conversely, a familial structure later called into question with his stepfather’s declaration that he is not his real father, an event which “taught me not to give a damn for what makes sense” (Crews, p149). Reviving again a more primitive state of being, Crews recalls with the clarity of a child’s consciousness: “The house there just behind me ... was called the William’s place. It was where I lived with my mama and my brother, Hoyet, and my daddy, whose name was Pascal” (Crews, p59). The boy’s life at this early moment in his personal history has a fixed point of reference in a household that serves as his home place, and a clear sense of direction with his stepfather’s continued verbal affirmations that he is fast becoming a man and well on the road to adulthood. The consequences of which he barely understands, but can instead endlessly dream about:

I stood up and stretched and looked down at my bare feet at the hem of the gown and said: “I’m almost five and already a big boy”. It was my way of reassuring myself, but it was something my daddy said about me and it made me feel good because in his mouth it seemed to mean I was almost a man (Crews, p59).

By repeating the words, and recognising in himself the fulfilment of those words, young Harry is gently guided toward personal growth and a narrative identity in his stepfather’s likeness, which would in his mind, bring with it a greater level of masculine intimacy by liberating him from a frustrating - and feminising - enclosure in the domestic sphere. “I was pretty sure I already was a man”, the boy asserts, “but the only one who seemed to know it was my daddy. Everybody else treated me like I was still a baby” (Crews, p61).

Yet to realise any real measure of social function, the stepfather compels in young Harry, reveries toward what he regards as the magical privileges of manhood as embodied by his stories, scars, and smell of soap and whiskey; which, so to speak, sustains him in *anima* fantasies about *animus* reality by being his cosmic signifiers. In short, he begins dreaming about becoming a man like his daddy while

in the idleness of early childhood. Although he realises that the whiskey is in some way responsible for the frequent episodes of domestic violence, to him it “smelled sweet, better even than the soap”, and what is more “[t]he stronger the smell of whiskey on him, ... the kinder and gentler he was with me and my brother” (Crews, p60). In fact, Harry refuses outright to think negatively of him, because

... I loved him so much. If he was sitting down, I was usually in his lap. If he was standing up, I was usually holding his hand. He always said funny things to me and told me stories that never had an end but always continued when we met again (Crews, p60).

In effect, his stepfather, like the stories he tells that never have an end, is suspended within the boy’s imagination and memory as an irreducible and mysterious archetype of the collective unconscious of place that drives an ever vague and expansive inner discourse: “I knew that he had taken the scar in a fight, but I never asked him about it and the teeth marks in his cheek only made him seem more powerful and special to me” (Crews, p60). As Bachelard also confirms: “Too minutely noted circumstances would prejudice the profound being of the memory” (Bachelard, p120), and his daddy’s scar by remaining unexplained takes on a certain talismanic quality that bears witness to a world made all the more powerful for having only been explored through fantasy.

This however does not mean that he is ignorant of the brutal ways of Bacon County - of which he is a constant witness - and in a total departure from the principles of poético-analysis, he begins to employ fantasy to entrench himself ever deeper in the sinister ways of his world. He writes:

Since where we lived and how we lived was almost hermetically sealed from everything and everybody else, fabrication became a way of life. Making up stories, it seems to me now, was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defence against it. It was no doubt the first step in a life devoted primarily to men and women and children who never lived anywhere but in my imagination. I have found in

them infinitely more order and beauty and satisfaction than I ever have in the people who move about me in the real world (Crews, p67).

Thus, rather than use the Sears Roebuck catalogue as a “Wish Book”, young Harry and his friend Willalee Bookatee “used it to spin a web of fantasy about us” (Crews, p64). Confronted with perfect people in their store-bought clothes, the boy is driven to invent stories of physical hardship and volatile familial bonds about them in order to explain away the absence of visible scarring or disfigurement. He explains:

... Nearly everybody I knew had something missing ... And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, ... but they were also beautiful ... and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much in the faces of the people around me. .

Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swelling and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world. And more than that, at some previously unremembered moment, I had decided that all the people in the catalogue were related, not necessarily blood kin, but knew one another, and because they knew one another there had to be hard feelings, trouble between them off and on, violence, and hate between them as well as love (Crews, p65).

While Bachelard's child has free access to the cosmos, young Harry refuses to explore, even imaginatively, a life of care-free pleasures. The boy in his reveries, reveals to us a rural world of *animus* unhappinesses in which gender is the greatest measure of identity². In fact, Harry finds himself, by virtue of his gender, in binary opposition to the girls of Bacon County. “God and girls are just like farmin. You

² Bachelard appears to agree with Freud who makes clear in his lecture entitled “Femininity” that “[w]ith their entry into the phallic phase the differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by their agreements. We are now obliged to recognise that the little girl is a little man” (Freud:1964, p118). Bachelard however vacates his universal child of any noticeable sexual context, translating *anima* and *animus* as divisive inner drives formed in solitude and in society respectively, for he is, unlike Freud, striving to describe a picture perfect moment in childhood, as opposed to stages in human development.

cain't ever git finished", Mr Willis explains to him, "Take sumpin out of the ground and it's time to put sumpin in again. Soon's you find out you ain't never gone git finished, you don't have to hurry or worry" (Crews, p169). However uncertain he is over the ambiguous and frightening nature of "*it*", Crews realises that girls, like every other aspect of his agonising existence, are part of an ongoing cosmic mystery that he must confront and come to understand to realise his place in the community ("Purvis ... was already old enough to come home drunk and bloody at daylight, for which we greatly admired him" [Crews, p112]), and retrospectively, to form a common bond with the father he has never known.

Ray Crews is a near mythical figure recovered and collected from "the mouths and memories of other people" (Crews, p37), and his exploits give credibility to Crews' own story which comparatively has "no shared voice from no common ground" (Crews, p37). And although the photographs of his father are for Crews like mirrors, "[a]nd looking into his face is like looking into my own" (Crews, p29), the substance of these images embody what Crews searches for, as opposed to something he already is or can ever hope to be. Hence the picture is reminiscent of a Lacanian mirror, which reflects the masculine ideal as instituted by communal consciousness:

Looking at them, I think of what my father was and some of what I have become. He was taller than I have ever grown ... Everything about him - the way he stands, his every gesture - suggests a man of endless and exuberant energy, a man who believes in his bones that anything worth doing is worth overdoing (Crews, p23).

Whereas McCourt appropriates the oral enunciation as an emblem of autonomous selfhood that he can "keep ... for myself" (MccCourt, p182), for Crews, the son of a tenant farmer, it is in effect, a binding pledge to the land that motivates a shared and uncompromising acceptance of the seasonal harvesting of tobacco, the inevitability of failed crops and habitual violence, ingrained from early childhood: "all our parents said, a beating will loosen a child's hide and let him grow" (Crews, p137). After all, if you were not *of* the community, you were simply "*that way*" and thus

beyond collective redemption: “You couldn’t go crazy in Bacon County; you were just *that way*” (Crews, p95).

Alternatively, we can state that without the unconscious archetypal forces of a childhood place with which to establish commonality, there is nothing to prevent the total dissolution of a sanity, saving regional identity:

... it occurred to me for the first time that being alive was like being awake in a nightmare.

I remember saying to myself: “Scary as a nightmare. Jest like being awake in a nightmare”.

Never once did I ever think that my life was not just like anybody else’s, that my fears and uncertainties were not universal. For which I can only thank God. Thinking so could only have made it more bearable (Crews, 114).

For Crews, place acts as an emotional filter that allows him to channel his libidinal energies toward the aggressive (masculine) production of absolute space in order that he may isolate the territory of self from Other, community from outsiders, and ultimately, community from God, in order to defend the mind from the unexplainable. This means that the Southern novelist, against the advice of Bachelard, is instinctively driven to “gather all our beings around the unity of our name” (Bachelard, p99), and contain his childhood memory and imagination within the reassuring confinement of a communally endorsed place surrounded with as much (poetic) detail as possible, because he asserts, “[d]etails were everything” (Crews, p92). Crews reveals: “I have always been fascinated with boundaries and borders - the Little Satilla, for instance, separating Appling County from Bacon, made me feel safe and good when I started to sleep at night, knowing that it was keeping all of us in and all of them out” (Crews, p131).

In Bacon County, there are in the end, no light *anima* interludes to interrupt the Harry’s waking and dreaming hours, which, as he himself acknowledges are but dimensions of the one terrifying *animus* reality. It is place - possessed of a certain

omniscience - rather than the child that is invested with cosmic totality, and what is more seen to be steering every psychic and bodily impulse towards destructive behaviour that he can suspend but never conquer:

... I had already learned - without knowing I'd learned it - that every single thing in the world was full of mystery and awesome power. And it was only by right ways of doing things - ritual ways - that kept any of us safe. Making stories about them was not so that we could understand them but so that we could live with them (Crews, pp97-98).

Unlike the distinctly urban childhood of McCourt, the rural childhood of Crews ensures that place is not simply a poetic canvas for the eternal imagination, but a space of physical cultivation and harvest. This is quite obviously a method of identity formation that operates to the exclusion of women and girls, who in their social role as either wives, daughters or simply "dry cattle":

... Maidens, or at least those young ladies who had never had a child, were called dry cattle after the fact that a cow does not give milk until after giving birth to a calf. An unflattering way to refer to women, God knows, but those were unflattering times (Crews, p29),

are to the men, simply as another contributing factor to their eventual demise; motivating the fulfilment of their inner drives in often undesired, traumatic but nevertheless fated sexual encounters, or otherwise through the unsustainable excesses of a large family. For the five-year-old Harry, it is the words of his older brother Hoyet ("It always comes a time in a man's life when he's got to do it. Purvis says it's sure as death"), which solidify an already developing consciousness of girls as objects of ritual that must be experienced despite his reluctance: "in some vague, unconscious way I knew that people must do the same thing as animals, more or less" (Crews, p112). In any event, this all goes to prove that women and girls, due to their largely passive role in the domestic sphere, are enclosed by place, that is, imprisoned in structures conceived by men as systems of identity. Hence outside of the male gaze, they appear to occupy a strange and

abstract space, and have their own unique sub-culture. Psychologically speaking, this feminine space is a direct rival to the masculine centres of power, and, in the manner of place, considered a mysterious and emasculating force that is vilified as much as loved.

Occurring in the opening pages of the memoir, his daddy's "crippled pleasure ... under the palm-thatched chickee" (Crews, p42), serves as the archetypal sexual act that defines women as a debilitating yet necessary affliction. Crews records this event with the vivid and damning details of emotive (masculine) purpose, making specific references to the grotesque, and less than human - almost feral - appearance of the Indian girl whom he tells us his daddy "had not wanted ... but they had been in the swamp for three years" (Crews, p20). This detail, in combination with the sounds she makes and her potent stench, mark her as something corrupt, diseased, and in an advanced state of decay: "he had lain under the palm roof being eaten alive by swarming mosquitoes as he rode the flat-faced Seminole girl, whose name he never knew and who grunted like a sow and smelled like something shot in the woods" (Crews, p19). Although Crews speculates about his daddy having felt remorse for his costly actions (which suggests the birth of Crews and his brother to be minor miracles: "I won't ever have any children if they take it [the testicle] off. That's what the doctors said" [Crews, p21]), the blame is disproportionately placed upon the girl, who by also being an outsider is made an easy scapegoat in his descriptions. As Crews confirms again later in his comments about the faith healer, to be an outsider is to be immediately held in suspicion: "he was not from our county, which amounted to making him not only a stranger but a foreigner as well" (Crews, p88). On a similar note, Crews appears to infer a connection between the arrival of the travelling Jew who "came into our little closed world smelling of strangeness and far places", and that of the mysterious childhood illness that saw him paralysed and bed-ridden after accepting a peppermint ball that lay casually in a dirty palm with "fingers ... badly twisted" (Crews, p83). At best, the Jew is a bogeyman exploited by the adults to frighten the children: "If you don't behave, youngun, I just might ... let'm have you", a warning that was "at least as effective as a whipping" (Crews, p83). Moreover, Crews' words can be said to endorse a

direct parallel with his daddy's sexual encounter, as both father and son are left crippled having tasted what can be regarded as forbidden pleasures.

This all goes to prove that Bacon County's near homogeneous cultural space³ is derived of paranoid delusions. Born mainly of ignorance and superstitions it gives rise to an *us* and *them* mentality, which, incidentally, serve a greater function than literal truth in a society of storytellers. In other words, patriarchy in the county works upon a simple ideological premise that supposes difference to be a measure of deficiency, active social function of masculinity, and passive social function of femininity. We can also claim that those individuals who embody both difference and femininity - such as the diseased Indian girl and also the storytelling Auntie (although in quite different ways) - inspire the greatest of masculine fears. This explains why the women of the community should be acknowledged by Crews as the most powerful storytellers. Whereas the men who source their often anecdotal stories from the secure confines of societal, women's stories breach prescribed borders in an effort to delve into the unfamiliar, un-centred and horrific in raw and unadulterated language, inviting the full force of place through their words. There is therefore, a distinctly feminine as well as masculine storytelling tradition operating in Bacon County that engages the full force of the *anima* and *animus* respectively. However, the *anima* in this instance gives birth to a discourse of psychophysical displacement. He writes:

It was always the women who scared me. The stories that women told and that men told were full of violence, sickness, and death. But it was always the women whose stories were unrelieved by humor and filled with apocalyptic vision. No matter how awful the stories were that the men told they were always funny. The men's stories were stories of character, rather than that of circumstance, and they always knew the people the stories were about. But women would repeat stories about folks they did not know and had never seen, and consequently, without character counting for anything, the stories were as stark and cold as legend or myth (Crews, p101).

³ Lefebvre points out: "Abstract space is not homogeneous; it simply has homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its 'lens'. And, indeed, it renders homogeneous. But in itself it is multiform. Its geometric and visual formants are complementary in their antithesis" (Lefebvre, p287).

In Crews' Bacon County where people are in a constant state of poverty and basically possess nothing but the bare essentials (and oftentimes not even that), stories are in a sense the only commodity that is regularly traded, exchanged, and collected. If we in fact consider stories a measure of wealth, as Crews appears to do, we can then make the assertion that women as the unofficial power base of the community and the enigmatic Auntie as its matriarch. This is a fact Crews seems to acknowledge, writing: "Willalee's grandma, Auntie, made the best part of me" (Crews, p71).

A Childhood goes to prove that the individual holds no position of privilege in Bacon County, and as indicated by the title and subtitle, his is an anonymous childhood in the biography of a place as unremarkable and nondescript as its name seems to suggest. Perhaps, if he were to realise absolute space through the poetical he would feel differently, but ultimately, it matters very little that "Bacon County is as flat as the map it's drawn on" (Crews, p26), or that its "timber ... was of no consequence, and there was very little rich bottomland" (Crews, p30), because it is neither the economic viability nor geographical characteristics of a place, but what that place represents for its inhabitants when infused with the awesome power of their imagination that furnish it with substance and significance. In this respect, storytelling is a political tool that sustains a belief in the validity of their suffering and the daily rigmarole of farming as rituals of identity. What is important then, is not the the origins of place in a physical locality - which in truth, is only ever a point of departure for Crews' stories and indeed Bachelard's reveries⁴ - but its realisation in the storytelling discourse. Storytelling is a continually evolving tradition that can never be furnished with a final signified, and Crews, by writing of the home place - of bloody feuds, domestic violence, grotesque sexual encounters, maimings, brutal practices and tainted beliefs - can be said to unconditionally perpetuate the storytelling tradition of Bacon County; illustrating in the process that he very much belongs to the place of childhood, despite having left it permanently at the age of

⁴ In his essay, Bachelard describes how revisiting an actual lake in the place of childhood marks a point of departure into imaginative solitudes. He writes: "We are standing before a great lake whose name is familiar to geographers, high in the mountains, and suddenly we are returning to a distant past. We dream while remembering. We remember while dreaming" (Bachelard, p102).

seventeen; and in the closing lines of his autobiography he confesses: “I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave it completely. Wherever I might go in the world, they would go with me” (Crews, p170). This is not to say that his adult life spent outside of the home place has been uneventful or traumatic, but to acknowledge that those early hardships suffered during those formative years have been the most immediate to his sense of who he really is: “I have always known, though, that part of me never left, could never leave, the place where I was born and, further, that what had been most significant in my life had all taken place by the time I was six years old” (Crews, p22). For Harry Crews, Bacon County will forever be his home place, and he has the scars to prove it.

Chapter Three:

“Even the least pleasant smell ... was part of the invisible network of Aké’s extended persona”

James Olney, in his article on African dramatist Wole Soyinka’s autobiography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, notes:

... *Aké* - and here I think is typical of African autobiography in general - gives the story of African consciousness, the story of the universal event, the story of the non-specific, non-singular community experience, and embracing not only the autobiographer’s generation but generations past and generations to come as well. This is why I have elsewhere suggested that much African autobiography might better be understood as “autophylography”, for the life, the “bios” that it records is not so much the life of the single and isolated individual individual as it is the life of the community, the life of the “phylon”; as is the life of a whole people, specifically including the past, the present, and the future of that people (Olney:1983, pp80-81).

This I feel is a surprising comment coming from a theorist such as Olney, for there is nothing in the text to indicate a typical African childhood, or for that matter, a distinct African consciousness as *he* defines it¹. In short, Olney in the above statements, promotes *Aké* principally as a generic account of an African variation on communal consciousness - hence, an African variation on absolute space - and almost as an aside, its artistic merits as childhood autobiography. Metaphorically speaking, Olney, in a manner reminiscent of Bachelard, attempts to weave his analysis around, instead of about, the child standing before him, calling his attention from centre stage. Can we not state then, that this is evidence of a characteristic “flaw” belonging to the Western psyche, that compels it to search for what it has lost - or what it perceives it has lost - so that when finally “recovered” in the form of either childhood or tribal order, it accordingly impregnates this space with the

¹ As Olney reveals in his article, “Aké: Wole Soyinka as Autobiographer”, “African consciousness” is a term borrowed from Soyinka himself.

accumulative, therefore cosmic, potential of an Edenesque paradise for its own mental well-being, and, ultimately, to ensure its post-conscious survival? Conversely, aspiring to immortality within the pages of literature is hardly a novel concept, but an immortality based upon the nostalgia of human origins is an entirely modern one, and owes its beginnings to the decline of Western civilisation. Indeed, in a tribal culture in which its adherents abide by time-honoured traditions and a cyclical calendar, a communal consciousness - the phylon as Olney puts it - will ideally act to subvert the approach of the historical (and by the same token, abstract space), and suspend human existence in its infancy. To put it another way, in an absolute space where the superego is apparently surrendered to the collective wisdom of tribal elders, a pantheon of gods and oral mythology, and the ego to the communal management of seasonal harvests, society can be said to take on the characteristics of an archetypal childhood. Hence to the Western spectator, the simplicity, innocence and naturalness of tribal life, is seen to nurture a perfectly ordered and eternal reality where unconscious life, so to speak, perpetuates conscious life². However, neither Aké nor Isara, can adequately fit this idyllic model of human existence, for both bear witness to the damaging effects of colonialism, and the spiralling decline of traditional values and practices in the face of an increasingly abstract capitalist system. Thus, the virtual renaissance of absolute space as envisioned by Olney, and also it would seem, by the adult Soyinka, occurs solely within the periphery of the Western gaze, and is accordingly braced, or rather colonised if you will, by its fundamental values - "soul values" Bachelard might say (Bachelard, p117) - and subsequent to this, operates as the template for a metaphysical commonality. This is to acknowledge African consciousness is a call to communion that exists purely as an aesthetic construct within the confines of the text.

Let us first consider in this chapter, the basic facts of Soyinka's childhood. The dramatist is brought up a Christian in a Christian conclave, taught to speak English, attends Sunday School, church and even the boy scouts; and as the favourite son of

² Lefebvre explains: "There is thus a sense in which the existence of absolute space is purely mental, and hence 'imaginary'. In another sense, however, it also has a social existence, and hence a specific and powerful 'reality'" (Lefebvre, p251).

the “Headmaster”, holds a position of privilege in the home as well as at school. For example, unlike the other older children who are forced to endure the indignities of the communal mat, the boy, at least during his early years is allowed to share the sanctity of the parents’ bedroom, that he comes to think of as “*our* room”: “I wondered what my sister [Tinu] felt about it all, unable to enjoy the intimacy which I derived from my father’s bedroom” (Soyinka, p79). At the close of the autobiography, we leave the boy at eleven-years-old preparing to go to Government College, a boarding school in Ibadan. This is a pipedream for most Nigerians who lack the financial resources to attend secondary school: “Here, people don’t go to secondary school straight from primary. They can’t afford to ... they go to work, save up enough, then go to secondary school” (Soyinka, p142). Quite clearly Aké is a place that has prospered under British colonial rule, and his household, furnished with servants, a radio, collection of books and all manner of Western luxuries, is far removed from his grandfather’s house in the tribal world of Isara. In fact, the boy fails to comprehend the poverty, physical hardships, customs and rituals of Isara as anything other than an unnecessary nuisance. For instance, when tradition requires that he prostrate himself in front of the “arrogant stranger” (Soyinka, p127), Wole refuses to comply, announcing: “If I don’t prostrate myself to God, why should I prostrate to you? You are just a man like my father aren’t you?” (Soyinka, p128). In addition, the Odemo’s heated response directed at his father in African, and translated for the reader only in the footnotes: “By my Oro ancestors! Did you teach him that?” (Soyinka, p128), further accentuates Soyinka’s cultural Otherness through what appears a symbolic - if not an actual - exclusion from discourse. The children are thereafter made to practice full prostration at home and at Isara, but it does not diminish the fact that the inhabitants of Isara and Soyinka do not share a correlative consciousness. Considered by the majority of people to be “aliens who actually had been heard to converse with their parents in the whiteman’s tongue” (Soyinka, p126), the children in turn regard the inhabitants with a similarly distancing curiosity and awe, which in the end results in them having neither a particular reverence or respect for the elders, gods or the tribal way of life. He explains: “the Odemo was simply Essay’s close friend, he meant little else. It was the women traders who brought the flavour, the smell and touch of

Isara to Aké” (Soyinka, 128).

While Isara is acknowledged as “second home” (Soyinka, p66), Soyinka does not - and cannot - share the kind of intimate bond with its people that he shares with the many paternal and maternal forces that define his extended family in Aké. He proudly declares: “The bookseller’s wife was one of our many mothers; if we had taken a vote on the question, she would be in the forefront of all the others, including our real one” (Soyinka, p15). To evoke the Platonic metaphor, Isara is in truth no more than a shadow world appended to his actual world of light principally through his annual family visits: “New Year meant Isara” (Soyinka, p67). By Soyinka’s own admission (during a seminar on *Aké*), his boyhood place is a self-contained universe, “a sort of semi-hermetic - but not altogether hermetic - Christian conclave where I grew up as a child, all the while foraging far out from time to time to imbibe the other side of the world. But it was kind of enclosed society [italics removed]” (Gulledge, p511). In the end, Aké is the boy’s only reality, and an absolute space over which he is the sole proprietor. As such, it is an absolute space conforming to the child’s miniature proportions. To explain further, Soyinka presents to the reader, a child’s eye view of the world, and everything and everybody the child appropriates as his place, becomes a window into the cosmos. Comparatively, the foreign places he glimpses in the journals and catalogues of his father “belonged to a different, unreal world” (Soyinka, p79). More importantly, Isara, despite its familial connections, is viewed in a similar light by the boy, who cannot, for instance, understand why when communal latrines were available,

... that it seemed to be accepted that children’s excrement could be passed anywhere, after which the mongrel dogs which roamed in abundance were summoned to eat them up. If they were not available, flies swarmed them until they finally dried up, were scattered by unwary feet at night, churned through by bicycles and the occasional motor lorry. And there were uncultivated patches in between dwellings into which faeces were flung or expelled directly by squatting adults (Soyinka, pp130-131).

Unable to ignore the ever present faeces any more than Crews and his people can

deny the odour of gas that tainted everything in Jacksonville, Soyinka is both repulsed and alienated by what he regards as irrational, not to mention unsanitary practices of the tribal community. For the children of the Headmaster, “clean ... meant normal”, hence symbolically natural, making him wonder “why we could not bring to Isara those Sanitary Inspectors who descended unannounced on Aké households, if only for the duration of our stay” (Soyinka, p131). In a similar fashion, the boy struggles to hide his disgust at the pathetic and desperate conditions he witnesses in these rural areas, igniting feelings of awkwardness and being out of place, as opposed to any real sympathy or concern. For all intents and purposes, Isara is an unnatural, rogue, yet apparently vernacular space the boy is unwilling to fill. In short, it offends him at a biological level; for this tribal world subverts, what are to him, basic human principles in its perpetuation of unsanitary practices. To take this further, the boy can be said to identify in Isara, the destructive potential of what Lefebvre terms abstract space³.

Isara’s communal structures are at the very least, a hindrance to social progress, and at worst, the method of its people’s destruction. It binds them to cyclical traditions that are incompatible with the progressive, socioeconomic reality of a rapidly westernising Nigeria, and as such, it exists outside of history. Indeed, the political agenda embodied in myth is no longer congruous with the survival of its inhabitants, and increasingly, the only tangible evidence of commonality is a misery born of poverty. Consequently, the ‘objects’ of ritual are fast approaching a post-communal conscious existence as cultural artifacts without living memory, for they can no more be housed in absolute space.

What is more, this antagonistic attitude, born essentially of an ego-centric insensitivity and instinct for self-preservation, is most noticeable on one particular visit to Isara when the Soyinka family have no choice but to accept the hospitality of

³ Lefebvre writes: “Abstract space is not homogeneous; it simply has homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its ‘lens’. And, indeed, it renders homogeneous. But in itself it is multiform. Its geometric and visual formants are complementary in their antithesis ... As for the phallic, it fulfils the extra function of ensuring that ‘something’ occupies this space, namely a signifier which, rather than signifying a void, signifies a plentitude of destructive force - an illusion, therefore, of plentitude, and a space taken up by an ‘object’ bearing a heavy cargo of myth” (Lefebvre, p287).

traders whose arrival in Aké has always been a source of delight for the boy. But

... [n]ow visiting them in their own homes, I sadly watched much of their mystery dissipate ... The homes of these traders depressed us, their shabbiness could not be disguised. Beneath their joy at our presence we now sensed the strain of survival, a life made up of forty-mile treks laden with merchandise. Their one 'dress of pride' was worn in our honour ... and the same dress would appear again at the most important festival of the year, the New Year itself, then disappear, until the next festival (Soyinka, p130).

As occasional and exotic visitors to his home place, the traders are invested with a certain mystique and soul value in his timeless childhood reveries. However, when rediscovered, this time in their meagre homes, Wole cannot help but selfishly lament the personal loss to his imaginative life at their mystery having been solved in the harsh light of *animus* reality. In this regard, he can be said to act in the manner of a tyrant, who, in his pampered arrogance, demands total compliance of his rural subjects to the "natural" order" of absolute space⁴. Therefore, as evidenced by his open declaration of prostration as an empty ritual, and numerous acts of defiance against adult authority, young Wole's *animus* is as much a tool of his individual mind as the *anima*. Hence the cosmos, beyond being the vehicle for his natural reveries, nurtures an inflated ego, and results in an insatiable self confidence to assert himself in all areas of social discourse and interaction.

This all stems from the fact that the children - especially young Wole - are yet to develop any semblance of social conscience, or rather the moral sensibility accruing from a communal consciousness, and exist largely to satisfy their *anima* drives. Or to put it another way, they have a patience and interest only for the things that feed their senses and imagination with a sense of belonging (of cosmic proportions). The Yoruba culture we must assume is largely an adult influence, for it is only ever adopted but in fragments into the boy's consciousness, and what is

⁴ Lefebvre in his discussion on absolute space explains that: "The city state ... establishes a fixed centre by coming to constitute a hub, a privileged focal point, surrounded by peripheral areas which bears its stamp. From this moment on, the vastness of pre-existing space appears to come under the thrall of a divine order. At the same time the town seems to gather in everything that surrounds it, including the natural and the divine, and the earth's evil and good forces" (Lefebvre, p235).

more, seamlessly merged with his limited understanding of Christian doctrine. Therefore when he expresses his desire to see the *egungun* (a spirit of the dead) that emerged from his friend Osiki's compound, Wole fails to comprehend his mother's objections: "Better not even let your father hear you", to which he responds: "Why not? ... he can come too ... He is not like Mama, he is a man too" (Soyinka, p32). In the young boy's mind, Christianity and traditional Yoruba beliefs do not operate as competing ideologies, but as aspects of the one cosmic reality; and for him there are no contradictions in being told Biblical stories alongside those about his Uncle Sanya "who was acknowledged by all to be an *oro* [tree spirit]" (Soyinka, p5); or for that matter, his believing the bookseller's daughter to be an *abiku* (a spirit child) and "not of our world" (Soyinka, p15) while also believing "Ogun is the pagans' devil who kills people and fights everybody" (Soyinka, p140). Thus, he is only ever semi-conscious of the manipulation of his mind by adult educators. However, regardless of what Bachelard says, the concern here is not that the child is fed stories that are too "childish" or entrenched in the historical (or for that matter, the mythical), because whatever their original substance, they find new life and meaning in his own stories. For instance, the children collectively determine - despite adult assurances to the contrary - that: "It was clear that only the pomegranate could be the apple that lost Adam and Eve the joys of paradise. There existed yet another fruit that was locally called apple ... The first taste of the pomegranate unmasked that impostor and took its place" (Soyinka, p3). Later, the boy upon examining the stained-glass images of saints at St Peter's church, comes to the conclusion that these men were undoubtedly *egungun*:

... The stained-glass windows ... displayed the figures of three white men, dressed in robes which were very clearly *egungun* robes. Their faces were exposed, which were very unlike our own *egungun*, but I felt this was particular to the country from which those white people came (Soyinka, p32).

Protected by his parents from the corruptive influences of the coloniser, Aké is undeniably the site of an idyllic childhood where the boy has free reign to dream

and invent as he wishes. This is demonstrated most effectively in the passages that describe the sounds, sights, odours and flavours of the markets in which Wole and his friend constantly indulge even at the expense of the Sunday offering. In any case, “I lightened our apprehensions by suggesting that we sang better [in the church choir] after the richness of the markets in our throats” (Soyinka, p154). Soyinka writes in remarkable and loving detail:

... The flavours of the market rose fully in the evenings, beckoning us to the depletion of the *omni* and halfpennies ... In the market we stood and gazed on the deftly cupped fingers of the old women and their trainee wards scooping out the white bean-paste from a mortar in carefully gauged quantities, into the wide-rimmed, shallow pots of frying oil. The lump sank immediately in the oil but no deeper than an inch or two, bobbed instantly to the surface and turned pink in the oil ... Then, slowly forming, the outer crust of crisp, gritty light brownness (Soyinka, p153).

The hypnotic and ritual motions of the market women and *akara* simultaneously compel his imaginative as well as physical appetites toward poetic reveries, eclipsing for the duration of the experience, all other personal motivations in place. Thus, the markets recall in a sense, the poetic fullness of Bachelard’s images.

Although such poetic moments are wholly owned by the child, commodified as much as naturalised in his reveries, they inadvertently establish a space of accumulation, thereby clearing a path for the emergence of historical space⁵. In fact, it is only with the emergence of historical space, that the boy in his adolescence comes to recognise communal consciousness as a redeeming and vital characteristic of his fast approaching adulthood. Hence a certain orthodox shape begins to emerge out of Soyinka’s childhood recollections when one chronicles the boy’s psychological progress through the absolute space of cosmic solitudes and into historical space; which at last facilitates entry into absolute space as founded on

⁵ “After the fashion of a cathedral’s ‘nave’ or ‘ship’”, Lefebvre asserts, “the invisible fullness of political space (the space of the town-state’s nucleus or ‘city’) set up its rule in the emptiness of a natural space confiscated from nature. Then the forces of history smashed naturalness forever and upon its ruins established the space of accumulation (the accumulation of all wealth and resources: knowledge, technology, money, precious objects, works of art and symbols)” (Lefebvre, pp48-49).

African communal consciousness. But most important of all, these psychic spaces of memory can be conveniently gathered around the collective banner of mythical space. On this subject, Tuan writes:

Two principle kinds of mythical space may be distinguished. In the one, mythical space is a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known; it frames pragmatic space. In the other it is the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities. Both kinds of space, ... persist in the modern world (Tuan, p86).

Aké clearly qualifies as mythical space under both these definitions; although, from the perspective of the child, “the empirically known” (his notion of place) is seen to contain rather than surround the “fuzzy area of defective knowledge”, understood purely as the unexplored regions of his interior world he is yet to fill with his presence. It follows, that even when the dramatist’s experiences are taken beyond the context of an unconscious early childhood, and placed in the greater context of Soyinka as a human being in the round, we can still locate a psycho-poetic centre at the heart of historical space, and indeed, in what Bachelard terms the event. The central (historical) event in the autobiography, is undoubtedly the women’s uprising against unfair taxation practices, successfully challenging in the process, the authority of the District Officer and the divine power of Aafin. As illustrated by this momentous event, African consciousness for Soyinka, need not uphold the traditional ruling elite, when party to a corrupt self-serving political system. Instead, it may serve to provide a common voice to address the constantly changing needs of African communities. Thus, it is a method of empowerment, and a Gestalt organism born of cross-cultural values.

However, with hybridisation comes the loss of a distinct cultural heritage; and the only tangible evidence of Soyinka’s participation in Yoruba traditions appears in the form of the ankle cutting ceremony performed by his grandfather who is referred to in the text only as “Father” - a most appropriate title, considering his status as the guardian of traditional wisdom and therefore a direct rival to the

Christian God. Obviously the boy at the end of the book is unaware of the full significance of the ceremony that has been sprung on him, or Father's prophetic words at its conclusion: "Whoever offers you food, take it. Eat it. Don't be afraid, as long as your heart says, Eat. If your mind misgives, even for a moment, don't take it, and never step in the house again" (Soyinka, p147). In a manner of speaking, he is yet to test his recently "inscribed" African consciousness, or to put it more accurately, a Yoruba consciousness. Hence what Olney determines as African consciousness has been in a sense (forcibly?) written into the recollection of boyhood memory by the culturally conscious adult Soyinka, for whom "the Yoruba gods are creative metaphors" (Gulledge, p512). But more significantly, what the theorist refers to as "autophylography" can be applied to any number of non-African biographies and memoirs - and here either one of the works discussed in the previous two chapter would qualify - that evoke the idea of a collective identity. While we may agree with Bachelard that childhood imagination is best pursued in solitude, it rarely tells the story of an isolated being. Crews' memoir it must be noted, imagines a similar fusion of self and place in its choice of title and subtitle, and what is more, young Harry, lacking the motivation for independent action, unlike the rebellious and often solitary Wole, inscribes a stronger sense of communal consciousness in his storytelling.

Subsequently, Soyinka is represented in the text as a three-fold personality: namely the happy child, melancholy adult, and African storyteller; in the process demonstrating most effectively the polar nature of childhood and adulthood as described in Bachelard's essay. The dramatist is first of all the child, who, like the child envisioned by poetico-analysis, is a creature of (imaginative) appetites and happy solitudes. It is the child that impregnates Aké with the beauty of the cosmos; weaving place, its odours and structures together through an organic fusion with a poetically charged unconscious. Thus, young Wole's storytelling voice is not formed on the principle of psycho-synthesis - because as already discussed, there is no evidence to suggest a passive acceptance of a prefigured social discourse - but instead what we may refer to as psycho-symbiosis with place. While such a term gives an unfavourable impression of the child as something parasitic (and in the

context of absolute space, power hungry), it is nevertheless appropriate, because the boy in a sense instinctively attaches himself to certain objects and people that are seen to satisfy his libidinal drives (inscribing their character with permanence purely in terms of his imaginative needs). This causes a psychological merger between self and Other, or to put it more accurately, self and symbolic Other. So much so that stories about the Other are better described as being autobiographical than biographical. Soyinka writes:

... Even the least pleasant smell, such as the faintly nauseating smell of a smashed bedbug, tinged with the whiff of camphor that should have prevented its appearance in the first place was part of the invisible network of Ake's extended persona (Soyinka, p149).

The "extended persona" of Aké serves a similar function to the Lacanian mirror image.

It is because the boy fully expects the people and objects of his world to conform to his understanding of self, that when mercilessly ridiculed by the women of his household ("If he sees a fight he will run ... If you touch him he will faint, then die altogether of fright ... let him run under the skirts of his books" [Soyinka, p102]), he fails to respond, either unable or unwilling to interpret their words as an assault on his character:

Who were they talking about, I wondered. Everything they said about me sounded like the findings of a serious study, so they could only be talking about someone and of specific deeds, or non-deeds. That appeared to be me yet I could not recognise myself in what they said (Soyinka, p103).

Distinguishing self and Other, and giving name and definition to things that circumscribe his existence for the purposes of his own psychophysical navigation of place is therefore as vital to his being as the recognition of elemental signifiers to Bachelard's day-dreaming child. In the household, there is the "Wash-Hand

Basin”, and “[l]ike every other item of furniture, it served more than the purpose for which it was known. And more than all other items, it was - a LANDMARK. The interior of the house was defined by its location” (Soyinka, p59). While located near the school is a large rock he calls Jonah that “was my own secret habitat” wholly removed from *place-of-other-people* (Soyinka, p64). Young Wole, thus convinced of his cosmic totality, and armed with the power to name - christen if you will - the world about him, stands god-like in place. There is in truth, no one to challenge his authority, with the possible exception of the ever vigilant mother who “had a habit of levitating from nowhere. For a moment a dwelt on the unfairness of it” (Soyinka, p58). A strict disciplinarian armed with an ominous vocabulary comprising of such mysterious words as “Temperature” and “GREED”, the mother is the one significant antagonist in an otherwise uneventful childhood.

Nevertheless, there is no urgency in the actions of either parent to compel him toward a premature social awakening - to accept an oppressive religious doctrine, the pain of separation or binding (fatalistic) social rituals - that would drive the *anima* forever underground. Take for instance the boy’s accident on the see-saw. After Wole regains consciousness, desperate to have the blood he lost poured back inside his head, the father does not challenge his son’s belief; rather he subscribes to its truth, reassuring him that it has already been done, adding: “How did you know that was the right thing to do?” (Soyinka, p28). The boy’s answer to this inquiry: “But everybody knows” (Soyinka, p28), illustrates the vague universality he attributes all his personal insights into the human condition. On this evidence we may claim that Soyinka throughout his early childhood lives a largely sheltered and charmed existence secure in the knowledge that he can always return to the reassuring confines and special privileges of the parents’ bedroom at the conclusion of his childhood adventures.

When Wole unwittingly embarks on his first “major expedition”, travelling from Aké to Isara mesmerised by the rhythm of the drums in the parade, he becomes justifiably anxious over what he sees: “It upset my previous understanding of the close relationship between the parsonage and Aké. I expected

the wall to be everywhere” (Soyinka, p38). However, he is never consumed by a numbing and unexplainable fear as is Crews over his sleepwalking episodes that threaten to render him a freak - because you are either *of* the community or “*that way*”: “You couldn’t go crazy in Bacon County; you were just *that way*” (Crews, p95) - and beyond narrative redemption, a most terrifying fate realised during the period of his long illness⁶. Whatever Wole’s actions, there is always an assured outcome - he is never on the precipice of a terrifying nothingness - and after falling asleep at the police station he predictably awakens back in his own house, once again in the company of his family and extended family, who celebrate his return:

And before I knew what was happening, she [the bookseller’s wife] had swung me on her back, slipped her wrapper round to secure me tightly and was singing and dancing. And suddenly everyone was singing with her, laughing and shouting at the top of their voices (Soyinka, p49).

For Soyinka there is always the certainty of belonging in Aké: no matter how far he projects himself or his stories from its perceived borders, they will expand accordingly. His discoveries on this particular journey are simply book marked for future exploration (“I made a note to start learning to ride a bicycle as we marched past a bicycle hirer”), or contextualised to his satisfaction within his evolving consciousness: “The parsonage wall had vanished for ever but it no longer mattered. Those token bits and pieces of Aké which had entered our home on occasions ... were beginning to emerge in their proper sizes” (Soyinka, p38). Because of this cosmic certainty we never register a change in four-year-old Wole’s demeanour, and he is his usual confident and assertive self during the conversation with the white officer and his sergeant despite being far away from the security of home and loved ones. Initially, Wole is left feeling confused and insulted by the ironical laughter that ensues over his statement (“My father is Headmaster.

⁶ Finding himself in the middle of a field one night, Crews tells us: “I stood utterly still and waited because I knew if I waited long enough, the terror would find a source and name. Once it had a name, no matter how awful, I would be able to live with it. I could go back home” (Crews, p76). Thus, as long as a story - a purpose and name - can be invented for the experience, the boy can preserve his fragile sense of self. However, when he is crippled, prevented from participating in the daily rituals of farming and made a spectacle for the community, it effectively positions him outside of discourse, leaving him helpless and alone.

Sometimes his name is Essay” [Soyinka, p47]), but he resumes control of the narrative through his unguarded and critical observations of the officer: “I could not understand why he should choose to speak through his nose. It made it difficult to understand him all the time” (Soyinka, p46). Here the boy is giving us a “literal” description of the officer’s speech. As far as he is concerned, the man *is* speaking “through his nose”. However, marking the reader’s interpretation of Wole’s impressions, is its apparent double life as both cosmic reverie and ironical narrative of childhood. Hence he can understand the child’s words on a metaphorical level; as an amusing and lyrical comment simultaneously standing in for the child self, and the literal truth. By this method Soyinka illustrates that it is clearly the adult as opposed to the child who is truly limited in his perceptions, leading him to underestimate the child’s mind and the scale of his poetic intuition.

To go further, the boy by directing the home place and its people towards his own personal vision is in effect performing the role of the dramatist he is destined to become in adulthood. His parents and the many colourful personages of Aké appear at times little more than allegorical characters in a cosmic drama Wole has staged, existing purely for his very serious creative efforts at identity formation. Or as Olney puts it: “they are names that Soyinka *imagines* for them as being appropriate to the characters and to their role in the drama of his childhood life” (Olney:1983, p78). The boy comes to the conclusion that Pa Delumo was known as the “Canon” because his “head was like a cannon ball ... Everything about the guns recalled the man’s presence, his strength and solidity” (Soyinka, p13). His mother he comes to call “Wild Christian” because of her wild application of the Faith, while his father, whose initials were S.A., “did not take long to enter my consciousness simply as Essay, as one of those careful stylistic exercises in prose which follow set rules of composition” (Soyinka, p14). This does not mean however that the adults of his world are without the ability to step off of Wole’s stage to take on unscripted (abstract) action; and there are many instances when the boy is left perplexed as to their motives: “Once again I felt a helpless confusion - did these grown-ups ever know what they wanted?” (Soyinka, p125).

“I was overwhelmed by one fact”, the author symbolically declares halfway through his autobiography, “there was neither justice nor logic in the world of grown-ups” (Soyinka, p104). This statement which signals his intended departure from inconsequential acts of childhood disobedience to those more characteristic of the politically charged adult Soyinka, arguably have their genesis in his outright refusal of the parents’ instructions to read in front of guests. Although young Wole is more than eager to exploit opportunities to demonstrate his abilities, his initial enthusiasm for the performances is soon overridden by a more pressing concern to protect his sister from ritual humiliation. Soyinka explains:

... she [Wild Christian] had to bring Tinu into the act, disparaging her comparative lack of attainment. In place of my delight at being invited to read came discomfort, then resentment. Tinu was the closest playmate I knew and a protective bond had grown between us which only showed when she was hurt or threatened ... I could not ... understand that Essay found it necessary to ask questions which were obviously designed to catch her out. Reducing her before strangers was, however, the ultimate crime (Soyinka, p80).

It is interesting that the parents through their unjust “adult” actions should in the end nurture within their son a strong moral sensibility to accompany his natural rebelliousness that proves especially crucial as he begins to outgrow their formative influences with approaching adolescence - a period guided by the words and actions of Daodu and his wife Beere, who instil him with the courage to pursue his political convictions. Thus the autobiography chronicles not only Soyinka’s dependence upon place, its people and geography - which is where Bachelard would be inclined to leave it - but his growing independence from it. *Aké* is therefore the story of a developing childhood consciousness which first recognises the exotic sights, sounds and odours of the home place, then via the vehicle of individuation, its deeply inscribed political problems in a corrupt national system. However, before any of this is allowed to happen, the boy suffers a difficult period of (a once unthinkable) uncertainty in which everything he had previously regarded as stable and fixed is slowly but surely proven transitory by the damnable forces of

“CHANGE” (which is seen to occur in the shadows of the historical).

Change is first encountered by the boy when he is unceremoniously uprooted from the parents’ room to take his anonymous place amongst the chaotic assortment of siblings, cousins and family appendages on the communal mat, his demotion giving birth to an infantile anger that is truly Oedipal in nature. His forced relocation provokes Wole to reject everything and everyone that had been the most immediate to him; his actions given momentum by the “unjust” beating he receives for periodically sampling the powdered milk, a harmless act considering it was simply left abandoned after his brother had been weaned: “I now blamed the entire household for my banishment from Essay’s room” (Soyinka, p92). If we in fact consider that the boy’s appetite for the milk is a surrogate impulse to his denied libidinal impulses, then his mother’s intervention can be seen to reenact the original loss of his privileges, further underlining his alienation from the household. Thus provoked by what he considers “their” continued mistreatment of him, the boy channels his negative emotions (for a lack of alternatives) toward a will to separation: “I had for long suspected that my place was no longer in that house”, forming in his mind a strategy for escape: “I rehearsed the swift movement down, the bundle of my possessions snatched up ... heading nowhere but everywhere, away from a household whose subtle hostilities had begun to prickle my skin” (Soyinka, p92). But compounding his great frustration at the loss of his favoured status and foiled attempts to run away is the shocking realisation that if change can manifest itself without warning around him, then it can just as easily occur inside of him. He writes:

Change was impossible to predict. A tempo, a mood would have settled over the house, ... then it would happen! A small event or, more frequently, nothing happened at all, nothing that I could notice much less grasp and - suddenly it all changed! ... Features appeared where they had not been, vanished where before they had become inseparable from our existence. Every human being with whom we came in contact, Tinu and I, would CHANGE! Even Tinu changed, and I began to wonder if I also changed, without knowing it, the same as everybody else (Soyinka, p93).

Because the boy cannot as yet comprehend the notion of growing older, change translates as the process by which he ceases to be himself and becomes somebody else altogether. And heightening this anxiety is arguably the unstated belief that whatever changes he undergoes will bring him into the fold of a perverse and sinister adulthood that will render senseless his poetic - and thus perfect - order of being. However, “[u]ntil the birth of Folasade I had believed that Change was something that one or more of the household caught, then discarded - like Temperature. Folasade’s was permanent” (Soyinka, p95). The death of Folasade finally confirms the machinery of change as an apocalyptic force gradually usurping his inner discourse of its cosmic vitality, ominously propelling narrative identity towards a final - and irreversible - signified. In foresight, a mysterious fate which seems at once impossible and irresistible. As is the case with Bachelard’s child, death is too approximate a concept for young Wole to fully grasp⁷ and as a consequence it does not register in his psyche as a trauma, but symbolically as a phantom trauma lurking beyond the periphery of his understanding. Despite this, the occasion gives expression to an uncontainable and nameless grief, but a grief suffered in anxious anticipation over his own future losses rather than for the actual loss of his infant sister: “Suddenly, it all broke within me. A force from nowhere pressed me against the bed and I howled ... I was sucked into a place of loss whose cause or definition remained elusive” (Soyinka, p98).

Perhaps facilitated most obviously by Soyinka’s years at boarding school where he would have been largely oblivious to gradual changes in his childhood world, Aké is represented in the text as two separate and divisive realities, experienced at opposite - and oppositional - ends of an eventful life, hence opposite ends of historical space. Thus, they are so to speak, poetic images encapsulating place prior to, and in the aftermath of experiencing traumatic time-bound events. I mean by this that *Aké* does not attempt to relate the whole of Soyinka’s childhood experiences (or at least what could be deemed the “whole” of his childhood

⁷ Bachelard declares: “The terms ‘life’ and ‘death’ are too approximate ... In the human being there are so many forces being born which do not, at their beginnings, know the monotonous fatality of death! One dies only once. But psychologically we are born many times” (Bachelard, pp111-112).

experiences) in painstaking and demystifying detail, but instead strives for its poetic essence. Because of this, Soyinka selects only what is necessary to convey the Aké experience, which is something personal, rather than anything provincial or even African.

Aké does however deliver a political message. If we, in accordance with this argument, regard the timeless Ake of childhood as representative of all that is good and hoped for in the Nigerian way of life, then the defaced Aké of adulthood is the very embodiment of everything that has gone tragically wrong in the aftermath of colonial rule. Through adult eyes, clouded as it were with *animus* cynicism, the home place is fundamentally experienced in miniature, its once great landmarks reduced to a mere shadow of their past glory: “Even the baobab has shrunk with time, yet I had imagined that this bulwark would be eternal, beyond the growing perspectives of a vanished childhood. Its girth has dwindled with time and the branches only give a little shelter” (Soyinka, p63). But more than the natural retardation of his primitive perceptions in adulthood, Soyinka laments the corrupt political systems and foreign influences that have drained the home place completely of its lifeblood. Because every bit of its magic, personality, rituals, stories and traditions (both Christian and Yoruba), but most of all its people have been driven from its borders, Aké in the end, is little more than a barren and desecrated shell without flesh or substance that will never again sustain community nor empower childhood imagination with a sense of belonging. He writes:

An evil thing has happened to Ake parsonage. The land eroded, the lawns bared and mystery driven from its once secretive combs ... The motor-hulk has not moved from its staging-point where children clambered into it for journeys to fabled places; now it is only a derelict, its eyes rusted sockets, its dragon face collapsed with a progressive loss of teeth ... The surviving houses, houses which formed the battlements of Ake parsonage are now packing cases on a depleted landscape, full of creaks, exposed and nerveless (Soyinka, pp3-4).

To go further, in its place is a mass hysteria, characterised by a grotesque and

frenzied consumption of foreign merchandise, its competing corporate symbols, to Soyinka's dismay and disgust, adopted as makeshift monuments of wealth and prosperity in modern day Nigeria: an abstract space empty of soul values and biography that is detrimental to the national psyche, as Jacksonville is to the people of Bacon County:

... The blare of motor-horns compete with a high-decibel outpouring of rock and funk and punk and other thunk-thunk from lands of instant culture heroes. Eyes glazed, jaws in constant, automated motion, the new habitués mouth the confusion of lyrics belted out from every store, their arms flapping up and down like wounded bush-foul ...

They move on to the trinket-and-cosmetic shop, their jaws implacably churning through the gummed-up troughs of synthesized feed in every conceivable idiom, pause at McDonald's, bury corpses of sausages-rolls in their mouths and drown the mash in coca-cola (Soyinka, p157).

As a result, the narrative in *Aké* shifts continuously from being as elaborate as dream visions warning of the demise of the already "wounded" Nigerian people, to being as uncomplicated as fairy tales in which every 'object' of ritual is perfectly housed inside absolute space - a world where "Birthday" first enters into Soyinka's consciousness as something that you eat, as indicated by his declaration: "We've come to eat Birthday" (Soyinka, p30). Yet these polar images witnessed by child and adult form a seamless narrative by being merged and separated within the guiding voice of a distinctly African storyteller grounded in the historical, whose highly stylised and evocative prose is evident from the opening lines:

The sprawling undulating terrain is all of Ake. More than mere loyalty to the parsonage gave birth to a puzzle, and a resentment, that God should choose to look down on his own pious station, the parsonage compound, from the profane heights of Itoko (Soyinka, p1).

Consequently, the narrative structure of the autobiography is cyclical in the manner of the African oral tradition. Narrative identity in this context expands like

concentric circles in waters - or rather “human waters” to borrow a phrase from Bachelard (Bachelard, p112) - disturbed by Soyinka’s strategically dropped stone. For a very brief moment (the duration of storytelling), the stone sends ripples across the surface of his hopeful (poetico-analytical) and hopeless (psychoanalytical) images, blurring all distinctions between them. As a consequence, we are never privy to the knowledge of exactly when the boy christens his parents Essay and Wild Christian, because in his timeless memories, they have always existed as Essay and Wild Christian. It seems hardly the work of the two-year-old we meet at the beginning of the book, and yet they are used by him almost instinctively, as if it were the most natural thing for him to do. Comparatively, his father’s real name is a childhood mystery in the shadows cast by absolute space: “few called him by his real name and, for a long time, I wondered if he had any” (Soyinka, p14). A character such as Daodu however is more complicated. He emerges early as a frequent - but inconsequential - visitor to the Soyinka household, but it is only in the latter half of the text that his importance along with that of his wife Beere is truly felt. Thus, it is fitting that the climactic moment of the autobiography should occur at the height of their influence, as the boy prepares to leave home signalling an end to his Aké experiences.

It must be noted that Soyinka’s storytelling voice is only ever stylistically African, rendered as it is in English for an English speaking audience, and evoking Christian - thus Western - values more frequently than Yoruba ones. Sighting similar evidence, Obi Maduakor argues the opposite of Olney, explaining in his article that “*Aké* cannot move us as *The African Child* moves us because it is not the story of a typical African native but the autobiography of a Westernized African” (Maduakor, p235). But whatever the literary merits of *The African Child*, Maduakor I feel is misguided in his criticism of *Aké*, nor can I see a point to the parallels he draws between the events in Soyinka’s fiction and *Aké*⁸. In other words,

⁸ Muakador in fact makes the comment: “A minor weakness in *Ake* is that characters are scantily sketched. Autobiographies have this one limitation in that the author speaks with his own voice and deals with real life characters ... His characters are not fully realized, not fully individuated” (Muakador, p239). Is this not a “weakness” we could detect in any number of autobiographical and fictional texts written since the advent of modernism? What is more, he goes on to criticise, missing, in my opinion, the point altogether: “The qualities that define the personalities of Wild Christian and Essay are not made concrete outside the home” (Muakador, p239).

Muakador is subscribing to the notion, to employ again the humorous quotation from McCourt: “the happy childhood is hardly worth your while” (Mccourt, p1). Soyinka’s invocation of African consciousness is ultimately correlative to the goals of poetico-analysis: the child is utilised as the symbol of Nigeria’s collective redemption, in an effort to make redundant a badly-spent past which has most noticeably claimed Aké in his absence. To recapitulate, this is a timeless hope for a better future best embodied in the collective voice of the market women whose protests earned them an extraordinary victory over the local authorities - both British and Yoruba - and their real and imagined powers. This event alone fixes a psychic centre in historical space, located halfway between absolute childhood space and abstract adulthood space, it eclipses both, and facilitates the psychological merger of all his social (*animus*) and imaginative (*anima*) beings, thus establishing in the process a common denominator in his conscious and unconscious realities which we may refer to as a well of cosmic energy (indeed, a transcendental archetype for the ages). Moreover, it illustrates that the forces of change (and the historical) need not mobilise narrative identity in the same unfortunate direction of previous and current generations. Absolute space is a psychic reality that may be rescued anytime from abstraction, a traumatic fate suffered when all the certainties of the religious, political, and historical are thought to have been exhausted. In summation, when the archetypes of absolute space are rediscovered again in the collective unconscious, it will conjure a revival of childhood reveries and post-conscious sensibilities in the creative and practical life of the adult, and ideally, his community.

Chapter Four:

“It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened”

Distinct from their male counterparts in the retrospective childhood, storytelling, for both Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, and Kyoko Mori in her memoir *The Dream of Water*, is a discourse of psychophysical displacement¹. With their *animus* caught inside the abstract space of the patriarchal mirror², expression of girlhood identity is restricted to the space of the body, as opposed to a body of space that is absolute in the mind. Space in this instance, is purely symbolic of a body in motion, or as it happens, a state of inertia, constricted as it is, by place and its traditions: “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (Kingston, p49). This then, is to identify absolute space as a traditionally masculine privilege, and the possessive child, fueled by the concept of property, as an agent of patriarchy. Made to play a subordinate role, the *animus* of the girl child is in effect, public property, and thus owned by communal consciousness, operates to cultivate, shape and conserve the female body for the sole benefit of the male gaze. As a consequence of this social “objectivity”, young Kyoko is helpless to prevent her every action from being anticipated by often brutal counteraction by a father forever determined to find fault with his daughter:

... My face was always an impertinent face. If we disagreed about something and I explained my view, he got angry at my talking back. If I said nothing, he got just as angry because, then, I was being sullen and stubborn. After a while I expected him to hit me regardless of what I did or didn't do. Nothing made any difference. The only important thing was to keep absolutely still while he hit me so that he would not

¹ With the text acting so to speak as a “stop-gap” in identity, it is possible to draw a parallel between the retrospective girlhood and girlhood diary. In her article, Jane H. Hunter writes: “Diaries offered several routes of meditation. Sometimes they served as surrogate battlefields upon which girls struggled to blend family expectation with personal impulse ... Each of these strategies enabled Victorian girls to entertain imaginative freedom while preserving the networks of affiliation at the center of their lives” (Hunter, p59). In fact, the nature of Mori and Kingston’s memoirs, appear more private, and less a performance when compared with the likes of McCourt, Crews and Soyinka’s works.

² According to Lefebvre abstract space achieves “the reduction of the ‘real’, on the one hand, to a ‘plan’ existing in a void and endowed with no other qualities, and, on the other hand, to the flatness of a mirror, of an image, of pure spectacle under an absolutely cold gaze” (Lefebvre, p287).

miss and get angrier ... Hiroshi's rage seemed to be as inevitable as a head-on accident (Mori, p22).

Similarly, Maxine to her frustration, finds that her scholastic achievements go unrecognised because "I was getting straight As for the good of my future husband's family, not my own" (Kingston, p49). There is therefore, little resemblance between their *anima* being of private reveries, and *animus* identity reflected in the eyes of the Other. And although Kingston for one, desires reconciliation ("The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" [Kingston, p53]), the fact that she is withheld all wealth and power in the place of childhood (because "[g]irls are maggots in the rice" [Kingston, p45]), clearly makes this an impossibility. What is more, the task of maintaining a bisexual, and indeed bilingual psyche, is an overwhelming burden which renders both writers, psychologically speaking, asexual.

It follows, the female body, when propelled outside of all familiar points of spatial reference, is basically lost in the uncontained immensity of external space, effectively an enunciation without an author. "What does it mean to be lost?", Tuan asks in *Space and Place*,

... I follow a path into the forest, stray from the path, and all of a sudden feel completely disoriented. Space is still organized in conformity with the sides of my body. They are the regions to my front and back, to my right and left, but they are not geared to external reference points and hence are quite useless. Front and back regions suddenly feel arbitrary, since I have no better reason to go forward than to go back.

The human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space. Most of the time he is not aware of it. He notes its absence when he is lost (Tuan, p36).

Whether within or without the confines of the domestic sphere, women and girls lack independent centres of accumulation, and if abandoned by either family or society, are left to wander a psychophysical wilderness as displaced, infantile beings.

As yet to resolve their pre-Oedipal attachments to place and the family unit, they are, in a manner of speaking, stranded in the GS of the societal, a surrogate that nurtures the Dramatic Vehicle of men. This is to recognise that fulfilment and fertility are parallel concepts for a woman in service to a male descent line, her body marking man's pre-conscious origins and post-conscious future, but offering nothing in terms of her own self-consciousness. Hence, "[a] child with no descent line would not soften her life but trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose" (Kingston, p21). In fact, Kingston as "half ghost", and Mori by being made to forsake her maternal relatives following her mother's suicide, find themselves in a similar predicament to a child born outside of social space and communal consciousness. Their greatest grievances, arguably, lie not with patriarchal conventions (which they are, in any event, helpless to circumvent), but with the parents who have failed to meet their familial obligations³ (to provide in some small measure "glory and a place" [Kingston, p53]), leaving them unprotected, exposed, and an orphan within discourses. Kingston for instance, is unable to truly participate in Chinese discourse, because she has no knowledge of its secrets and mysteries, what rituals are particular to her home village and what are not. She writes:

... Never explaining. How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask ... I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along (p166),

Despite this, Maxine is required by her family to maintain phantom identities in order to keep "immigration secrets" (Kingston, p164) without ever knowing the hidden truths that perpetuate the lies. "I don't even know what your real names are", a frustrated Kingston tells her parents, "I can't tell what's real and what you make up" (Kingston, p180). Meanwhile, her progress in America is hindered by her inability to express herself vocally with anything other than an ineffectual "small-

³ Kingston for example, laments: "I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I looked at women who are loved enough to be supported" (Kingston, p49). Mori on the other hand tells us: "I wanted to have parents who would offer me Bride Training so I could decline it and be irritated by their misguided expressions of love" (Mori, p233).

person's voice" (Kingston, p50)⁴. "My record shows that I flunked Kindergarten", she writes, "and in first grade had no IQ - a zero IQ" (Kingston, p164). Although Mori has spent the last thirteen years in Wisconsin, she finds that people immediately treat her as a foreigner as soon as they discover she was born in Japan: "'Do you go back often?' people ask me ... I invariably wince at the words *go back*" (Mori, p10), while Japanese selfhood remains elusive because she has never learned the subtleties of adult Japanese discourse. She writes:

I have never learned this kind of adult talk in Japanese. I don't know how to be indirect about sensitive matters and still get my points across - by being politely vague but not too vague, clear but not too embarrassingly clear, insinuating and talking around issues a lot. I notice how other people do it, but I don't know where to begin (p89).

They are, in the manner of the un-self, helplessly suspended between the finite and infinite, absolute values that are equally frightening in their minuteness and immensity⁵. Having no hand in the production of space, and unduly inflicted with the "raw pain of separation, a wound that only the family pressing tight could close" (Kingston, p21), neither writer is willing to entertain an amalgamated poetico-analytical home place, any more than a psychoanalytical cure, for all space to varying degrees is a source of great anxiety. "Whenever my parents said 'home', they suspended America", Kingston says, "They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me. My father would marry two or three more wives" (Kingston, p93). Therefore, the experiences of the "No Name Woman" could in equal measure describe the displaced status of Kingston as well as Mori.

In the first of her talk-stories, Kingston reveals the forbidden story of the no

⁴ Mori finds herself in a similar predicament when speaking in Japanese, explaining in her collection of essays: "In Japanese, I don't have a voice for speaking my mind ... A woman's voice is always the same: A childish squeak piped from the throat" (Mori: 1998, p5).

⁵ As if to confirm this fact, Mori writes in *Polite Lies*: "An endless universe was too scary to be true - a pitch-back room in which we were lost forever, unable to find the way out. It worried me just as much, though, to think of the universe having an end" (Mori: 1997, p3). Kingston in a similar vein confesses: "As a child I feared the size of the world. The farther away the sound of howling dogs, the farther away the sound of the trains, the tighter I curled myself under my quilt" (Kingston, p93).

name woman, whose fall from grace ignites her own indefinite feelings about the nature of her own selfhood and long held suspicions that her female body is the site of uncontainable and often violent conflict. “Now that you have begun to menstruate”, the mother tells the young Maxine, “what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (Kingston, p13). In the girl’s mind, this thinly veiled warning against the temptations presented by her emerging womanhood is indicative of the perilous position women occupy in Chinese society by being conditioned to a selfless (and consequently voiceless) life of servitude:

... My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family (Kingston, p14).

Her own first-hand experiences of Chinese culture have taught Kingston that her aunt could not have had the will to pursue of her own accord an affair of the heart, nor the inner resolve to resist the man’s advances. She writes: “His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (Kingston, p14). What is more, because female identity has no inherent value outside of the male gaze: “To sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colours and shapes that would interest him, changing them frequently in order to hit on the right combination. She wanted him to look back” (Kingston, p16), the manifold nature of female sexuality, unrepresented and illegitimate, remains for women an unspeakable, shameful burden that is ultimately alienating and frightening⁶.

As a result, the no name woman, when forced from the interior space of village society, finds herself trapped in the indefinite expanse of a void that makes apparent the terrible reality of her long denied sexuality:

⁶ “If we had to depend on being told”, Kingston tells the reader, “we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (Kingston, p166).

... The black well of sky and stars went out and out for ever; her body and her complexity seemed to disappear ...

Flayed, unprotected against space, she felt pain return, focusing her body. This pain chilled her - a cold, steady kind of surface pain. Inside, spasmodically, the other pain, the pain of the child, heated her. For hours she lay on the ground, alternately body and space (Kingston, p20).

Experience as constituted by narrative is no longer applicable to her condition; the overlapping pain of “eternal cold and silence” (Kingston, p20), and that of the unborn child - “a foreign growth that sickened her every day” (Kingston, p21) - slowly willing her to nothingness. Although giving birth to “the hot, wet, moving mass” (Kingston, p21) grants temporary reprieve from the void, the body is now little more than a hollowed out shell, unceremoniously emptied of the last vestiges of being. Indeed, as the story of the forgotten aunt collapses into her own, Kingston begins to conceive of her female body as a crippled mass of alienating flesh that swells with pregnancy and bleeds during menstruation to incriminate and debase a sexual identity already retracted to the point of near total negation: “‘I’m not a bad girl’, I would scream ... I might as well have said, ‘I’m not a girl’” (Kingston, p48).

However, from young Maxine’s perspective, to be an outcast - at least for the period of a “free movie”, talk-story, or even school day: “It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery” (Kingston, p150) - outside of the indefinite boundaries of village and traditional discourse, is, contrary to expectations, self-affirming and even idyllic. It is after all, a place that perpetuates the anxiety of female experience by restricting activity to the public arena: “The villagers punished her [the no name woman] for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (Kingston, p19). Conversely, this is why young McCourt, already a little patriarch in boyhood, feels he has the right to judge, and even persecute the mother for begging at the Redemptionist

church, and later for her affair with Laman Griffin⁷. For Mori however, to accept such vague *anima* happinesses would be akin to performing the impersonal rituals and adopting the conformity of voice that govern Japanese social interaction. In fact, contrary to the advice of poetico-analysis, Mori refuses to disown her unhappy childhood experiences, an action resembling all too closely the kind of passive resistance exercised by Japanese women who abandon self-will to suffer quietly in unhappy marriages for the greater good of family and society.

“It won’t do me any good”, Mori tells her aunt Keiko who preaches forgiveness through her religion, “I’m not interested in forgiving or letting go” (Mori, p93). By continuing to resist a reconciliation with the past in this manner, the author is, so to speak, perpetually reenacting on an ever grander scale her act of childhood rebellion in which she would swim in the river hungry for having refused lunch against the loving advice of her mother, and maternal relatives:

... Keiko, my grandmother, and my mother wanted me to eat lunch before swimming in the river at one or two, and I refused because I thought the food would make me heavier and cause me to drown. In the end, I always got my way about not eating, as well as about most other things (Mori, p93).

In a very real sense, what sustains Mori throughout her ordeal in Japan and into her new life in the American Midwest, is an “unnatural” drive (from the perspective of patriarchy) to resist at all costs the father and the culture that privileges and protects him. To satisfy her hunger, is, according to her childhood fears, to risk sinking - and suffocating - in the waters of her thirteen-year exile, an action which is undeniably suicidal. Hence she is now as in the past, motivated to sustain her momentum through waters both real and imagined, and achieve a perfect synthesis of conscious and unconscious activity: “Another lap done, I kick the wall and glide. Though the

⁷ Considering neither the mother’s motivations, nor how his father has placed her in such desperate circumstances, Frank views her actions as a personal betrayal: “It’s the worst kind of shame, almost as bad as begging on the streets ... the family will be disgraced entirely. My pals will make up names and torment me” (McCourt, p288). If McCourt finds it “hard ... to look at my mother the beggar” (McCourt, p289), he finds he cannot contain himself in front of the mother after her affair, striking her during a particularly heated battle over his future: “I hear my mother crying and I want to tell her I’m sorry but why should I after what she did with Laman Griffin” (McCourt, p400).

water is cold and I am dizzy from not having eaten all afternoon, I am finally swimming easily, as effortlessly as in my recurring dreams of water” (Mori, p99). Resulting from this psychophysical merger is a Dramatic Vehicle which allows Mori to transcend the GS of girlhood, and a basic human impulse to fill spaces, either with the body or inside of it. In fact, the physical centre of her female body by being carried through the current created by the near mechanised motion of its constituent parts, is, as a result, rendered androgynous. To put it another way, Mori overrides - rather than tries to overlook - her female condition, her *anima* taking her beyond the human drama of spatial identifications into a perfect state of self-denial, a cosmology of displacement. However, just as actually swimming through a body of water will not produce physical evidence of her passing, her independence of place is only affirmed while she remains in perpetual motion and in hunger. As Bachelard confirms: “Limbo is aquatic” (Bachelard, p112), and to relax her guard in any way, is to retreat back into the distant past: “I can’t quite believe I am really here ... suspended between memory and dreams” (Mori, p17). To explain, Mori returns to Japan an American academic, but it is once again as the aggrieved daughter of Hiroshi that she leaves its shores, a cycle she is destined to repeat on all future trips to her childhood home: “I suddenly know that I will never come back to this country to spend more than a few weeks at a time. My impending departure seems as final as the one before, thirteen years ago” (Mori, p273). Mori, it appears, refuses to entertain her instincts for reverie, or rather, works to inscribe her reveries with struggle in order not to forget the very real sacrifices of her mother and her family, the greatest legacy of her Japanese heritage:

... My leaving is the logical conclusion of everything that has happened to my mother and her family: the loss of our land, the choices she made because of that loss, her letting go of me in the end to die alone ... I am continuing our legacy of loss, which might in the end be a legacy of freedom as well. I am the daughter my mother had meant to set free through her losses. This is the most essential thing about my past here ... I can go anywhere in the world and not feel that loss again. My mother wanted me to move on, not to be afraid of uncertainty, not to be bound to old obligations (Mori, p275).

In the end, Mori, her mother and Keiko, have simply chosen different ways of addressing their sense of loss: “She [the mother] had been trying to fill the emptiness of her house, just as Keiko is clothing herself in the holy light of her religion now. Their longing is like a hunger, the recurring theme of their stories about wartime” (Mori, p99). Conversely, having experienced loss all her life, almost as a prerequisite of female selfhood, change for Mori is nothing to be feared, resisted or emphasised in upper-case, as is the case for Soyinka. Kingston it appears, comes to similar conclusions: “If I could not-eat, perhaps I could make myself a warrior like the swordswoman who drives me. I will - I must - rise and plough the field as the baby comes out” (Kingston, p49).

Storytelling for Kyoko Mori, is a will to cultural separation performed in the absence of a *happily-ever-after* made impossible by her inability to reclaim her happy childhood place from the trauma of events that chronicle her descent into unhappy childhood and culturally disjunctive adulthood. Thus prevented through her own actions from ever negotiating a permanent foothold in either Japan or America from which to advance a cultural identity, the relationship between self and place remains for Mori, strictly oppositional; and she finds herself forever adrift without an emotional anchor in strange but familiar waters as expansive and intangible as the body of ocean that fills the physical divide between Japan and America, and as mutable as the river in which she used to swim during her summer visits to her grandparents in the country that every year “looked the same but was in fact different”(Mori: 1995, p186). Subsequently, her journey into deeper waters is an enterprise that sees her enact the theatre of repressed childhood upon the American cultural stage through her role as writer, wife, and academic. Thus, the act of telling stories about childhood, and the daily ritual of American life, have the mutual function of inviting discourse, simulating community in what is, and will always be for the author, the territory of the cultural Other.

Mori is well aware that she is not psychologically inscribed in the geography and history of Wisconsin; and that her American identity is something borrowed

from outside of the self, and simply juxtaposed against her memories of an unhappy Japanese childhood in an effort to realise a semblance of social purpose. Midwestern life offers stability, but it is a stability with a fixed point of reference

... in a small Wisconsin town where the old women in diners don't look anything like my grandmother and the children playing in front of the ranch houses at the edge of town do not resemble any children I could possibly have. The life I am leading cannot really be my life I think from time to time, especially while I am running or driving through the city (Mori, p11).

By remaining in America, Mori's psychology continues to be pervaded by an overwhelming sense of placelessness, a feeling of not belonging anywhere, driving her to perpetually negotiate identity between two worlds, each culture in its own way filling her with an anxiety she can never adequately resolve. She writes:

... I wish I had not come so far from home, that I could take the next plane and head back. But as soon as I think that, I'm not sure what I mean by *home* ... I am no longer a citizen of the country in which I was born; I have been thinking of moving to another city, another state. After seven weeks here in this foreign country that was once my home, perhaps I will not feel that returning to Green Bay is going home, either. I might feel more as if I am going from one foreign place to another (Mori, p14).

As a woman from a good Japanese family, Mori is well aware that had it not been for her scholarship and her permanent relocation to America, she would never have achieved economic independence of the father, leaving her to suffer the same fate, if not of the mother, then that of her cousin Kazumi, who finds herself in her early thirties, unmarriageable, unemployable and bound in domestic servitude in a culture that does not value intelligence in its women. Further, her long self-imposed exile in continued defiance of the father, has done nothing to alleviate but has only served to heighten her anger concerning the great injustices perpetrated by the culture, through fathers, husbands, and grandfathers, against Japanese women and girls.

Individuation therefore has run concurrently with her indoctrination into American society, requiring of her, not only a symbolic shift in national allegiances - evidenced by the fact she no longer holds a Japanese passport - but more significantly, the suspension, erasure, or reconstitution of an already debased and fragmented Japanese selfhood. In this manner, she preempts a readership that will be complicit in her narrative of cultural difference and outrage, as depicted through her localised memory, the legacy of forsaking one small world for another small world, or rather, one abstract space for another abstract space. In fact, it is because she views Japan with the jaundiced lens of small world understanding, that Mori comes to regard her former home as little more than a system of patriarchal conventions, familial obligations, and impersonal politeness that offends her American sensibilities. Kobe then is a world that has been disenfranchised from the evolution of social subjectivity, and can no longer constitute a progressive reality for Mori. Instead it functions as regressive unreality - as "artificial fables" (Bachelard, p118) - which like her mother's ghost story about the "Mansion of the Plates", seems immediately nonsensical, false and unjust to her sense of individual being: "Your story is unfair ... Poor Okiku had to count the plates even after she was dead. Her master only had to listen. I thought he was the villain" (Mori, p153). In a manner a kin to her own Japanese experiences, the story of Okiku lacks emotional closure, as it fails to deliver to her satisfaction an appropriate outcome. It ends with the servant woman unduly punished and forced to suffer in death, and there is no doubt in Mori's mind, that the master "should have had to do the counting" (Mori, pp153-154). Hence such fables have a very real and frightening antecedence. In fact, just as young Kyoko is dissatisfied with her mother's explanation to her serious enquiry: "This was supposed to be a ghost story, not a joke" (Mori p154), the adult Mori is greatly disturbed by the way the conformist Japanese culture breeds automatons who unquestioningly accept the artificial fables of adult educators, which among other things reinvents the Second World War, and indeed the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima as a cosmic disaster that could not be averted:

... Being a gracious loser is an essential part of Japanese culture ... by treating the bomb as a cosmic disaster, we eliminate human responsibility - it's as if the bomb

caused itself to be dropped. But that is not the truth, and the atomic destruction of a city is scarcely a fit occasion for politeness (Mori, p200).

As she makes clear in the opening scene, her father had a choice, as did her mother, and Mori has been made to live with the consequences and make her own choices accordingly. A wife should not have to break plates to keep a husband faithful, no more than Okiku should have been made to count the plates. Nevertheless, likewise to Kingston who through her silence was made an accomplice in the punishment of the no name woman, Mori has long been a party to her father's crimes by staying away and refraining from correspondence with friends and family.

Although outraged to discover her father's letters to her grandmother with its politely rendered self-serving lies: "what my father wrote saved only his own face" (Mori, p169), she is in her own way guilty of perpetuating the illusion of happy childhood through her own letters that talked only about school life; an illusion maintained by her unexplained absence in adulthood: "Our relationship is missing an important middle part: we were together when I was too young for serious rebellion, and suddenly I am here as a grown-up granddaughter, someone who should have been attentive to her needs" (Mori, p183). Mori, due to her actions, has inadvertently fulfilled her father's wishes that she sever all notable contact with her mother's family and "turn out differently ... You can't be like them" (Mori, p4). Furthermore, not only has she "turned out differently" to her mother and her family, her American experience has undeniably distanced her to some measure from all her family and friends, so that if she can be said to resemble anyone, it is her culturally transgressive father, the only other person capable of matching her stubbornness and pride. Mori is resigned to the fact there are neither universal truths nor organised systems of collective worship that will furnish an accumulative centre and fill the emptiness inside and about her.

Kingston on the other hand, by filling up the limited interior space within the text with the essence of ideal selfhood, offers in miniature, compacted childhoods that are complete in themselves, and which require no further participation of the

author - or indeed a place - for their fulfilment. Her reputation as storyteller - or rather "story-talker" in her case - is established in her absence, with her remaining silent and left in a state of merged consciousness with the mother and "ghosts" of Chinese-American girlhood: "Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (Kingston, p25). The self in this context is synonymous with a mythology of the female condition, and as also indicated by the subtitle, an expression of composite identity, each persona and its story memorialising either a hopeless or hopeful moment in the collective memory of Chinese women. The adult Kingston as author has in a sense, voluntarily entered into her own death, the unexplored complexities of displaced being - now surplus to requirements - effectively dissolved, so that the text becomes simply a collection of talk-stories, a sequence of poetic images performed by the reader for the benefit of the reader. As Roland Barthes confirms in his essay: "The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes, p118).

For Kingston, her text has metameric properties to her crippled female body, and hence, stands in its place as an object of exchange. Her memoir then, can be seen to encapsulate the "outward tendency in females" (Kingston, p49), by existing for the reader's benefit, rather than that of family members - the no name woman, Moon Orchid and the mother, Brave Orchid - who inform it. To put it another way, Kingston through her writing, proposes in a sense a marriage of convenience to the reader, in order to bring him into the fold of her cosmically staged talk-stories: "Marriage promises to turn strangers into friendly relatives - a nation of siblings" (Kingston, p19). But more importantly, as young Maxine discovers to her horror and disgust when she tries mercilessly to bully the other quiet Chinese girl out of her silence⁸, the female flesh enfeebled by patriarchy, is essentially brittle, weak, paper-like ("She wiped her eyes with her papery fingers. The skin on her hands and arms seemed powderly-dry, like tracing paper. I hated her fingers. I could snap them like breadsticks" [Kingston, p159]), while beneath the skin, the body seems little

⁸ "The reflexiveness of the situation is unmistakable", Eakin notes, "the hatred self-hatred, the murderous aggression suicidal" (Eakin: 1985, p268).

more than liquid: “so much water coming out of her. I could see the two duct holes where the tears welled out. Quarts of tears but no words” (Kingston, p161). Therefore, the adult Kingston, driven to correct this paper-like fragility and stem the flow of fluids, has, so to speak, replicated through the writing process, the actions of the parents of Fa Mu Lan (as described in “White Tigers”), who carve a list of grievances on her daughter’s back, so that “[w]herever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know of our sacrifice ... And you will never forget either” (Kingston, p38). Words are a method of empowerment, and is, as Eakin tells us, a means of “making for herself in language a second skin - this text - of legendary proportions, in order to contain all the words that would not fit on the original body of the self” (Eakin:1985, pp263-264). She is driven to declare herself a woman warrior in her own right, but as the modern incarnation of the mythical Fa Mu Lan, Kingston seeks to vanquish the American revival of the traditional enemy, no longer with the sword, but with the written word standing in place of direct actions: “The reporting is the vengeance - not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words - ‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too that they do not fit on my skin” (Kingston, p53). Having come to realise that she occupies a previously uncharted space between the two cultures without fully belonging to either - highlighted by the fact she can never make herself properly “Chinese-feminine” or “American-feminine” (Kingston, p18) - America is for Kingston a phantom world without tradition or memory existing in the shadows of a forgotten homeland. Subsequently, it acts as a facade for the same oppressive patriarchal forces that have always undermined the female condition: “From the fairy tales, I’ve learned exactly who the enemy are. I easily recognise them - business-suited in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye” (Kingston, p50).

This goes to affirm the status of the talk-stories as poetically charged wish-fulfilment⁹ mentally projected upon the territory of the reader (like one of young Maxine’s “free movies” [Kingston, p170]), where they discover, so to speak, a

⁹ Eakin explains that Kingston “presents the events of the life of the woman warrior as unfolding in an extended reverie or daydream, a girl’s wish-fulfilling fantasy of the acquisition of the power requisite to the formation of an autonomous identity” (Eakin: 1985, p259).

surrogate home place and descent line. In other words, it is necessary to understand the writing process as an extension of her girlhood desire to somehow confess and exhaust her growing list of indiscretions to the mother, thereby absolving an overburdened mind of its natural yet isolating inventiveness. She writes: "If I could let my mother know the list, she - and the world - would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (Kingston, p177). On this subject, Eakin writes:

... The goal of the child's narrative program is, ultimately, not to narrate but to come to the end of narration; to have said all of the 'true things' about herself would be to have closed the gap that separates her from her mother and abandoned the solitude of her autonomous identity (Eakin: 1992, p200).

In addition, apparent in the girl's actions is an overwhelming desire to own her enunciations, and not follow ghost-like the narrative path of the mother, a desire that is only partially satisfied in adulthood with her completing her mother's talk-story. Kingston cannot ever trace her origins in the constantly shifting landscape of the mother's talk-stories, and she, like Mori and the no name woman, is left to inscribe selfhood in the waters of limbo through the ownership of specific pains, which, conversely, stand in place of memory. Inherent in the young girl's words therefore, is a wish to transcend narrativity by waiting "by the water to pull down a substitute" (Kingston, p22), so that she may live again in liberating idleness, as she once did during her long illness: "My bed was against the west window, and I watched the seasons change the peach tree. I had a bell to ring for help. I used a bed pan. It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened" (Kingston, p163). Indeed, just as the peach tree takes on a poetic existence when disembodied from the rest of the world when "inside" the window frame, Kingston's "girlhood among ghosts" when similarly extracted from the otherwise confused fabric of narrative identity, is in effect, a total season; and from the perspective of the author, clearly marked with a final signified.

Thus, her talk-stories do not constitute in any form, a framed image of the type Bachelard is loath to even recognise as a childhood memory, and this I propose, is

due to two reasons. Firstly, the frame for Kingston, functions principally in the manner of a lens, giving priority and definition to the female gaze. Secondly, it is possible to recognise - in a manner that reflects the author's psychological interior - the world inside and outside the frame as parallel *anima* and *animus* universes of the self, one fuelled by the cosmic energy of the child, and the other, by the unstoppable momentum of the societal. In this regard, Kingston's condition closely resembles that of an unwilling passenger on a train. By employing the *animus* Kingston is free to move about its carriages and explore whatever mysteries contained within, but she is all the while helpless to either leave the train, or prevent it from reaching its unknown yet scheduled destination. However, if she sits and concentrates on the view in the window with the full force of the *anima*, the landscape outside appears to take on action in her place. In truth, the landscape, like a roll of film, is made up of serialised images that enter in quick succession the frame of the window, achieving in the process the optical illusion of movement. In any event, the image gives birth to an *anima* selfhood, that operates independent of her culturally specific, time-bound narrative identity.

Therefore we can make the claim that during the period of her long illness Maxine's activities are so severely restricted and progress so minimal, that the peach tree in the window with its gradual seasonal changes, takes on narrative identity in her absence. Left alone to indulge in her natural reveries, she localises change as operating specifically within the frame, failing to recognise changes in her own condition until suddenly one day she is declared fit by the doctor, and made to go back to school. Because she has long been protected in the house, as the no name woman was by the village construct, her reintroduction to external space proves disorientating and frightening, and akin to banishment: "The sky and trees, the sun were so immense - no longer framed by a window, no longer greyed with a fly screen" (Kingston, p163). Conversely, the details of Kingston's actual Chinese-American girlhood (which she confesses, "has been such a disappointment" [Kingston, p47]) is effectively a residual self image, and as such, consigned to the periphery of the autobiographical narrative, a dramatic pause in between the poetic peaks of the imagined life pursued by proxy in varying guises.

In her second talk-story "White Tigers", Kingston attempts to rectify the nullifying effects of female sexuality by reinventing herself in the persona of Fa Mu Lan the mythical woman warrior, thereby rewriting her girlhood (and adulthood) to better meet the expectations for selfhood that has gone unfulfilled in America. As Fa Mu Lan, Kingston earns the support and respect of her village and family. She is not only a "female avenger", but also a dutiful wife and daughter, and although guilty of culturally criminal offences ("Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers ... no matter how bravely they fought" [Kingston, p42]), escapes punishment by having the ability to shift in and out of identities to suit her changing circumstances. Her pregnancy for example, is first utilised on the battlefield to enhance her masculine presence ("I wore my armour altered so that I looked like a powerful, big man" [Kingston, p42]), while later it serves to improve her status in her husband's household by gifting them a son, thereby fulfilling her obligations in both political spheres. But despite her many achievements as Fa Mu Lan, Kingston is denied the final satisfaction of making the baron understand the reasons for her seeking vengeance; their verbal confrontation reaches a stalemate with the baron remaining unwaveringly unapologetic: "The families are glad to be rid of them" (Kingston, p45), and she finds herself frustrated at the moment of victory. Hence, in spite of her successfully infiltrating patriarchy, she is helpless to change social attitudes and subvert the natural order of place. Even Kingston's attempt to reveal to him the list of grievances on her back also works against intentions, serving only to expose her female body, dissolving communication and forcing her hand: "When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head" (Kingston, p46). It seems that even in this fantasy life, Kingston is unable to affect any real change. She has vanquished a tyrant in a long ago China, only to see another take his place "At the Western Palace".

The tradition of talking-story is the exclusive activity of Chinese women, and a means of establishing a uniquely female space within patriarchy. But it does not however allow Kingston to rescue a girlhood endured and suffered from the

margins, as it is expressed in a language designed to serve patriarchal interests and keep women subordinate to male authority and supervision: “There is a Chinese word for the female I - which is ‘slave’. Break the women with their own tongues!” (Kingston, p49). In the end, it stunts emotional growth and leaves them permanently dependent and infantile: “Be cute and small. No one hurts the cute and small” (Kingston, p153). Moreover, even in the guise of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston finds it impossible to escape Chinese protocol and answer honestly when asked whether she had eaten rice that day, stating in parentheses: ““No, I haven’t’, I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. ‘I’m starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies’” (Kingston, p26). Thus it is significant that Kingston explores her childhood in English, for beyond the practical considerations, it is an alternative discourse that is not available to the Chinese patriarchs that regard girls as worthless “maggots”. For Kingston, her sister, and female cousins, English exists as a secret language through which they can freely express their dissatisfaction, and thus assert individuality without fear of recrimination: ““He does that at every meal’, the girls told us in English. ‘Yeah’, we said. ‘Our old man hates us too. What assholes’” (Kingston, p171).

What is more, there is a definite sense that Kingston’s Chinese village dialect has reached the end of its evolutionary cycle and now outlives its usefulness as a mode of communication and social interaction. Instead, it appears to compel of its adherents, a reclusive personality, which for women can only lead to the greater confinement of a mental institution: “When a woman disappeared or reappeared after an absence, people whispered, ‘Napa’. ‘Agnew’” (Kingston, p167). As they have no precedent for escaping domestic servitude or challenging patriarchy, it seems inevitable that village women will suffer the greatest consequences of this communal seclusion which prolongs integration into American society: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (Kingston, p162). Hence women are but recluses in another’s discourse who quickly fade out of existence with the decline of community and storytelling traditions. As Brave Orchid confirms: “The difference between mad people and sane people ... is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (Kingston,

p143).

Conclusion:

In this study of the retrospective childhood, I have explored the role of the child as a poetic symbol of collective redemption born essentially of modern man's preoccupation with his secular prehistoric origins. This is also to understand poetico-analysis as being on a collision course with Freudian psychoanalysis, its parent theory (alongside Jungian theory), which, since its inception, has worked to diagnose childhood as a mental disorder particular to the psychology of an individual, that invariably necessitates a cure, further underlining his isolation and diminished capacity for discourse. As Kingston has revealed through her text, to refuse variety in self-expression is to invite a descent into madness. In Bachelard's mind, the cosmically conscious child need not suffer the social contagion of ego and superego in the imagined life, because deep within him exists a correlative unconscious centre, an *anima* being that liberates the psyche of the burdens of social consciousness, or *animus*. Confirming this poetic truth is the happy childhood of Wole Soyinka, the boy left to enjoy solitary flights into the cosmos unencumbered by the weight of the societal. Similarly, Frank McCourt's happy in-between times with the father by the fire are identical to the total moment of a Bachelardian image. However, cosmic reveries are in actuality, the work of poets who do not address the child directly, or allow him to speak with his voice, but simply acknowledge him as the source of their inspiration, and are hence suspended in the GS of a story.

The body, that much maligned organic constituent of the child which bonds him to his physical environment, is, I must again mention, the root of all human spaces. Therefore, it plays an integral part in the formation of place and its story. Contrary to the claims of poetico-analysis, we must assume childhood is a space with formal dimensions, created not with abstract measurements, but with the child's small body. All things that caress, shelter and protect the child's body, are established, regardless of its organic or manufactured origins, a space of accumulation which the child proclaims as his place. What is more, an

understanding of space can be seen to begin early in the child's infancy, and here I have introduced the concept of an un-self, a symbiotic creature of appetites that exists in the indefinite psychophysical expanse of a body cosmic. As illustrated in the works of Crews and McCourt, a communal consciousness born in reaction to an unknowable centre simulates a similar condition within already developed social spaces. In any event, the twin concepts of full and empty that define the infant's existence, are, as Tuan and Lefebvre suggest, fundamental to the human condition and indeed the production of absolute space. Absolute space, it appears, is largely the domain of the boy child. He is free to enter the public sphere and satisfy his appetites (and cultivate an identity) by way of labour and storytelling. Comparatively, the girl child is conditioned to a life of servitude inside the domestic sphere, denied a private life, and in the case of Kingston and Mori, withheld intimate knowledge of communal consciousness. For these two female writers, space is always experienced as something outside the self, and although labour and storytelling meet in a bitter struggle against an ever potent patriarchy, it is not related to the process of production, and can only convey loss through a state of psychophysical displacement.

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