This paper engages with Psalm 137 as a literary text which foregrounds questions of desire and ambivalence as they are represented — and perhaps experienced — within a language of place. As well as expressing something vital about the historical and cultural experiences of socio-political power and resistance, it also argues that the Psalm provides insight into the formation of the individual, or the complex relations between subjectivity and speech, desire and place. Within a framework of psychoanalytic theories regarding mourning, lack and subjectivity, the paper considers ways in which this Psalm uses the poetic mode to comment upon both the specific role of the poet and the general place of language in the formation of subjectivity and culture. As an example of lyric art woven from a poetic language of metaphor, image and pulse, the poem/Psalm can be read as evocative of the tensions between notions of sacred place or home, and those of exile. It also highlights both the longings and the ambivalences between the voice which speaks in the now, forever oscillating between a debased and exilic here and an idealised, always unobtainable there, the place of remembered or imagined origin. In discussing the Psalm as paradigmatic of the position of language in relation to loss and subjectivity, the paper argues that it foregrounds the production of the poet, the speaking voice of articulation and synthesis which, paradoxically, can only emerge in the exilic valley of the shadow of death and fragmentation.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How can we sing the LORD’S song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.

O daughters of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

(Psalm 137, 1-5, King James Version)

Psalm 137, ‘By the rivers of Babylon’, has been variously interpreted as a divinely inspired psalm of exile and lamentation within both the Judaic and Christian religious traditions, and as a
broader cultural expression of dislocation and political resistance. As critic Nathaniel S. Murrell notes, the Psalm which began as ‘... an ancient Hebrew lament, sung as an ‘inner jihad’ against Babylonian culture in the sixth century B.C.E., and still recited as grace... at modern Jewish tables, become[s] not only a Black lamentation but a popular liberation theme song in Rasta reggae lyrics’ (Murrell 2000-1: 4) Not only have the lyrics of the Psalm been used to articulate Caribbean and African-American experiences of colonisation and its resistant voices, but, as David Malouf’s novel Remembering Babylon (Malouf 1993) suggests, the trope or idea of Babylon can also be used as a device within Australian culture to contrast the experiences of the Old World and the New, the European and the Indigenous. As that novel makes explicit, while we may all long to ‘remember’ such a place of perfection and beginnings, both the processes of memory and the shifting notion of Babylon itself render this a highly problematic endeavour. Where is the centre – where we ever there? Can we ever return? What is the relation between the inevitably marginal position in which we find ourselves in any given moment, and this idea of a place of ultimate definition or home? The Psalm, like Malouf’s novel, highlights both the longings and the ambivalences between the voice which speaks in the now, forever oscillating between a debased and exilic here and an idealised, always unobtainable there, the place of remembered or imagined origin.

In this paper, I extend a reading a Psalm 137 as a literary text which foregrounds these questions of desire and ambivalence as they are represented – and perhaps experienced – within a language of place. However, as well as expressing something vital about the historical and cultural experiences of socio-political power and resistance, the Psalm can also be interpreted as offering insight into the formation of the individual, or the complex relations between subjectivity and speech, desire and place. Within a framework of psychoanalytic theories regarding mourning, lack and subjectivity, I particularly consider the ways in which this Psalm uses the poetic mode to comment upon both the specific role of the poet and the general place of language in the formation of subjectivity and culture. Thus, as an example of lyric art woven from a poetic language of metaphor, image and pulse, the poem/Psalm can be read as evocative of the tensions between notions of sacred place or home, and those of exile – and the crucial context which they provide for situating the position of self and of speaker. In discussing the Psalm as paradigmatic of the position of language in relation to loss and subjectivity, I argue that it can be seen to foreground the production of the poet, the speaking voice of articulation and synthesis which, paradoxically, can only emerge in the exilic valley of the shadow of death and fragmentation.

The speaking voice of the Psalm – putatively David, king and harpist – is situated in the non, or illegitimate, place of Babylon, but it is also crucially inflected with longing for the idea of home, the informing absence here connoted as the Place of Jerusalem. Such tensions – between place/Place, presence/absence – can certainly reflect the geographical and/or political dimensions of an experience of exile. In this sense, the Psalm functions as something of a prescient commentary upon subsequent Jewish diasporas, the combination of theological rationale and realpolitik implicit within contemporary Zionism, as well as any physical experience of displacement from a place or culture identified by any individual as constitutive of home and self. However, the Psalm can also be read as offering primary insight into the role of the artist or poet – the speaking or singing self, the plucker of the harp, who recognises themselves as within the void of exile and yet who longs for a defining elsewhere. The ‘Lord’s Song’, here perhaps a metaphor for the production of art as well any divinely-inspired utterance, will, in this sense always be one which
speaks of loss, of the imagined possibilities of wholeness on the one hand, and the lived experience of loss and fragmentation on the other. Psalm 137 imagines the moment of artistic creation through the retrospective identification with the Hebrews in exile and captivity. The art which is created – the material Psalm which is sung despite the impulses toward silence, toward the hanging up of the harp – is coterminous with the production of a speaking position which, paradoxically, can only arise in the possibilities of loss, of being not at home. The Lord’s Song is thus a lyric which mourns that which it remembers but has lost, and whose words signal the interlinked possibilities of blank text and reinscription.

While the Psalm offers insight into the perspective of the individual – the subjective experience of loss which paradoxically gives rise to voice and differentiation – it is, like all the Psalms, also presented in the voice of the King. David, poet and dreamer perhaps, is also representative of his people; his private lamentations also speak to and for the collective public experience of the oppressed Hebrews, dislocated from their place and experience of rightness, from the place of fittingness. In this sense, the Psalm reads as a collective memory of trauma that serves to preserve and validate a cultural past and identity – even within the ongoing destabilisations of the ‘strange land’.

To be in such a state of exile is to know the parameters, the taste of home, and yet to be held apart from it, to be cast into the void of antithesis – like Lucifer tumbling from celestial perfection in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, like Adam and Eve evicted from the garden in *Genesis*, indeed like the quintessential human subject, born from embryonic connectivity with a maternal body into fragmentation and loss. The exile, as emblematised within this Psalm, is defined by that place and that subjectivity where he is not, his sense of self eviscerated by his fractured and residual connection to that enabling place, or authorising Self, which has produced him, yet with whom he cannot remain. Paradox and ambiguity are thus his lot: to return home, even if he could, would be to be lovingly absorbed, cradled into silence; to remain in exile is to know good and evil and the lonely abyss which lies between them, yet only there is it possible to begin the work of making a life, of singing the song of art.

The experience of the Hebrews in Babylon then becomes a metaphor not only for an aspect of the human condition, but in a heightened and intensified way, for the role of the poet; only in the painful liminality of the exilic experience, only in the recognition that the self is not accommodated in any permanent or present way, does it become possible to speak. No longer silenced by the imaginary of the satiating and phallicised breast of Jerusalem, the words of the poet reflect hunger, desire and the unobtainability of the imagined object. The words of the Psalm as lyric poem thus enact a complex and explicit process of mourning: they chart desire and loss, seek to compensate or even cover over the imaginary nature of the dreamed-of plenitude, attempt to integrate loss and gap into the weave of the future, and perhaps even help us to grow resigned to the fallen world when we retain or imagine the image of perfection. David’s voice re-creates not only that of the captive Hebrews, precursors of his own contemporary sense of place, statehood and divinely sanctioned subjectivity – but also, significantly, it repeats the loss and ambivalence of Adam and Eve, as paradigmatic human figures, caught forever on the cusp of an impossible, silencing perfection and the fallen world of articulation, embodied here in the creative lament of the poem.
The poet/Psalmist begins his lament, his evocation of the exilic experience of the Hebrews in Babylon, in the past tense:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

The Psalmist and his fellow-captives sat down – we wept, we hung up our harps and could no longer bear to sing, to make the lyric of art, of communication, of joyous acceptance. Such melancholic retreat – epitomised here in the literal place of grief and exile, the not-home – would, the tense suggests, be best held at bay, confined to the captivity of the past, recounted perhaps but not reinhabited. Yet, the present tense and indeed the first person pronoun erupt into this anaesthetised landscape, bursting into the more formal and elegiac language of lament with the raw immediacy of distress and vitriol – the threat of silence, the erasure of subjectivity as the punishments invoked for a failure to remember, to enshrine the place of origins:

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Forgetting is always a possibility, a threat from within. As Freud noted, forgetting might be understood as the failure or refusal to cohere the fragments, to find a speaking position and to tell a context-bearing narrative (Freud 1963: 159). However, what is past does not, of course, stay past, at least not in its entirety; it haunts and informs the present, both forging and warping the possibilities of future. Such an irruption, such a return of the repressed, can certainly bring destruction in its wake, as we see to some extent in the Psalm – ‘Rase it, rase it, even to the foundations thereof’, cry the hostile ‘children of Edom’, a remembered and reanimated threat to the solidity and sanctity of the walls and body of Jerusalem. However, it can also mark and even effect a cathartic transition from a fatal melancholic identification with a lost object, into what can be seen as the life-affirming possibilities of mourning. Mourning in this sense denotes life’s equivocal journey from the dark place, a movement which is always bi-directional. It maps the spires of the dreamed-of city of loss, and will never be completely free of a desire to reinhabit the bricks and mud and air of Jerusalem – yet, crucially, mourning also recognises the ragged fields of compromise and construction and undertakes to walk amongst them.

Mourning is a process, a series of acts – some consciously undertaken, others unconsciously motivated – by which an individual comes slowly to an acknowledgement and an acceptance of loss, an acceptance of the world as torn and fallen yet still containing the possibilities of life. Mourning is the process which evolves out of the raw experience of grief, out of the visceral response to trauma, however occasioned, which leaves us shocked, retching, wailing or catatonic in our disbelief. As Cathy Caruth has argued, trauma is always too much already as it occurs in
time; we can’t, we refuse to understand the fullness and the consequences of the loss which it brings because it will shatter us, shatter the construct of self and world which we had, until this moment, never realised was so fragile and provisional. Trauma, or, as she describes it, ‘the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wounds of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’ (Caruth 1996: 4). It is only in retrospect, incrementally, and homoeopathically, that we can begin to taste the fullness – or shocking emptiness – of loss and to approach the wounds which it has caused, circling the burned hole left behind within experience and within language. Thus, primary loss or lack is continuously reconfronted and revisited in narrative form – the garden, the exile, the loss of the beloved o/Other – as part of a fundamental human desire to draw the inexplicable into the frame and meaning-bearing patterns of story.

Mourning is thus enacted, or facilitated, through the repetitive, often ritualistic uses of language – in so doing, we visit, and re-visit the sites of loss and pain, each time surveying that fearful yet inevitable territory, each time, at least ideally, accepting and understanding their significance a little more. Like the child with the cotton reel in the fort-da game (Freud 1984: 283–287), our use of language operates to some extent as a complex way of chronicling change, and our responses to it, as well as, at least apparently re-gaining some degree of the agency which trauma had stripped from us. To speak, to find the words to respond and to articulate the aporia of loss, the silence of shock and absence, is to trace the pattern of what is implicitly there, as it also to shape, to creatively map our selves into the fabric of the world around us. However, poetry is a linguistic mode which is particularly amenable to these kinds of complex, multi-directional articulations of loss. Poetic language is the pulse, evident beneath the skin and frame of narrative – a visceral and/or imagistic embodiment studded through the linearity of ‘story’.

Indeed, it could be claimed that poetry is the proto-typical language of mourning, the language which best suggests mourning’s journey through the ambivalent fields of silence and speech, the enmeshed conflicts between the desire to continue in life in spite of the cruel experience of loss and the desire to identify with that which is lost, to take the drear path down, and into depressive silence and death. Rather than attempting to exhaustively document what is lost, the precise nature of the catastrophic rupture of an apparently intact world, poetic language instead offers what Slavoj Zizek has referred to as an ‘encirclement of trauma’, a linguistic mode which suggestively delineates or evokes a space of unspeakability, a glancing evocation of that which cannot be definitively held within consciousness and discourse. Jenny Edkins, in her study Trauma and the Memory of Politics, also uses Zizek’s term to differentiate between modes of speaking the unspeakability of trauma, noting the political – and psychological – consequences of each:

... the temporality and inexpressibility of trauma makes the role of the witness an almost unbearable one. Despite this, there is an imperative to speak, and a determination to find ways of speaking that remain true to the trauma... the process of re-inscription into linear narratives, whilst possibly necessary... is a process that generally depoliticises, and there is an alternative, that of encircling the trauma. We cannot try to address the trauma directly... as this would
neutralise it. All we can do is ‘to encircle again and again the site’ of the trauma, ‘to mark it in its very impossibility’ (Edkins 2003: 272).

Poetry, the Lord’s Song, is thus a mode which allows for ‘indirect’ address of the aporia of loss – of whatever kind. It suggests the point of vanishing and of illegibility, presenting at least an element for contemplation and explication, yet without either attempting to classify or to domesticate the wildness of that trauma.

In the Psalmist’s complaint, or elegy, this space of unspeakability is characterised by a complex of seemingly paradoxical emotions: by longing for an idealised lost place or loved one (or One), by an anger fuelled by dependence on that loved other, by the meagre circumstances of a life ‘fallen’ from its ideal, by a profound anxiety about abandonment and death, by the contradictory impulses toward silence – a hanging up of the harp, a tongue idle in the mouth – and the concomitant impulse to sing, to make a Kaddish of acceptance. The singing of the poem/Psalm is not only an acknowledgement of loss, but importantly it also becomes an offering of consolation. In the act of consoling the poem stand with, and beside, the experience of loss – an articulation of mourning which hauls the asymbolia of the traumatic into the sound of a word, of a linguistic act which crucially links self with other.

In this sense, the poet is one who knows himself to be in exile – the place of home, as it is imagined or remembered, is not here, and thus grief and dislocation will become, in poet Paul Celan’s terms, the ‘black milk’ of sustenance. The body, the self, must take in sustenance – yet will it choke, poisoned by the ‘black milk’ of death and anguish? And/or is this same ‘black milk’ the only milk available? Is it the antithesis to the white milk of a maternalised home, or is it fact indistinguishable from it? Is it the dark death which is carried into the body in the innocent mouthful of milk? The Psalm offers the bi-valent image of water in the river of Babylon and the tears of the captive Hebrews – water that is outside the body and yet which offers something (equivocal to the self), as well as the transition of the interiority of tears into the greater ‘waters’ of external experience. As Derrida noted of Plato’s concept of the pharmakon, the porous ‘thing’ which is incorporated is both sustenance and poison, the cure as well as the problem. Yet, by virtue of the materiality of the poem, the poet resists the seductive lure of melancholic silence, and chooses nevertheless to speak, to shape a song both in spite of and even because of the sharp experience of loss, a song which reflects the fundamental ambiguity of the ‘medicine’, even the transubstantiation of human experience. Poetry, here characterised as the Lord’s song, looks both backward and forward; its words will always speak of longing and irreparable loss as well as of the possibilities of consolation.

Grief, emblematised in the Psalm as the embodied experience of exile, confronts the subject with its own limits and dependencies. We mourn the loss of the other in part for the other’s sake – the beloved is lost to the world, or at least to our world – but also to bolster and console ourselves, suddenly and catastrophically adrift in the asymbolia of the traumatic. However the loss is occasioned, the self is confronted not only with the psychic necessity of incorporating trauma, and of acknowledging its own vulnerabilities to the ravages of time and of limit, but in so doing, the mourner seeks consolation, understanding, integration. To enter into the various works and forms of mourning, is thus to emerge from the silence and arrest of trauma, and to begin the process of drawing the unspeakability of loss into the more manageable spheres of language and symbolisation. Within these labours of mourning – externalised as the repetitive,
often ritualistic re-engagements with the stations of loss – the speaking/acting self symbolically delineates the nature of its attachment and dependence upon the lost and beloved other. We mourn loss in its particularised, painfully embodied specificity – calling, invoking, inscribing, paying tribute, denying, and eventually perhaps even accommodating the always raw wound of trauma. However, in embarking upon this protracted psychic and intra-psychic labour of separation and residual connection, we not only acknowledge the primacy of the other, but are compelled to confront the complex and imbricated nature of our relation to them.

Predicated upon image, metaphor and association, poetic language operates at the cusp of conscious and unconscious impulses: it clearly functions within a recognisable symbolic sphere, often within constructs of style and genre; and yet it also exceeds rational logic, delineating, rather than classifying, a variety of possibilities of ‘otherwiseness’ – for example, the codes of the unconscious, of the traumatic, of the spiritual. Poetic language is then a powerful and highly appropriate mode for the hoped-for transformation of the unarticulateable tidal waves of grief, longing and trauma into the more structured and consciously modified labours of mourning. In this sense, and building on Freud’s still influential essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (Freud 1984: 245–268), I understand mourning to be a process, a protracted labour which operates at both conscious and unconscious levels, involving the subject, emergent from and always incipiently destabilised by grief, in a potentially cathartic, dialectical movement between present and past, between the wounded self and the other which has been torn from it. Like the process of physiological pregnancy and childbirth, the labours of mourning can be seen as a productive form of pain, a work in which an other is acknowledged or produced, differentiated, finally both adhered to and lost. The language of poetry provides an enabling frame across which such labours can be brought into the field of signification, one which allows for suggestion and possibility but which generally resists the violence of definition.

In Psalm 137, the other who is grieved for, is seen in quite explicit terms as inevitably multifaceted. The petit objet a, as Lacan described this impossible object, can be seen in terms of place – Jerusalem stands for the site of home and perfection; as an other person, a site of familial, particularly maternalised, bodily attachment; and as a divine Other, the Signifier who represents wholeness of self and belonging, the Body of the Divine into which the self has been entirely integrated, incorporated. The speaker, the desiring self, is both collectivised and individualised, and speaks at a threshold of the intensely personal and the public address, joining his tears of suffering with the great rivers of Babylon, his place of exile and captivity:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

Even here, in his state of radical unfamiliarity, the river nevertheless offers some point of identification and comparability for him, the paradigmatic exile, signifying perhaps the flowing of waters which are ‘free’ to travel through and beyond the territories of enslavement. However, like Celan’s ‘black milk’, they also suggest a possible toxicity as well as refreshment, an illegitimate incursion into the porousness of the body and its desires, in addition to the idea of ‘life-giving’ waters which may also carry the fruits of death. The physical tears signify the great loss which impels him, which drive him toward both devouring despair and the production of the song. In this moment of speech – where language is an acknowledgment of fracture and loss – the
speaker is always at odds with any real or imagined point of origin, always in a skewed and impossible relation to what we imagine as our true and idealised home. We may all carry such an image, or at least the idea of such a home, within us, although as Irigaray has argued, female subjects may have a radically different relation to such a notion of ‘origin’; nevertheless, the forcible confrontation with the discrepancy between our own inevitably reduced circumstances and that place of utter rightness, of familiarity, is a visceral pain, experienced as an attack upon an integral self.

Not only does the Psalm’s speaker weep, fall into hopelessness and silence, but he must also battle against demons from within as well as without. He exhorts himself repeatedly not to forget the LORD and the sacred place of Jerusalem – as though he himself must fear that forgetfulness is possible, and not only that, but that he too might be forgotten, left to die on the outside of the precious place or home. The retributive violence and vitriol of the last verses – ‘Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth the little ones [of Babylon] against the stones’ – operates as a frightening and unacknowledged externalisation of the self-directed violence of melancholic grief and depression. To be dislocated from ‘home’, from the maternalised body of ‘Jerusalem’, is to experience the self not only as abandoned, but turned upon, broken and consumed by the walls of Babylon as a kind of bad, devouring mother.

Jerusalem connotes the place, the body of beginnings from which the speaker has been torn. The Psalm could thus be read as a kind of oedipal parable – wherein Jerusalem, preferred above the speaker’s ‘chief joy’, is privileged over the denigrated femininity, the implicitly whorish ‘daughters of Babylon’, who deserve only to be ‘destroyed’. Just as in fairy tales where the maternal figure is often split into a good but dead or absent mother, and a wicked step-mother or queen, in order to avoid the difficulty of competition with her, so here the paternal principle is split into the good Lord, who, as in the Lacanian paradigm, offers compensatory symbolic language in lieu of dyadic unity with the mother, and the bad, collectivised father of ‘they who carried us away captive’. Any oedipal hostilities are redirected in the Psalm to these captors and their ‘false’ people, just as any incestuous desire for Jerusalem as the body of the mother is sublimated into misogyny and misanthropic excessiveness toward the daughters of Babylon and their de-legitimized ‘little ones’. Just as the expulsion from the garden signals both loss and a necessary transition into full human subjectivity, so does the experience of exile mark a traumatic dislocation from the body of the mother – which is nevertheless necessary in any passage to maturity and adulthood.

From this perspective, while the Psalm may offer insights into the broadest human experiences of lack, exile and the possibilities of ‘song’, it also exposes the masculinist nature of its representation here. David is not only regal representative of his suffering, yet proud people; he is the son who must struggle with his oedipal desire for the mother – to be in and/or away from the defining body of Jerusalem – in order to enter into the compensatory speech and power of the paternal. Yet while this conventional depiction appears to reinscribe desire and speech as masculine attributes, I would argue that the persistent tone of excess, of the evocation of plenitude and catastrophic confrontation with dislocation – indeed, the evocation of grief and the poem as a work of mourning – is suggestive of a complexity of desire which destabilises the masculinist paradigm. When even this patriarch of the Hebrews sings the ‘Lord’s Song’, it is fractured with desires for what is absent and taboo as well as present and possible, thus paradoxically making space for
differently gendered voices to participate in the poetic – and human – experience of silence and speech, of the poetic voice as a response to loss.

The Psalm’s speaker claims to resist the demand to produce a song – given that song, or poetry, or indeed prayer, might be said to come from the heart, from an intense and personal experience or sense of self, it cannot be produced flippantly to entertain a tormentor: ‘How shall we sing the LORD’S song in a strange land?’ However, when we consider the text of the Psalm itself, we do find that song is produced, a song that does reflect the complex interiority of the speaker. It is not produced on demand for the entertainment of captors, but is produced precisely because of the condition of captivity and exile in which the speaker finds himself. In fact, it can be argued that the ‘LORD’S song’, if indeed this is a form of it – as a song that reflects the desire of the human speaker for a connection with the Divine which is explicitly associated with a politics of place, and an emotionally perfect ‘coming home’ – is only possible to sing when the speaker is away from Zion, when he is clearly not in the idyllic vales of perfection. The Lord’s song will thus always be one of longing and lament, reflecting, at best, only glimpses of the lost territory of home, of the imaginary ideal.

Poetry, like the song of the captive here, is only possible within the fissures of longing, in an experience of the self which is dislocated from some real or imagined point of home or origin. It is this crack of exile, this recognition that loss structures the very foundations of our ‘fallen world’, which opens up the possibilities of grief, of numbing depression, of denial, of a resistant retention of the phallicisation of self and other (victim/child vs. tyrant/LORD) which expresses itself in the excessive violence toward the other. However, it is also this same terrible aporia which alone makes possible the words of the song or poem. To be – were it possible – at home, in the symbolic Zion of perfection, would be to enter or return to a place in which language was no longer necessary, a space of infantile fantasy in which self was indistinguishable from a Powerful M/Other and a retreat from the labours of life could finally occur.

This paradoxical desire for speech to cease, for poetry to act as a kind of bridge across the detritus of melancholia and the vicissitudes of human experience, and into an imaginary sphere in which language and its significations are annulled and disappear – are indeed a logical consequence of any discourse which privileges an extra-physical alterity. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins, for example, makes this clear in his poem ‘Heaven-Haven’: the oft gestured toward but rarely articulated end-point of desire is seen here to be silence and death, the perfected yet static state of being ‘out of the swing of the sea’ of life with its incessant movements and cross-currents:

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.
‘Heaven-Haven: a nun takes the veil’ (Hopkins 1950: 40).
Inflected with loss, with longing, yet also with dreams of integration and hopefulness, the song of the Psalmist is the very product of loss and despair, yet also marks the speaker’s return from the brink of suicidal silence and refusal. In this sense, the act of the poem is as much the gift of God to the speaker – the challenge to create life affirming and producing language – as it is a tribute from the human to the Divine. Given the impossibility, within the sphere of human life, to exist in such a ‘garden’ of perfection, the Lord’s song – or, in secular terms, the reparative, even the redemptive poem – becomes possible only in that traumatic recognition of being lost, of finding oneself wounded and exiled in the ‘strange land’, the place where the self is irrevocably confronted with separation from its beloved object, is subject to limit and to death, adrift in a partial, dislocated world.

It is the pain of fundamental exile – emotional, bodily, geographical, spiritual, familial, linguistic etc. – which brings the speaker into a state of longing, of melancholic stasis and ultimately towards language, and the linguistic and psychic events of mourning. This is the underlying pulse of narrative which is evoked and revoked in any linguistic construction of subjectivity; as in the Lacanian paradigm, the possibility of speech arises in the catastrophic confrontation with lack, with the puncturing of the dyadic bubble of the imaginary. In this sense, the Babylonian exile corresponds to the intrusion of the Law of the Father, prising apart the speaker and the body of Jerusalem. Like the abduction of Persephone, like the removal from the Garden, it is a rupture with ambiguous implications – a violent dismembering that marks the path of loss and death; and/or a painful rupture which is nevertheless necessary in order to move beyond stasis, which is indeed its own form of death. In order for there to be life, possibility and change, there must also be death, and recognition of separateness and lack. Only in that crevasse of exile, is it possible for any speech to arise at all, let alone the art of the poem – the Lord’s Song – which inscribes both the dreams of redemption and restoration, and the consolations of the piecemeal, the potentially reparative work of the poem.

ENDNOTES

1 I am of course drawing upon a psychoanalytic, and primarily Lacanian, account of subjectivity as constituted in direct relation to an experience of ‘lack’, of being not-connected in ways that it is possible to imagine/remember connection. Cf in particular, ‘The Mirror Stage’ (Lacan 1977: 1–7).

2 Sigmund Freud: ‘… “forgetting” consists mostly of a falling away of the links between various ideas, a failure to draw conclusions, an isolating of certain memories’ (Freud 1914, in Rieff 1963, 159).

3 I draw implicitly here on Julia Kristeva’s notion of language as a complex and variable braid of signification composed of the semiotic, as the expression of the maternally connotated chora, and the symbolic register of paternal law. Poetic language, she describes, as a kind of signification in which the semiotic, or the visceral experience of the body with its pulses and aporia, is foregrounded over the cause and effect logic of the symbolic (Kristeva 1986).

4 Paul Celan, ‘Deathfugue’ (Todesfugue): ‘Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening/ we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night/ we drink and we drink…’ (Celan 2001: 30).

5 Derrida (1981): ‘his pharmakon, this “medicine”, this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternatively or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent. The pharmakon would be a substance – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already
paving the way for alchemy – if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisybstance itself: that which resists any philosophe, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nnonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite abyss of what funds it (Derrida 1981: 70).

C.f. Bice Benevento and Roger Kennedy’s discussion of Lacan’s essay ‘The Subversion of the Subject’ (1960), in which they describe the objet thus: ‘It is the object which unchains desire, especially desire for what is lacking with regard to the mother, and then what the mother desires… It represents what the Other lacks in order to be absolute, represents the lack itself as the irreducible remainder in any signification. It is the object which always escapes the subject…’ (Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986: 176).

This is a key argument across much of Luce Irigaray’s work, highlighting the woman’s ‘exile’, within phallocentrism, from any representation of her desire for the maternal body or origin: ‘she cannot turn back toward her mother, or lay claim to seeing or knowing what is to be seen and known of the place of origin… She is left with a void, a lack of all representation, re-presentation, and even strictly speaking of all mimesis of her desire for origin’ (Irigaray 1985: 42).

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