



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

---

# TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | [textjournal.scholasticahq.com](http://textjournal.scholasticahq.com)

***Cleft (a short story) & In my father's house (an essay)***

Alison Ravenscroft

To cite this article: Ravenscroft, A. (2022). Cleft (a short story) & In my father's house (an essay). In Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore (Eds.) *TEXT Special Issue 66: Historical biofictions from Australian and New Zealand*. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.37093>

*La Trobe University*

**Alison Ravenscroft**

**Cleft (a short story) & In my father's house (an essay)**

Abstract

“Cleft” – a short story – is concerned with bodily cuts and folds and the meanings that are given to them, and it is also concerned with the cuts and folds in storytelling itself: where narrative breaks and where it goes on. “In my father's house” is a companion essay to the story. The essay doesn't attempt to explain the story, however; it is not exegetical in that sense. Instead, it is another attempt to find “the words to say it”, to recall Marie Cardinal's novel of the same name. To write a story about a life is in some ways to make that life – it is a performative rather than merely representational gesture – but it is also to fail to make it. To try again is to fail again.

Biographical note

Alison Ravenscroft is a Lacanian psychoanalyst in private practice in Melbourne and an Adjunct Reader and Associate Professor in English at La Trobe University.

Keywords:

Fathers and daughters, autofiction, biofiction, Jewish history.

*La Trobe University*

**Alison Ravenscroft**

**Cleft**

### **1. My Leopold Bloom was born with no roof to his mouth**

**Daughter:** The morning's euphoria is spent. I pick up the *New York Review*, shuffle it into better shape and read on. *King Lear* is playing at the Old Vic and Glenda Jackson is Lear, although she dons no costume to mask her sex. She goes further, giving her female body to the role, her small aging woman's body coupled with that voice that retains its contralto pitch. Female and male, majesty and disarray, held together in the one body. Jackson must know how at sea a father is in the face of a daughter's love, and of her fury. Here she is, a daughter playing a father bewildered by his daughter.

**Father:** She should mind how she speaks to her father.

My favourite table no longer delivers the quiet it did an hour ago; the spot is over-heated by the midday sun and the barista's voice reaches around the counter and finds me out in my corner. The barista is loud and uses 'like' too frequently and not to indicate a simile or a gradient of approval or affection. Time to go. I'll leave the tip on the table, and pop into the bookstore before heading home. I wonder if that young woman is behind the counter today, a smiley slip of a girl. I can't say those things anymore – young slip of a thing. My daughter would tell me off for my harmless talk, that's for sure, in that unforgiving way she has.

She should mind how she speaks to her father.

**Daughter:** My father was born with no roof to his mouth, no place where his tongue could press. His tongue would probe his mouth, seeking the resistance out of which he could make words, for we all want words to fill our mouths, even if they choke us. His tongue refused to lay flat, too, and was always arching itself. At eleven years old he took up a shaving razor and sliced the connecting tissue under his tongue and so at last his tongue combined with his breath could sound some approximation of the English language. This had not been the first deliberate cut to his body, but it would be the only one made by his own hand.

When I was a child, I would watch him shaving. He looked into the mirror while he guided his razor with great delicacy over the old scars on his upper lip, the traces left from a doctor's crude stitches a lifetime ago. He would hold the warm bowl where white foam floated and, submerging the bristle brush, turn his eyes to his face, wipe the steam from the mirror, and lather the brush against the green shaving soap before applying the brush to his cheeks and scraping a path across his skin. As the razor touched the skin between nose and lip, he would shoo me away. "Off you go now".

**Father:** My mother told me how I came to be born with a cleft palate – it was out of her own greed, she said, her own impatience. In late pregnancy she had burnt the roof of her mouth with a hot chestnut pulled straight from the fire. She gave birth to me at home, and the midwife – seeing how I would always be marked – took me up in her hands saying, "This boy will never want. He'll not be rich and he'll not be poor". A life poised between having and not-having.

"This boy will never want". But I did want; I wanted words – the pleasures of storytelling sitting sweet in the mouth. And I would smoke, a cigarette brought between two fingers towards damaged lips.

The English tongue is stupid, fat and lardy. The words roll around my mouth like warm, buttered dumplings, promising pleasure they will not deliver. So, I reach for another, and another, till I am sick with the sweet fattiness and am still unsatisfied. Is this the root of violence – here, in the impossibility of language to meet our need of it?

**Daughter:** What is a man to his daughter, the daughter to the man? In her eulogy to her father, Emmylou Harris asks all the questions she had always meant to ask him but never did. Can I hear her voice constricting with the strength of her regret, or is it my own regret that clutches at my throat? It's not that I've not asked my father; it's that he's reluctant to tell, for all that he loves a good story. My father hints at something hidden; he approaches and then recoils from it in a continuous movement that refuses to be stilled or resolved. Emmylou, would you resurrect your father with your song, kiss the hem of his gown, wash and kiss his wounds? Do you raise him in order to revel in your own exquisite lack? It may be our feminine forms of enjoyment from which our fathers turn, repelled.

And who inherited the old man's land?

**Father:** The kidneys and mushrooms are spitting in the pan, the bread frying in the fat. The tea is made, I can smell the hot tannin of it. No one yet has disturbed the cream on top of the bottle of milk and I dip a teaspoon in it and bring it carefully to my lips. The morning paper is already on the table, promising seclusion. I hold it fully open between my outspread hands,

affecting my retreat. One hundred and thirty mostly unarmed Palestinians killed by Israeli fire. I close the paper so fast my hands slap together.

In *Timebends*, Arthur Miller reports that his father, who could not read or write and who would never be drawn to sit through a performance of Shakespeare, nonetheless was a keen connoisseur of Vaudeville and knew intimately the routines of performers such as Al Jolson and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. But Miller's father told him that years earlier he had seen a Yiddish theatre production and was so moved by it that he saw it over forty times.

"The great Jacob Adler was its star," he said. "He played some kind of king. You know, it was the olden days. And he had maybe three or four daughters, I think it was three, maybe four. And he's going to give each one some of his money and the one that really loves him the most he thinks don't love him. So he ends up half out of his mind looking for his buttons, and he's got nothin' and he's left standing there in the rain, it was some story. But that Adler, there was an actor, he put it over, I tell ya. I seen that show, must've been over forty times, because he was touring for years in it. What I would do I would go past the theatre and ask them when the last scene goes on, because that was the best scene, when he's out there in the rain. He would belt out a roar that you couldn't bear to look at him".

**Daughter:** "Dad, tell me about your mother's family," I say, hoping to catch him off-guard, to lure him into telling me – just this once – the story he always refused to tell straight, without deferral and elision. And there it suddenly is – a few words put together in a simple phrase that makes the past snap into formation like iron filings arranged by the power of a magnet. "Oh, they were Jewish".

## 2. "I'm not a Jew"

**Daughter:** I never met my father's mother, but I knew her intimately, nonetheless. Or at least I knew this woman whom together my parents made and then presented to me as my grandmother in that strange reversal of the laws of conception that is called family history. I remade her in turn, and took on some of her fleshy neuroses, and so gave birth to myself.

**Grandmother:** Billy cleans the sole of a shoe and polishes that part of the heel that the stirrup rests against when a gentleman is mounted. If shoes haven't been cleaned properly the dirt can be seen when the gentleman climbs a flight of stairs. Billy has always said that a gentleman precedes a lady up a staircase. I suppose that's right because if a woman goes up ahead, her behind will be in the gentleman's face.

Billy never comes downstairs in the morning until he's shaved and dressed. Sometimes he is only in shirt and waistcoat, but always a tie. Always with shoes on, never stockinged feet, and never slippers downstairs, only upstairs in the bedroom.

I've never liked that he undresses in front of me of a night-time. I don't suppose other women's husbands do that. Perhaps he doesn't think about what I like, or that I'm looking. I'm thinking of the washing that'll need doing and wondering if his suit pants or jacket need to go to the cleaners. I spend a lot of good money at the cleaners but sometimes I wonder how clean you can get clothes if you don't use soap and water. They press them nicely, although I could do better myself.

**Father:** I married in the summer of '49 in the church where I had sung in the choir since boyhood. Two mornings every week, and three times on a Sunday at matins, mass and evensong, my countertenor voice lifted itself above the other male voices.

"Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold?" It was Leopold, not Molly, who said "yes" first – "Be near her ample bed warmed flesh. Yes yes".

Instead of a wedding dress, my bride chose a cream suit of wool crepe with a straight skirt and a jacket with a nipped-in waist, and a veil that scarcely reached her shoulder. She came out of the church laughing. At the railway station my mother took that laugh away. She handed my wife a folded piece of old linen saying, "Lay this on the sheet" and to me she whispered, "You made your bed".

**Grandmother:** I play whist with the Admiral's wife. Billy spends time with the Admiral's wife too in the long months when the Admiral is at sea. Billy has built the Admiral a fine brick stable with a wide arch at the entry and doors that perfectly meet the masonry, closing with a slight sigh. The doors slip in, tight as a hand in a glove.

I play whist with the Admiral's wife.

**Father:** My mother cleaned the house on the morning of my wedding. It was the day for polishing the silver, but my father said not to clean on her son's wedding day. She said perhaps there's no harm in that, but it was the day to fill the salt cellars and she did fill them and she polished the front doorstep because she said there's no getting past that. I watched a wildness in her face that day. I stood in my groom's suit while she wiped over the balustrade with a damp cloth because "although I do that every Tuesday it's surprising how the dust gathers and the light that comes in when the front door is open just falls there and shows it up". My mother was always saying to my father: "I'm a dirty woman, Billy. I can't sit down; I can't be still". She was impelled always to worry at the human stain.

**Daughter:** My father said that when he was a boy and his mother was bathing him she would hold his penis in her soft hand and finger under the foreskin, instructing him on the care of an

uncircumcised penis. She remained anxious, though, that her best efforts against dirt would not be sufficient, and so she had him circumcised.

**Father:** I'm not a Jew. (Was I made a Jew at my mother's hand?)

"Why were the Jews never persecuted in Ireland?", Mr Deasy asked Dedalus. "Because she never let them in. Ha! She never let them in!"

**Daughter:** He could never travel to Israel, he'd say. He paused there, as if the reason were obvious, until prompted by his children: "Why not?" My father's mind sometimes makes strange movements, as if he were recounting a dream.

He could never go to Israel, he continued, because if he were by chance to be unclothed and his circumcision uncovered, the Israelis would never let him leave. Smiles form at the corners of his children's mouths as the scene appears before their eyes of men at Jerusalem airport, hopeful of departure, being required to show something more than a passport. In our father's fear of being taken to be a Jew, he evoked a scene where the idea of exposure took its most literal form.

**Father:** Your grandmother was beautiful. She'd dress to kill to take the dog for a walk.

**Daughter:** The reader becomes what she has read, and every story is cupped among the many more.

### 3. Transmission

**Daughter:** Nancy Cunard, disinherited of her family's fortune, rushed into Virginia and Leonard Woolf's house in Tavistock Square carrying a large fox made of silver, saying "This is my inheritance".

**Father:** A daughter can never be disinherited because there is nothing that rightfully belongs to her. In my family, all is passed down from father to son. Nothing from my father's father's father's house will come to my daughter. Even the family name is only lent to her – it is not hers to pass on.

But my daughter's love, if that could come to me.

**Daughter:** I snarl, showing my animal side. My father allows me no claim even to my grandmother's fine cup and silver bowl, these small objects that her hands had touched daily.

**Father:** There is no transmission along the maternal line. My mother brought nothing to her marriage. She had nothing to pass on.

**Daughter:** But, then, my father surprises. He hands me a small box and inside, wrapped in brown paper, is a singularly beautiful object, a vase made of black glass that had been handed down father to son across two centuries. I don't for a moment mistake this gift as recognition of a daughter's rights. He is too old for that, and his day is drawing to its close, but – still – he has broken his own law.

I carry the object home saying, "This is my inheritance".

**Father:** Where's that bloody nurse stupid treacherous Irish girl and the German orderly pushing me and leaning too hard into my body and shaving my face too fast while I lie there still so still the noise sounds in my ears and the heat buzzes on my upper lip.

Please, nurse, what work is there for me today? I want to live.

**Daughter:** The nurses morph into guards as the day comes to its close, his vision subject to the ambiguities cast by the day's last bright light and its long shadows. A war so long ago now expresses its repressed power in the shape it gives to the numbered days of a dying man ("I am a Jew!" "I am not a Jew!"). In the last hours of the day his agitation sets his heart to race, and his breath comes fast, and his eyes grow wide and his pupils deep and dark. And after a while his mind and body are exhausted, and he grows quiet and passive and longs only to be allowed to sleep.

**Father:** Lay me down to rest and dream.

**Daughter:** Small doses of morphine seem enough to calm, but who knows what the dying feel? These past few days he has moved from lucidity to madness and briefly back to lucidity. He poses strange questions that arrest me, lifting me out of my own thoughts.



I enter the room where he lies dying and sit on the periphery of his vision, assuming him to be unconscious. But he lifts his kingly head and turns his still great body made heavier with morphine and he faces me and finds my eyes before turning away again, turning inward. His presence seems suddenly uncanny, like a seeing blindness.

He has a desperate thirst. I was told only to moisten his lips with the wet swab for fear of choking him, but he mouths it fiercely.

**Father:** I am not yet indifferent to her touch although her voice seems to come to me from a great distance.

**Daughter:** His breath is no more. But then his breath returns, deeply, urgently.

When finally, he leaves us, his body shudders. We women kiss him and sit with him and speak of him and kiss him again and then walk away into the light, re-entering life after the extremities of the night. We make the necessary calls to priest and undertaker. He will be buried in rocky earth far from the country of his birth.

At night a moth the size of a small bird beats itself against the window where a single candle burns. What does it imagine is there for it, on the other side of the glass, but death by fire?

*La Trobe University*

**Alison Ravenscroft**

**In my father's house: making, unmaking, remaking a life**

In my father's house are many mansions but not one room for me.

– Kathleen Mary Fallon, *Working Hot*, 1989.

My efforts to write a story about my late father were like the clumsy movements of a drunken doctor wielding needle and thread. They remind me of the title Louise Bourgeois gave to one of her installations – *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*, which referred both to her art practice and her subject matter: the seemingly endless negotiation and renegotiation of her relationships with others, both living and dead (Morris, 2007, p. 11). The name of my story about my father is “Cleft” and it appears here, in this volume on Australasian biofiction. In attempting now to write about the story and its making, I find myself not so much giving an account of it as having another try – undoing, redoing. This essay is one more stutter, now in another form. It does not hold the story's key, its *clef*, but points to its *cleft*, a fold, an indent, a cut that remains despite efforts to stitch it over.

**Daughter:** My father was born with no roof to his mouth, no place where his tongue could press. His tongue would probe his mouth, seeking the resistance out of which he could make words, for we all want words to fill our mouths, even if they choke

“Cleft” takes a structure that reiterates some of the uncertainty of its subject matter, circling around love and its varying capacities to enunciate itself, and around a hidden, or elusive or imagined Jewishness. The word ‘cleft’ itself, because of its proximity to ‘cleave’, speaks both of separation and clinging and both meanings have a bearing on my father's story, and my telling of it.

Between the father and the daughter in this story a conversation takes place – if conversation is the right word. There is, anyway, some kind of speech but it is at times inaudible, or it stutters and stumbles. It is tongue-tied, as my father was tongue-tied as a boy until he stole a razor and cut his tongue to cleave it from its connecting tissue, its *lingual frenulum*.

One of the places that my father's speech stumbled was around the

us. question of his mother's Jewishness, a prospect that he raised and then denied. It seems almost as if he raised it in order to deny it – doing, undoing, redoing. "Cleft" attempts to allow the ambiguity in my father's telling of his story to be repeated in my own instead of writing it as if it could be told with one meaning only, for which *one* could it be?

At eleven-years-old he took up a shaving razor and sliced the connecting tissue under his tongue and so at last his tongue combined with his breath could sound some approximation of the English language. At some point in my efforts to write my father's story, two threads came together – the one concerned with a father's relationship to his daughter, and the one about Jewishness. This is one of those moments when I saw how the writing of a story in biofictional form is performative in the way that Sidonie Smith, all those years ago, insisted is the case for autobiographic texts (Smith, 1995). In the act of writing about my father's life, his life story changed shape and in such a way that two strands that once had been separate came to be tied together.

What knotted the threads was the matter of inheritance. My father had always refused my right to inherit those things of his that had been passed down to him by his father. As his daughter, he said, I had no rightful claim to those precious objects by which family history is carried because everything that was inheritable was passed down exclusively along the male line. Nothing of significance comes into a family through a woman; his mother, he said, had brought nothing with her.

**Daughter:** Nancy Cunard, disinherited of her family's fortune, rushed into Virginia and Leonard Woolf's house in Tavistock Square carrying a large fox made of silver, saying "This is my inheritance". And suddenly, in the writing of "Cleft", I saw this in a new way: I saw my father's insistence that inheritance only moves down the paternal line as an inventive response to his anxiety over his mother's Jewishness if it had been passed down to him, and, if so, what that might have made of him.

Was my grandmother anxious about this, too? She worried away at the dirt of ordinary life as if it might reveal the mark she had tried to cover over. Her son worried that she had made him Jewish by having him circumcised, but did she too think that she had made him Jewish via the maternal line? Had she transmitted this to him, as she has given him a cleft palate – or so she believed – by eating hot chestnuts during her pregnancy and burning her palate? Her anxiety was carried to him, in her touch, her voice, her anxiety that structured her body as if, instead of a skeleton and soft tissue and bone, her body were structured by high-tensile wire that grew tighter at every turn.

**Father:** My mother was always saying ... "I'm a dirty Some have argued that Jewishness is all in the mind, calling on an idea of the radical contingency of identity, but what concept of *mind* is this and where is its *body*? What did the "human stain" (Roth,

woman, Billy. I can't sit down, I can't be still". She was impelled always to worry at the human stain.

2005), the whisper of Jewishness in my father's mind, make of him in his material body, and in turn what story could his body tell? Did the body write itself through a pupil dilated in anxiety, through a tied tongue? Did it write itself in relation to his circumcision, a fact that seems to have made his body into something that was too much for him? What I am wondering is: was he troubled by his body *because* of the cut to which he had been subject; was his body too much because of what was missing, and what that loss might be understood to signify?

The question of what is carried in and transmitted by bodies is suggested by the name of the genre that is the subject of this special volume – biofiction. While biofiction points to the coupling of biographic and fictional genres into productive relation, it also suggests other meanings, ones that have come to be associated with the terms *bio* and *fiction* in the wake of theories that travel under different names again – posthumanism, or new materialisms – where the bio concerns the very matter of life, and where life is always textual, where life writes (Kirby, 1997).

This way of looking at life writing, where textuality is practised by cell, nerve, tissue and bone, rewrites my "Jewish" subject once more because I cannot think of my grandmother and what she passed on to my father without enquiring into the matter of bodies. If history has written on the bodies of Jewish men and women, how have their bodies inscribed themselves in the writing of human history, or biography, or biofiction? How have these genres been shaped; how do they carry the marks of bodies?

If we can think of genre as a way of ordering diverse texts, where genre is therefore not representative but performative – it makes rather than makes present – then "woman", "man", and "Jew" are genres. They are categories where the making of the category is productive of the object that it was invented to describe. This recalls Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (2017) where the narrator, B, remembers how in Hungary under the Nazis the making of the category, or genre, "Jew" made people into Jews. It made the "Jew" appear. "Jews" were made in order to be murdered. The single word "Jew" became a (death) sentence.

It seems to me that the making of the figure of the Jew in the Holocaust made my father, too – but perhaps it has made us all. The horror of what can be done to a person who appears as a Jew might have reached into my father, shaped him, as it may already have shaped his mother and grandmother with their knowledge of earlier violences. Throughout his life my father's response to such history

**Father:** Please, nurse, what work is there for me today? I want to live.

was to make an appearance as a “not-Jew”, a position that has “Jew” written in its heart. But in the very last months of his life, the death camps became real to him, and he was their prisoner.

\*

I have made a start, knowing that any beginning will need to be started over. There is no origin, no thing, no entity before the others, who in turn are made by more others. What chemistry is meaning making?

How else to begin?

I could start in the archive where I found my great-grandmother as a guest in a household of Eastern European Jews in Manchester on the night of the 1871 census.

I could start by making it clear that my father had no firsthand experience of the front, and never knew the smell and feel of a camp. Instead, he stayed in Crewe making engines for bombers. But the factory was bombed. My father, only a teenager, saw a head without its body and one eye open. He was sent home, and he told us of riding his bike at great but erratic speed because he was made wild by the look of that eye, and that he had to steer a course through the women at the factory gate as their hands reached out to stop him: did you see our Freddie? Did you see our Alan?

I could start with the Sephardic Jewish name that my father pressed me to take as my middle name.

Instead, this time, I will turn to those stories that shape the story I can write because they have shaped the woman who is writing it. The story I can write is born of the stories I have been given, and the stories I have found. These are the stories that have made the daughter, and they have made the ways she can know, and fail to know, her father. “Cleft” is made by stories that it in turn rewrites.

\*

Only retrospectively did I understand that many of the stories that called my attention when I was writing “Cleft” share a subject – the father – and share questions about origins, history and its authorised transmission, themselves tied up with ideas of femininity. For my father, only men were authorised to transmit the past, the family name and what it stands for. (Yet my own father broke this law – once – and in that imperfect reiteration of the law, the history of the future was re-written.) As Cixous wrote in “Coming to Writing” –

which is itself an experiment in writing a self who is oneself and not oneself and, more than oneself, others – literature itself is a nation that will not authorise the feminine subject (Cixous, 1991). The feminine subject must therefore authorise herself in the sense of taking up the role of author and subject. In Cixous' writing practice, the feminine "I" who writes is both author and subject, where both are always in excess of 'Cixous'. Auto/bio/graphic/ficto/theory keeps working at this tension.

So, "Cleft" is a story about my father, I claim. But if biofiction points to the effects of an author's own blind spots and investments, showing how the author's efforts to represent her subject is inflected by her own orientations, then this author is one of her own subjects and she is as blind and as invested in this subject as in any other.

Running underneath "Cleft" are those writers whose texts we categorise as theoretical but that are no less personal for that: I have already mentioned Hélène Cixous; then there is Jacqueline Rose, Vicki Kirby, Teresa Brennan, Roland Barthes ... and the many others to whom I am indebted and who make worlds so that others can live. I name these reluctantly because to do so risks presenting my writing as if it were an exercise in theory, as if the story's debts could be slotted under one or another term in the *Norton's*. Instead, these stories have produced material effects in me: it is I who have been exercised. To misquote Djuna Barnes's *Ryder*, the reader has become what she has read.

**Daughter:** The reader becomes what she has read, and every story is cupped among the many more.

Other stories that trace a course through "*Cleft*" might be called biofiction. Once they might have been called biographical or autobiographical fiction and earlier again, *roman à clef*, each name bearing its own historicity and its associated reading strategies – again, a making of what is said to be there already. These stories exceed the constraints of genre in many ways, and while they are available to be read as fiction, and life writing, they also (perhaps always) are theory, too, recalling the Greek word for speculation, a looking at: *theōria*. After all, it is Djuna Barnes's novel *Ryder* that I reached for just now in order to speak about reading as incorporation.

Feminist literary historians in the 1980s and 1990s claimed that *Ryder*, a surprising bestseller in 1928, is auto/biographical fiction that tells the story of Barnes's girlhood in a bigamous family in rural poverty in upstate New York in the late nineteenth century (Benstock, 1987; Ponsot, 1991). According to that reading, the *Ryder* of the title is Barnes's own father.

There is a wildness in this text, it is ribald and Rabelaisian, and

*because of this* it speaks a truth that would never have been possible if Barnes had written a text received as autobiography (admittedly a most unlikely project for her). Fiction gave her the opportunity to speak of gendered and sexual logics that might have been unimaginable, perhaps impossible, for her in any other literary form.

It has been said that Barnes, to avoid the censors, inserted asterisks in the text to cover over its obscenities, obscenities that include the suggestion of incest. Of course, the asterisks have the effect of accentuating the gaps in the text, as Barnes would have known. They are more immediately visible, more attractive of the gaze, than if the sentences had appeared fully; like the veil, they draw attention to the fact that something is hidden, and the reader is arrested in her reading, she slows down to fill in the gaps, there is a writing that she will have to perform. This could stand in for Barnes's style more generally which refuses to resolve the different strands of narrative, where the text refuses to give a full account. So, in *Ryder* there is the grandmother's last will and testament in which she details how her dead body is to be laid out next to her husband's: "My left hand (with the worn, thin gold band of bondage encircled) to be placed palm in and about that part of him which \* \* \* \* \* as the evening star rests upon the finger of the dawn" (1928, p. 95). In Barnes's texts we must read for what is not written; we must read through the ellipses that cause us to pause, to be arrested in our headlong pursuit of the narrative, and in that pause we find our own writerliness does its work, elaborating, thinking through.

**Father:** Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold? It was Leopold, not Molly, who said 'yes' first – 'Be near her ample bedwarmed flesh. Yes yes'".

Barnes is one of my hidden debts. Others are more explicit. They are there on the surface of the page. *Ulysses* is one of these; my father is Leopold Bloom, with the enigma around his Jewishness and his taste for "the inner organs of beasts and fowls" (Joyce, 1992, p. 65). *King Lear* is there, for the story it tells of the father's failure to understand his daughter's love, so poignantly rendered in the 2017 British production with Glenda Jackson in the role of the aging king. She allows her woman's body to do the work of querying gender. (Where is gender? In what part of the body can it be said to abide? Do we grow into it, or away from it?)

There is another production of *King Lear* that is also referred to in "Cleft". This is borrowed from Arthur Miller's memoir where he recalls a particular Yiddish theatre production that his father watched again and again, forty times perhaps: an illiterate man who knew nothing of Shakespeare, nothing of the theatre, but everything of a father's anguish. Miller's father, who has never been to see a performance of one of his own son's plays, tells his son about the power of Jacob Adler's performance as he bellows in the King's

final scene: “He would belt out a roar that you couldn’t bear to look at him” (Miller, 1987, p. 60). Miller’s father would come into the theatre in time to see this one scene that held him so powerfully, and perhaps shocked him, too.

Although not named in *Cleft*, Kertész’s *Kaddish* is among its debts. Here is a story about a man who refuses to become a father because he is Jewish. *Kaddish*’s narrator is, like Kertész himself, a Hungarian novelist who had been interned in Auschwitz. This narrator will not have children because that would be to risk passing on the death sentence that, for him, is what it is to be a Jew.

This narrator recounts an event from his childhood when, staying with his aunt and uncle, he entered his aunt’s bedroom (a transgression) and was startled by a stranger in the room, sitting before a mirror at the aunt’s dressing table, *a bald-headed woman dressed only in a red negligee*. The boy is confused – who is this woman, a woman who herself seems to be transgressing the same law he has just transgressed, entering his aunt’s bedroom unbidden? The scene will take on traumatic qualities retrospectively when the Nazis make the Jewish people the objects of their death camps. The narrator says that he had not met Jews before. He and his family were not Jews, by which he means that he had not been brought up to identify as a Jew. His aunt and uncle with their Orthodox religious practices that demanded how and what one might eat, how one might pray, how one might appear in front of one’s mirror – bald and dressed *in a red negligee* – this is what emerged for the young boy as “Jewish”. *He was not a Jew. To be a Jew was to be that strange bald-headed woman in a red negligee*, a phrase that is repeated throughout the text and in italics that make the words jump.

The past penetrates the present, recalling the line from *Requiem for a Nun* which, however often we hear it, we will probably always bear to hear it one more time: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, 1951, p. 92). The past enters the sinews of our body, shapes the pathways in our DNA, makes itself present. This then might be one meaning of biofiction. But Kertész’s story gives another twist to Faulkner: the past not only lives on but is remade in the present – as trauma.

Unlike *Kaddish*’s narrator, my father had the “good luck” not to be traumatised into a definitive answer to the question: am I a Jew? “I am not Jewish, I am Jewish,” he said. This ambiguity had its effects. It made this man, it made this man as a father and, in some still indecipherable way, it made his children. The undecidability of what is true and imagined, fact and fiction, is the stuff of life. As Katja



Petrowskaja writes in *Maybe Esther*, a story of her Jewish family in exile who must reimagine Jewishness in order to live: “we owe our life to a fiction” (2018, p. 196). These are the fictions that write us.

## References

- Barnes, D. (1956). *Ryder*. St Martin's Press. (Original work published 1928)
- Benstock, S. (1987). *Women of the Left Bank: 1900-1940*. Virago.
- Cixous, H. (1991). Coming to writing. In D. Jenson (Ed. and Trans.), *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays* (pp. 1-58). Harvard University Press.
- Fallon, K.M. (1989). *Working Hot*. Sybylla Press.
- Faulkner, W. (1951). *Requiem for a Nun*. Random House.
- Ford, H. (Ed.). (1968). *Nancy Cunard: Brave Poet, Indomitable Rebel*. Chilton Book Company.
- Joyce, J. (1992). *Ulysses*. Penguin. (Original work published 1922)
- Kertész, I. (2017). *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. (T. Wilkinson, Trans.). Vintage Classics. (Original work published 1990)
- Kirby, V. (1997). *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. Routledge.
- Miller, A. (1987). *Timebends: A Life*. Methuen.
- Morris, F. (2007). I do, I undo, I redo. In F. Morris (Ed.), *Louise Bourgeois* (pp. 11-17). Tate Publishing.
- Petrowskaja, K. (2018). *Maybe Esther*. (S. Frisch, Trans.). 4th Estate. (Original work published 2014)
- Ponsot, M. (1990). A reader's *Ryder*. In M.L. Broe (Ed.) *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes* (pp. 94-112). Southern Illinois University Press.
- Roth, P. (2001). *The Human Stain*. Vintage.
- Shakespeare, W. (1997). *King Lear*, R.A. Foakes (Ed.). The Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1606)
- Smith, S. (1995). Performativity, autobiographical practice, resistance. *a/b: Auto/Biographical Studies*, 10(1), 17-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.1995.10815055>