



Psychoanalysis Revisited - A Feminine Ethics in a Man's World

A conversation between Bracha Ettinger and Anne Enright

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Introduction

‘Who am I?’ Despite this question being one we, whether consciously or unconsciously, ask ourselves often, it is not one which is easily answered. Even before the ancient Greek philosophers we still refer to today set out to know the world they were living in, the most basic of ontological questions were already being asked. ‘Who am I?’ From Aristotle, for whom the subject, or the ‘I’, was “a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence”, to Descartes, for whom the subject was equal to the ability to think, we have entered the age of modernism (Foucault 1978: 143). Due to increasing technological developments, which have, amongst others, led to globalisation and advanced capitalism, the subject once again became open to investigation (Braidotti 1994: 97). From the early days of modernism onwards, the matter of subjectivity has been addressed from within a range of approaches, amongst which are “psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, social theory and inter-disciplinary work in cultural, feminist and postcolonial theory” (Venn 2004: 149). Despite this broad and elaborate discussion of the subject, it has not become easier to answer which seems quite a straightforward question: ‘Who am I?’ In fact, it might have become more difficult to discuss the ‘I’ and exactly what it entails. We have, by now, entered the era

of post-structuralism and postmodernism, an era which has proven to be a hostile climate for the subject. Although both movements have argued that it does not exist, Judith Butler does make a distinction between the post-structuralist and postmodernist attitude toward the subject. As she explains, post-structuralist thinkers claim that “the subject *never* existed” (Butler 1992: 14; emphasis in original). Postmodern thinkers, on the other hand, argue that “the subject once had integrity, but no longer does” (*ibid.*).

Considering this claim, a discussion of the subject might no longer be relevant. Indeed, “[i]t might be thought that this is an old debate, fought out between structuralism and post-structuralism” (Venn 2004: 149). If the subject never actually existed, we should leave the subject for the nothing it is, and thank post-structuralism for pointing the obvious out to us. However, the question of the subject has proven not to be that simple. On a theoretical level, the subject might be considered to be dead or as not having existed in the first place, but outside of the academia,

the idea of the autonomous, unitary subject or the ‘free individual’ has reappeared under different guises: as the sovereign consumer, the responsible citizen, the enterprising worker, the self-governing agent and, more generally, the egocentric individual of liberalism and neo-liberalism. (*ibid.*)

When we bear in mind the paradoxical effect of increasing technology and the corresponding globalisation and advanced capitalism – while stressing the universality of people’s needs around the globe, it simultaneously addresses the human need to be recognised as an individual – it will come as no surprise that human beings are still in need, and a growing need that is, of an identity.

One of the major critiques in the 1980s and 1990s on the post-structuralist and postmodern deconstruction of the subject has come from within the field of feminist theory. At the same time women began to make claims as subjects, mostly white male theorists began

to argue that the subject had lost its virtue, if it had ever possessed such a quality. In *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti has explained why this poses a problem for feminist theorists: “one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted [...]. In order to announce the death of the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one” (Braidotti 1994: 141). This is not to say that women, if they want to be taken into account as subjects, should strive for the exact same subject-position as open to men. On the contrary, what the subject is and/or should be has always been articulated from the perspective of the white heterosexual male. However, that women have never been granted this specific subject-position in the symbolical and empirical sense of the word, does not mean that we have to get rid of the subject altogether. Indeed, as Marysia Zalewski has argued in *Feminism After Postmodernism: Theorising Through Practice*, “it is not a question of *choosing* between retaining the subject or not, rather it is a question of revisiting our understanding of what the subject is” (Zalewski 2000: 39; emphasis in original).

This is precisely what I intend to do in this thesis. Following the tendency in both feminist philosophy and the broader philosophical field to discuss the subject not in terms of *being* but in terms of *becoming*, I will understand the ontological question I have asked at the beginning – ‘Who am I?’ – to mean ‘Who will or can I become?’ This question will guide me through my research. The aim of my research is to facilitate a conversation between Irish novelist and writer Anne Enright and Israeli-French feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger. When I first encountered Ettinger’s work, I had just finished reading Enright’s last novel *The Gathering* (2007). Despite being introduced to the former’s theory through the more accessible writings of Griselda Pollock, who has been working with Ettinger for more than twenty years and who has published extensively on the latter’s work, I seemed unable to grasp Ettinger’s argument. At least, until I realised that the fragility of the subject Ettinger discusses in her theory resembled the fragility experienced by the female protagonist

of Enright's novel. It had been precisely this aspect – this fragility – that had struck me while I was reading *The Gathering*.

The vulnerability of the subject is a recurring issue in Enright's work. In his review of Enright's second novel *What Are You Like?* (2000), James Wood argues that her characters in general are “more confused than those in more ordinary novels: they are cognitive zealots”¹. As Susan Cahill explains, Enright has always had a specific interest in the instability of the body:

Enright [...] has ‘always paid close attention to what the body is and what it actually does’, combining an ontological curiosity with an approach that is oriented around potentiality. Furthermore, Enright, in her writing, continuously refuses to configure the corporeal as a stable entity. (Cahill 2006: 168)

After having read more of Enright's work, I cannot but agree. Throughout the narratives I have read, the ontological question ‘Who will or can I become?’ seems to be haunting the characters in them. I felt disquieted when I read *The Gathering* for the first time because Enright does not answer that question in a reassuring way. She does provide an answer, but it is not one that, on first glance, seems to be able to bring relief to both the characters in her novels and the reader. Instead of offering her characters a happy and complete ending, Enright only seems to provide them with just enough tools to make their lives bearable.

In her work, Ettinger attempts to re-articulate the subject through a discussion of what she has called the matrix or the matrixial. Since matrix is the Latin word for womb, it will come as no surprise that Ettinger takes the pregnant body as the starting point for her theory. Discussing the encounter between pre-maternal – pregnant – woman and pre-natal – not yet born – child, Ettinger articulates a relationality between subjects which radically transforms the binary between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Although Ettinger's theory is able, as I hope to

¹James Wood, “To Thrill – A Mockingbird,” *Guardian* 11 March 2000, 23 November 2010
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/mar/11/fiction.reviews2>>

demonstrate, to provide answers to a number of questions we have been struggling with for a very long time and are still struggling with today, she has “no intention of presenting the matrixial complex as some caricatural lost paradise” (Ettinger 2006: 70). Her re-articulation of the subject is thus not meant to provide us with a happy answer to the ontological question I have been repeatedly asking. On the contrary, one of the aims of her theory is to acknowledge and embrace the trauma of what it means to be human. For Ettinger, one’s subject-position is based on the responsibility the subject has towards the other, an ethical implication which inevitably entails the experience of *both* pleasure and pain. It is the going beyond these binaries which also resonates in Enright’s fiction. By facilitating a conversation between Enright and Ettinger, I want to answer the following question: ‘How do the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* experience their subjectivity and how can a matrixial reading of these experiences open up a way of thinking a feminine ethics?’

This thesis is divided into four parts. In the first part – “Chapter I: An Introduction to the Research Material” – I will discuss Sigmund Freud’s ‘discovery’ of the subject as we still understand it today. I will also discuss the feminist critique this Freudian formulation of the subject has had to endure for the last four decades. After having referred to a number of continental and, more specifically, French feminist theorists and the interventions they have made, I will introduce Ettinger’s theory of the matrix. After this introduction, I will elaborate on Enright, her work, and her affiliation with the question of the subject. In the remaining three separate but overlapping parts, I will engage in three particular academic debates.

In “Chapter II: The Past”, I will discuss the formation of the subject, or the ‘I’, and will address the following question: ‘When and where does the ‘I’ come into being?’ I will open the chapter with a discussion of subject-formation in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Having discussed where these three psychoanalytic

thinkers trace the onset of the process of subject-formation, I will turn towards the work of Enright to analyse how her protagonists challenge their claims and, as a corollary, make room for Ettinger to intervene in the discussion and radically change our understanding of the subject.

In “Chapter III: The Present”, I will discuss what I have called the sex-gender debate between Anglo-American and French feminist theorists. After elaborating on this contemporary debate, in which the former argue against and the latter argue in favour of an investigation of sexual differences, I will address the following question: ‘Is another sexual difference possible for the subject?’ Since the subject has always been articulated from a male perspective, and since this position has been understood to be unattainable for women, we need to investigate whether there is room for an understanding of a sexual difference which will be able to address both women, men, and those not fitting this binary. Working through the reaction of both the female protagonists and the female and male characters in Enright’s work to events that are, according to psychoanalytic thinking, dangerous to the integrity of the subject, I will discuss Ettinger’s claim that the feminine is not by definition always already related and in opposition to the masculine. Looking at her articulation of a different feminine difference, I will then discuss her attempt to open up a subject-position which is open to every single human being.

In “Chapter IV: The Future”, I will elaborate on the ethical implications of Ettinger’s theory. Discussing the binaries between self and other and pain and pleasure, I will ask the following question: ‘Can an alternative understanding of the feminine open up a different way of thinking ethics?’ The independence and the autonomy valued in our current ethical climate maintains a negative understanding of the other: I am who I am because I am *not* you. According to Ettinger, this discriminating between self and other can ultimately only lead to violence. Through a discussion of the humanising moment in Enright’s fiction, I will

elaborate on Ettinger's moving beyond the abovementioned binaries and her articulation of an ethics which, springing from the feminine dimension she has termed the matrixial borderspace, will help us to redefine the human relationship.

Chapter I: An Introduction to the Research Material

1.1 The Freudian subject

With the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, Freud radically challenged and changed the way in which the subject had been understood in Western thinking. Since the seventeenth century, when René Descartes famously claimed ‘I think, therefore I am’, subjectivity had been equated with the ability to think. It was precisely this ability which differentiated ‘man’ from the rest of the species that inhabit the world (Colebrook 2004: 99). Where Descartes did wonder about the division between mind and body, he eventually claimed that the ontological question ‘Who am I?’ could be solved by reason. Freud, on the other hand, argued that there was more to the human mind. Through the analysis of his patients’ dreams and neurotic symptoms, Freud discovered that every human being has an unconscious: a part of the brain to which access is limited and which we, therefore, cannot fully comprehend. Due to the presence of the unconscious, which undermines reason, the subject is not, and will never be, able to understand the self entirely. In “The Ego and the Id”, which was published in 1923, Freud developed his notion of the unconscious further. In his

re-articulation of the subject, he differentiated the human mind into three different though interdependent parts: the ego, the id, and the super-ego. The ego is the conscious self, or what we refer to as the 'I'; the id is the emotional unconscious we do not have full access to; and the super-ego is the controlling mechanism which, in order for the subject to participate 'normally' in society without any neurotic symptoms, has to control the id and keep the ego compliant (Storr 1989: 60). Freud termed the process in which the repression of the unconscious and the submittal to the super-ego takes place the oedipal phase. During this period, the child will learn that there is only one important organ – the penis – and that not everyone possesses it. Due to the castration-complex – the anxiety to lose the penis – the child will reject its mother, who does not own the organ, and identify with its father, who does. By doing so, the child will subject itself to the so-called law of the father: the rules one has to live by in a patriarchal society. After the oedipal phase, which, for Freud, happens between the age of three and five, the child will only have full access to the ego and will have become an 'I'.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the French psychoanalyst Lacan took Freud's original work and developed it into a structuralist account of psychoanalysis (Rivkin and Ryan 2008: 393). Where Freud believed that the ego came forth out of the repression of the id and the submittal to the super-ego, Lacan argued that the subject was predominantly based on language: "[b]efore language assigns us an 'I,' we possess no sense of self" (*ibid.*). As such, the nature of Lacan's division of the human mind is linguistic. According to Lacan, there are three different though interdependent orders: the imaginary, the symbolic order, and the real². The imaginary is that which precedes language, and thus the subject, and the real is that which exceeds it. The symbolic order is the social and linguistic system which both constitutes and supports the subject and which every human being needs to enter in order to become a subject and take part in society. To enter the symbolic order – to become an 'I' – the child has to go

² Although the two are very much related, and are sometimes used interchangeably, Lacan's model of the human mind is not the mere structuralist equivalent of Freud's original division into the id, ego and super-ego.

through a process which Lacan has named the mirror stage. During this process, which is supposed to begin when the child is between six and eighteen months old, the child will acquire language. Since language differentiates between 'I' and 'you', 'self' and 'other', the child inevitably learns to see itself as a solid and individual entity which is separate from its mother or its maternal environment. Although Lacan, in contrast to Freud, understood the anatomical penis to be symbolic, for him, the child's entrance into the symbolic order was also completed when the child took up its predestined position vis-à-vis this transcendental signifier he titled the phallus.

1.1.1 A feminist critique

Although Freudian psychoanalysis, in which I include both Freud's original writings and the theories still closely connected to his work, such as the work of Lacan, has been challenged from and discussed within a variety of academic fields, I will focus specifically on the critique that has come from the feminist theorists who have engaged with continental and, more specifically, French feminist theory. One of the main critiques on Freudian psychoanalysis from within this perspective is that the Freudian universal subject is anything but universal. Freud's oedipal phase and Lacan's mirror stage are both based on the experiences and the position of a male child in a society which is by definition patriarchal. In concordance with western science, they have taken the white heterosexual male as the universal norm. Being unaware of their own situatedness as white male theorists, or being unwilling to take it into account, their theories have failed to adequately address the situation of those who do not fit this norm, such as women. Freud, at the end of his "Lecture XXXIII: Femininity", which was originally published in 1933, eventually admitted that the information he had provided on femininity was "certainly incomplete and fragmentary" (Freud 1973: 169). He even advised

his audience to “inquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information” if they were interested in learning more about the issue (*ibid.*). Lacan, on the other hand, ‘solved’ the question in an altogether different manner. According to him, ‘Woman’ as such does not exist (Lacan 1998). As Teresa de Lauretis elaborates, Lacan did not intend to say that women – actual, living, breathing women – do not exist (de Lauretis 1984: 164). She is, however, of herself no category: a woman does not define her own existence but can only be in opposition and relation to that which has been defined as the centre (*ibid.*). What a woman is and how we can understand her is thus based on her position vis-à-vis man. This is not to say that the category ‘Woman’ does not exist at all, but she does not exist in the one order we have access to – the symbolic order – but in the real. Being positioned in an order of which we can have no knowledge, every attempt to talk about ‘Woman’ and what a woman might be in and of herself is, from a Lacanian point of view, unfeasible.

If we look back on Freudian psychoanalysis from our current position, it is quite easy to point out the flaws in the theories and to laugh – with or without contempt – at the sometimes creative attempts to describe a woman’s oedipal phase or mirror stage or explain women’s behaviour. However, Freud and Lacan did not try to provide us with a blueprint of how the world we are living in *must* work. They did not write the law of the father or lay down the linguistic structures which constitute the symbolic order. They tried to explain how the world *is working* and which necessary steps subjects need to take in order to be able to live within that world. In “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”, Luce Irigaray, who is both famous and infamous for her critique on Freudian psychoanalysis, argues that the patriarchal structure uncovered by Freudian psychoanalysis is “indeed the one that lays down the law today” (Irigaray 1991b: 122). To her, it is of the utmost importance that this is acknowledged: “[t]o fail to recognize this would be as naive as to let it continue to

rule without questioning the conditions that make its domination possible” (*ibid.*). Although her essay was meant as a critique on how Lacan managed the *École Freudienne de Paris*, Irigaray explains that she did not write it “in order to return to a precritical attitude towards psychoanalysis, nor to claim that psychoanalysis has already exhausted its effectiveness” (Irigaray 1991b: 121). On the contrary, she also refers to its potentiality (*ibid.*). What we need is thus a critical account, and not a dismissal of Freudian psychoanalysis. As Leo Bersani has pointed out, despite the errors that have been made along the way and despite its inability to fit everyone into its theoretical framework, “Freudianism is—both from the point of view of theory and from that of social practice—the most pervasive, and the most prestigious modern form of a discursive technology of self-knowledge and self-creation” (Bersani 1986: 30).

1.1.2 Re-articulating the feminine

In reaction to the failure of Freudian psychoanalysis to adequately theorise about women, continental and/or French feminists theorists have tried, and are still trying, to give new meaning to terms that are associated with ‘Woman’, such as ‘femininity’ and the ‘maternal’. Hélène Cixous, for example, has pointed out that everything that was to know about femininity at the time of her writing was written by men (Cixous 1976). According to her, “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing [...]. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (Cixous 1976: 875). She therefore advocated a specifically feminine writing style she has named ‘écriture féminine’. Kristeva has introduced the concept of the ‘semiotic chora’, which has been linked to the maternal (Kristeva 1984). According to her, there are two modes of meaning making: the symbolic and the semiotic. Where the symbolic refers to language in its barest form, the semiotic, originating in the time before the child’s separation

from the mother, refers to an extra layer of meaning without which the symbolic mode of signification has no meaning (*ibid.*). Irigaray has argued that the binaries through which we understand the world are hierarchical and that women, as such, always already stand in a negative relation to the male norm: a woman is defined by what a man is not (Irigaray 1985). Irigaray, therefore, has tried to articulate what the feminine, the mother-daughter relationship, and the maternal could be in and of itself (*ibid.*). Elizabeth Grosz, in reaction to “an amazing blindness on the part of these founding fathers of psychoanalytic feminism” has proposed a corporeal feminism which takes into account the unique experiences of the female body and not those of Freud and Lacan’s so-called universal body (Grosz 1994: 58).

Although some of these early feminist attempts to work with or move beyond Freudian psychoanalysis date back more than thirty years, recent publication of books such as Lisa Baraitser’s *Maternal Encounters: An Ethics of Interruption* and Anne Enright’s *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* show that there is an ongoing struggle to articulate the feminine and the maternal and to do justice to the sexual specificity of the female body (Baraitser 2009; Enright 2005). In her autobiographical account on the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, Enright discusses the effect of being pregnant, giving birth, and being a mother on a woman’s sense of self (Enright 2005). Baraitser uses her background as a feminist theorist and a psychotherapist in her attempt to articulate a specific female/maternal subjectivity (Baraitser 2009). Although both the older and the more recent attempts to (re-)articulate these terms have contributed considerably to the debate and have presented us with a number of metaphors which have proven to be very useful, I would like to argue that Ettinger’s matrixial theory provides us with the most complete answer to date. As such, I will not argue in favour or against the validity of the theories described above, but focus on the potentiality of Ettinger’s work.

1.2 Bracha Ettinger

Bracha Ettinger (or Bracha L. Ettinger or Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger³) was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1948. She is an artist, a feminist philosopher, a practicing psychoanalyst, a senior clinical psychologist and a second-generation Holocaust survivor⁴. According to Pollock, she, “[a]longside Irigaray and Kristeva, [...] has become one of the most influential theorists writing today in the field of French psychoanalysis” (Pollock 2006: 14). Next to psychoanalysis, Ettinger’s work touches upon the fields of “philosophy, visual culture, feminism and ethics” (Giffney, Mulhall, and O’Rourke 2009: 2). Due to this broad approach, her work can be and has been discussed within a large variety of contemporary debates. In their “Seduction into Reading: Bracha L. Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace*”, Noreen Giffney, Anne Mulhall, and Michael O’Rourke provide the following summary of thinkers whose work Ettinger has engaged with in her theory:

Her writing extends and challenges the work of contemporary philosophers and psychoanalysts (many of whom are her friends) including Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Edmond Jabès and Luce Irigaray. (*ibid.*)

Since Ettinger is herself both an artist, a feminist, and a practicing psychoanalyst, her work coincides on three different – though overlapping – planes: the artistic-aesthetic, the ethical, and the psychoanalytic plane (Ettinger 2006a: 145). Because these three planes work alongside and with each other, Ettinger’s theory has “major aesthetical, analytical, political, and most crucially ethical implications” (Giffney, Mulhall, and O’Rourke 2009: 2). Since I am concerned with the question of ethics, and am researching the articulation of a *feminine*

³ Throughout the years, Ettinger has published under these three names. For the sake of clarity, I will only refer to her as Ettinger in the text.

⁴ Although this last aspect does not refer to Ettinger’s professional achievements, it is, as I will demonstrate in “Chapter IV – The Future”, a vital and integral aspect of her work.

ethics specifically, it is beyond the aim of my research to elaborate on the artistic-aesthetic aspect of Ettinger's work⁵. I will, despite my engaging with psychoanalytic theory, also not address the actual analytical practice⁶.

Although Ettinger has been working on her theory since the 1980s, and has published extensively on the topic in the mean-time, it was not until 2006 that her book *The Matrixial Borderspace* was published. With this book, which includes a foreword by Butler, an introduction by Pollock and an afterword by Brian Massumi, Ettinger brought her theory of the matrix to a wider audience. The main aim of her theory, as she herself explains, is "to understand the passage into the symbolic kingdom outside the paradigm of castration and the role of the symbolic phallus in it" (Ettinger 2006b: 218). Where, for Lacan, the entrance into society ends when the child takes up its designated position vis-à-vis the symbolic phallus, Ettinger wants to look at the subject and subject-formation from a non-phallic perspective. Through her articulation of the matrixial borderspace, Ettinger has opened up a place from within which we are able to do so.

For me, there are three crucial aspects to Ettinger's work. First of all, she is not trying to move beyond or completely away from the symbolic order. On the contrary, she takes it very seriously. It might be nothing more than a man-made structure, as post-structuralist thinkers have pointed out, it is a structure without which we would not be able to function within society. The language through which we have to make sense of our selves and the world around us is, however, limited. The problem for Ettinger is thus not the existence of the symbolic order per se, but the limitations it causes to our understanding of the self. To get around these limitations, Ettinger has proposed the matrixial borderspace as a sphere which exists simultaneously with the symbolic order. Arguing that this matrixial sphere is part of the

⁵ For more information on the artistic-aesthetic aspect of her theory, please read "Trans-Subjective Transferential Borderspace" (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1997).

⁶ For more information on the psychoanalytic aspect of her theory, please read "From Transference to the Aesthetic Paradigm: Interview with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger" (Guattari 1997).

symbolic order, and not only before and/or after it, it broadens the boundaries of the latter and opens up room for a non-phallic, and thus non-patriarchal, perspective on the subject to become intelligible.

In her articulation of the matrixial borderspace, Ettinger turns to the pregnant pre-maternal body. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the subject comes into existence through a phase in which the child learns to see itself as a separate being who needs to accept the structures of the symbolic order. Instead of seeing the subject as that which comes into being through a separation from the mother, Ettinger grants a subject-position to the two beings who have never had a proper place in the phallic model: the mother and the pre-symbolic child. In order to do so, she argues that subject-formation does not start after the child is born, but has its onset in the “*late* intrauterine encounter” between the becoming-mother and the becoming-child (Ettinger 2006a: 81; emphasis in original). Although a discussion of pregnancy and its effect on the becoming-mother is not uncommon in feminist theoretical circles, Ettinger does not focus on the psychological effect pregnancy has on the one carrying the child, but – and this is the second crucial aspect of her work – on the effect it has on the child itself. By looking at pregnancy from a different perspective, she turns the experience from an inevitable difference between women and men into an experience every single human being has had.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the subject is believed to be complete before the so-called cut or split from the mother and will strive its entire life to achieve that lost feeling of wholeness. By situating the onset of subject-formation in an encounter in which it is impossible to speak of the subject as an individuated entity – during pregnancy, the foetus is literally bound to the mother – Ettinger argues that the subject was never whole to begin with. Although it is, on an academic level, already widely understood that the subject, once split, will never be able to become whole again, for me, this claim constitutes the third crucial aspect of her theory. The radical notion of the subject as always already partial sheds a new

light on both our understanding of subjectivity and the relationality between subjects. Instead of reading subjectivity in a negative light – I am who I am because of who I am *not* – it is precisely the relationality between self and other, and not the separation of, which create the subject.

1.3 Anne Enright

Anne Enright was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1962. She graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1985, having completed a B.A. in Modern English and Philosophy (Cahill 2006: 169). She moved to England to attend the M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, where she was taught by Malcolm Bradbury and Angela Carter (*ibid.*). After having obtained her Master's degree in 1986, Enright started to work as a television producer and director for, amongst others, RTÉ, Ireland's National Television and Radio Broadcaster. During this period, she wrote short stories. Her first collection of these stories – *The Portable Virgin* – was published in 1991 and won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, which is annually awarded to young Irish writers. Due to the success of *The Portable Virgin*, Enright quit her job in 1993 to become a full-time writer (*ibid.*). In the seventeen years that have passed since then, Enright has written four novels: *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), *What Are You Like?* (2001), *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), and *The Gathering* (2007). She has written a biographical account on her experience of pregnancy and motherhood – *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004) – and published another two collections of short stories: *Taking Pictures* (2008) and *Yesterday's Weather* (2009). Enright has written a number of screenplays and essays, the latter having, together with some of her short stories, been published in the *Guardian*, the *Irish Times*, and the *London Review of Books*. Among her most well-known essays is “Disliking the McCanns”, in which she criticises the parents of

Madeleine McCann, the three-year-old girl who disappeared from her room during a holiday in Portugal in 2007, an event which has created an enormous media frenzy.

After winning the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 1991 for *The Portable Virgin*, Enright won the Royal Society of Authors Encore Prize for her novel *What Are You Like?* in 2001, which is biennially awarded to best second novel. In 2004, she won the Davy Byrne's Irish Writing Award for short stories for "Honey", which was published in the *Irish Times* in 2004, and has been included in *Yesterday's Weather*. Enright's last novel, *The Gathering*, was awarded with the 2007 Man Booker Prize, a literary award for best novel by a writer from the Commonwealth. It also became Irish Novel of the Year 2008. By winning the prestigious Man Booker Prize, *The Gathering* is the novel which has made Enright more widely known in both Irish and international literary and theoretical circles⁷.

1.3.1 The subject in the work of Anne Enright

As I have discussed in the introduction to my research, Enright's work engages in a discussion of the instability of the subject. In her work, she refuses to give a satisfying answer to the question 'Who will or can I become?' and to offer a solution to the instability experienced by her protagonists. Since her writing does not fit within the framework through which we have learned to look at the world, the reader might be left with a feeling of dissatisfaction – it does not end how we would like it to end – and discomfort – we are not sure how to deal with it. At least, that is how I experienced *The Gathering* the first time I read it. The subject – what it was, what it is, and what it might be – is a current topic in contemporary Irish writing. In *The Irish Novel at the End of the Twentieth Century: Gender*,

⁷ There are, for instance, quite a few feminist theorists currently based at University College Dublin who are writing on Enright's work. She has also been invited by the University of Limerick to give a public lecture during the "New Voices: Inherited Lines" conference that took place the 28th and 29th of May in Limerick, Ireland, 2010. In the spring of 2011, *Anne Enright*, a collection of essays edited by Claire Bracken en Cahill, will be published.

Bodies, and Power, Jennifer M. Jeffers argues that “[t]he 1990s was a boom period for the Irish novel as a group of young Irish novelists came to the fore to create an entirely new agenda for the genre of the novel” (Jeffers 2002: 1). As both Cahill and Jeffers point out, it was the economic boom of that period – a period which gave Ireland the nickname ‘Celtic Tiger’, and which came to an abrupt halt in 2007 – which affected both the cultural and economic climate of Ireland as well as the existing “grid of power” (Cahill 2006: 11-12; Jeffers 2002: 1). These changes have had a major effect on what Jeffers has called “that perennial Irish problem”: Irish identity (Jeffers 2002: 1). In reference to Enright’s oeuvre, fellow Irish novelist Colm Tóibín has argued that the Dublin Enright describes “for the first time in its long life in fiction, has become post-Freudian and post-feminist and [...] post-nationalist” (Tóibín 1999: xxxiii)⁸. As Jeffers has pointed out, to be able to address the identity-crisis caused by these shifting power dynamics in a cultural, economic, and political sense, contemporary Irish novelists such as Enright have returned to the question of difference between the sexes: “[f]or several of these novels the demarcating line of identity [...] can be gauged at the basic level of sexual and gender identity” (Jeffers 2002: 1).

Referring to three of these young Irish novelists – Enright, Colum McCann, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne – Cahill has argued that they all “use configurations of the body in order to negotiate” the relation between the past, the present and the future (Cahill 2006: 12). In the three novels I will analyse in my research, the female protagonists negotiate this relation through a questioning of the binary between life and death, and through the articulation of both their genealogical – looking back (to the family) – and pro-genitive – looking forward (to relations not based on blood ties) – relations. Through an investigation of these relations and

⁸ Although I am in this research project mostly concerned with the post-Freudian aspect of Enright’s work, I would like to explain the other two ‘post’s’ shortly. As Jeffers explains, “Irish identity is in large part a matter of economics (replacing the traditionally political) as the Republic of Ireland’s postmodern place in the Eurocommunity becomes more important than its postcoloniality” (Jeffers 2002: 1). In “Irish Feminist Futures?”, Bracken has taken up the question of economics and consumerism and has related it to the lack of feminist consciousness in contemporary Ireland (Bracken 2007).

their effect on the boundaries of their bodies and their sense of self, the female protagonists, at a moment of severe instability, try to make sense not only of who they are, but also of who they might become.

1.4 The novels

To facilitate a conversation between Ettinger and Enright, I will analyse the novels *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering*. In each novel, the female protagonist is experiencing a severe crisis of the self. I am focusing specifically on these three novels, because they are all set against the spatial-temporal background of the rapidly changing metropolis Dublin. Although some parts of the narratives do take place elsewhere, each novel criticises particular aspects of traditional and contemporary Irish society. One of the main topics in *The Wig My Father Wore* is the changing economic climate of the nineties. In the novel, Enright criticises its effect on Irish metropolitan society and the changing attitudes of its inhabitants towards each other and towards life itself. In *What Are You Like?*, Enright engages in the discussion of abortion, which is, except when happening for medical reasons, still illegal in Ireland, a country in which the foetus continues to be valued over the woman who is carrying it⁹. With *The Gathering*, Enright responds to the recent world-wide 'discovery' and debate on sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, in which the still very much Catholic Republic of Ireland has a large share. Although her novel does not discuss abuse by an actual member of the clergy, the piety of the man in question is repeatedly underlined.

⁹ It is beyond the aim of this thesis to discuss the status of women in contemporary Ireland to a larger extent. For more information on the topic, please read *Valorising the Virtual Citizen: Death, Gender and Citizenship in Ireland* (Hanafin 2003).

1.4.1 *The Wig My Father Wore*

The narrator and focaliser of *The Wig My Father Wore* is Grace, who is also a character in the novel¹⁰. She is a young single woman who lives in Dublin and who has become too cynical to believe in either love or life. She works as a producer for the Love Quiz – which can either be seen as ironic or as an explanation of her lost hope – a tacky dating show in which a young single woman has to choose a date without having seen the three male contestants. Grace’s narrative begins when she finds the angel Stephen on her doorstep, who immediately begins to thoroughly question her. Having killed himself in 1934, it is now Stephen’s job to move in with those who are on the verge of doing the same and save them. Although Grace herself does not make it explicit that she is contemplating suicide, Stephen’s mere arrival does. Much to Grace’s dismay, since he is supposed to help her out and not them, Stephen mingles with her colleagues and family: while she is gradually losing grip on her life, Stephen’s angelic influence seems to change theirs for the better. One of her colleagues, for example, falls in love with his own wife after years of having been unfaithful to her. The condition of Grace’s father, who has had two strokes, too seems to be improving instead of deteriorating.

There is one question on Stephen’s list – the list he fired at her when they first met – which he is not able to remember. He does, however, argue that he at least knows half the answer. Throughout her mostly chronological narrative, Grace is sharing her memories about the past with Stephen, her colleagues, and with the reader. Reminiscing specific events which have happened in her childhood and her journey into adulthood, she is trying to find both the answer to that last question, and the question itself. She searches for both of them in the arrival of her father’s wig, which, according to Grace, has reigned over the family ever since.

¹⁰ I explicitly use narratological terms in my analysis of the novels, because I find it important to differentiate between the one telling the story and the one focalising the events. As Mieke Bal explains, “[i]f we see focalizations as part of narration, as is usually done, we fail to make a distinction between linguistic, visual, or auditive – hence, textual – agents and the purpose, the ‘colouring,’ the object, of their activity” (Bal 2009: 18).

She also looks for them in the problematic relationship she has with her mother, and tries to find them in the ones she has had with men.

After finding out that Stephen, whom she has fallen in love with, is not only trying to change her life, but is also literally altering her body by taking bits and pieces away from it, Grace develops a plan to make him disappear from her life. Participating in the final episode of the Love Quiz as one of the male contestants, Stephen, who does not have a body but is a mere signal, is transmitted into the air and does not return. Grace, who after the cancellation of the Love Quiz does no longer have a job and who has found out that she is pregnant with Stephen's child, leaves her life in Dublin, of which not much is left, and retreats to County Mayo, a thinly populated area on the opposite side of Ireland. Being far removed from the life she was once a full participant in, it is here that she learns a valuable lesson about love and its power to bridge the gap between life and death.

1.4.2 *What Are You Like?*

Except for the seventh chapter, the narrator of *What Are You Like?* is non-perceptible and external. In other words, the narrator is not a character in the narrative and does not refer to him- or herself as 'I'. In chapter seven, the narrative is narrated and focalised by a character in the novel: Anna Delahunty, whose maiden name is Kennedy. In the remainder of the narrative, the focal point does switch to an internal focaliser from time to time but the larger part of the narrative is presented from the point of view of the external narrator. *What Are You Like?* tells the story of two identical twin sisters – Maria Delahunty, the main protagonist, and Rose Cotter, or Marie Delahunty – who have been separated by birth and do not meet each other until the end of the narrative. Through a picture she has found while she was living in New York two years before they meet, Maria was already aware of the existence of her twin-

sister. Rose, on the other hand, does not find out about Maria until the moment they accidentally run into each other at Maria's work in Dublin.

In the non-chronological narrative, the external narrator discusses the events and the lives of a group of people who are knowingly and unknowingly connected to each other. With almost every sub-chapter, the focus of the narrator switches to someone else. Next to the lives of Maria and Rose, the narrator discusses certain events in the life of their father Berts Delahunty, whose wife Anna died as a result of a brain tumour when she was pregnant with Maria and Rose; Evelyn, who is Berts' second wife and mother to his two youngest children Cormac and Laura; and Sister Maura Reynolds, who took care of the adoption of Rose. In chapter seven, Anna speaks to the reader from her grave to reflect on her own childhood, her marriage, and her death.

Starting with a description of Maria as a baby in her parental home in Dublin, the narrator travels through space and time, taking the reader amongst other places to Dublin in 1965, New York in 1985, Leatherhead, Surrey in 1977, and finally back to Dublin in 1987 where the narrative ends after Maria and Rose finally meet. Although it becomes obvious quite early in the narrative that something must be wrong with Maria, the reader does not immediately find out that she has a twin-sister. It is not until the end of the third chapter that we learn what has happened to the twins and why they were taken apart. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that Maria and Rose are both troubled by the other's absence and presence. In Maria's case, it even causes her to attempt suicide. It is only at the end of the narrative that they both seem to realise that, as long as they are together, the questions of absence/presence and sameness/difference are no longer as important.

1.4.3 *The Gathering*

The narrator and focaliser of *The Gathering*, which refers to the coming together of the nine remaining children of the Hegarty family to bury their brother Liam, is Veronica Hegarty, who is herself a character in the narrative. Typically Irish middle-class, she is a thirty-nine-year old stay at home mother of two – daughters Rebecca and Emily – who is married to Tom, a successful businessman with whom she lives in one of the best and most expensive areas of Dublin. Having been the closest to Liam, who has ended his own life, Veronica is, reluctantly, the one in charge of everything. She is the one who has to bring the news of Liam's death to their mother, she has to go to England to identify Liam's body, she has to make sure it returns back to Ireland, and she also has to arrange his funeral.

In her non-chronological narrative, Veronica takes her readers on a trip from her present to her own past, to the time before she was born, and back again to the present. While her life as she knew it is falling apart, she travels, both literally and in her memory, to the places that have been haunting her since Liam died: from her desk in her home in Booterstown to her grandparents' home in the suburb Broadstone, to London, to the asylum her mother's brother had been locked up in, to the beach in Brighton where Liam drowned himself, and, in the end, to Gatwick Airport. Throughout her narrative, it is made explicit that some of Veronica's memories are entirely the work of her own imagination, and that others are based on a combination of fantasies and recovered memories. Her narrative is thus highly unreliable, and she is herself very much aware of this. Nevertheless, it is offered to the reader as a means to explain why Liam, who was her favourite sibling, ended his own life. A life, Veronica discovers, which was and still is very much intertwined with her own.

As her narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Veronica is not only trying to bear witness to what might have happened to her brother when he was a little boy – something she

is herself not entirely sure of – and what might explain why he did not fit into the world as we understand it, but that she is also trying to convince herself that she is not the one to blame for the way his life turned out to be and how it came to an end. Finding it impossible to return back to the way things were before Liam took his life away from hers, Veronica is taking measures to make sense of the past, measures that are becoming more extreme as the weeks and months go by. At the end of her narrative, she even flies to England. However, instead of becoming able to move on with her life, she finds herself stuck in Gatwick Airport. Feeling unable to either walk into England, where Liam was living with his partner Sarah and their son Rowan and where he drowned himself, or fly back to Dublin, to her husband and kids, Veronica is faced with and forced to answer what might be one of the greatest questions in life: how do we go on after our loved ones have died?

Chapter II: The Past

2.1 Subject-formation in Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva

According to Freud, the subject's repression of the unconscious id is necessary because the former will only be able to live along the rules of society if it is able to deny the id's irrational anxieties and instinctive search for pleasure. One of the most famous anxieties that has to be repressed is the fear of castration. When a child goes through the oedipal phase or the mirror stage, it learns that the mother has a certain lack. For Freud, the lack is constituted by the anatomical penis and, for Lacan, by the symbolic phallus. As such, the male child becomes afraid to lose the penis/phallus and the female child begins to desire it. Since the father is the one who is in possession of the penis/phallus and the power the latter symbolises¹¹ – and thus also has the power to take it away from the child – the male child unconsciously sees the father as his rival, and the female child sees the father as the ultimate object of her desire. When this so-called castration complex is not repressed, the male child will resent his father,

¹¹For Lacan, both men and women are unable to possess the symbolic phallus. However, it is the understanding that men have it and women do not which, despite it being a delusion, keeps the structures of the symbolic order intact.

and the female child – who either wants the father or what the father possesses – will resent her mother.

Although Freud focused mostly on the anxieties and fantasies that go with the castration complex in his work, he also, albeit to a much lesser extent, discussed the presence of womb anxieties and fantasies in both adults and children. According to Ettinger, who has taken Freud's predominant focus on the penis instead of the womb as her entry point into the debate, there are two reasons why fantasies concerning the womb needed to be repressed. At first, a denial of these fantasies – that there is a womb and that something actually happened there – will defend “the male child's narcissism and allow the development of his Ego” (Ettinger 2006a: 174). If the male child were to acknowledge the existence and importance of the womb, it would have to give up the belief that he is the one who is in possession of the one valuable organ. Secondly, a discussion of womb fantasies “would have placed at risk some of the most general and basic psychoanalytic assumptions” (*ibid.*). If the womb were to be recognised as having an effect on the child, causing the anatomical penis or symbolic phallus to lose its prerogative, it would rock the very foundations of psychoanalytic thinking. Nevertheless, Freud himself did not deny the existence of womb fantasies. However, instead of discussing the implications of fantasies that are related to the womb, he fully supported the subject's denial of this organ (*ibid.*).

Lacan, on the other hand, “entirely ignores the intrauterine phantasy” (Ettinger 2006a: 175). In “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”, Irigaray explains that “[p]sychoanalysts take a dim view of this first moment” in which the child is literally not yet cut off from its mother (Irigaray 1991a: 39). First and foremost, the intrauterine encounter is not a visible one, but happens inside the pregnant body. Technological developments might have enabled us to look inside the womb now, but that does not take away the fact that scans and ultrasounds, no matter how advanced, are not able to show the child's psychological bond to the mother.

Secondly, there was, and still is, the fear that a so-called return to the womb would lead to the dissolution – the death – of the subject (*ibid.*). Irigaray concludes that “[a] taboo is in the air” (*ibid.*). Where Freud at least acknowledged that womb fantasies existed and that they had to be actively repressed, “Lacan warned that whosoever dares deal with the matter of the prenatal could not be called psychoanalyst and would have to be excommunicated”¹² (Ettinger 2006a: 181). According to him, as well as Freud, whatever happened at the level of pregnancy has nothing to do with the formation of the subject, and as such, with psychoanalytic theory (Ettinger 2006a: 175). Both the denial of womb fantasies and the denial of the denial of these fantasies is thus necessary for psychoanalytic thinking since “the field of psychoanalysis itself depends on the foreclosure of procreation” (Ettinger 2006a: 181).

In “Stabat Mater”, Kristeva criticises Freud for having very little to say about this specific topic: “[t]he fact remains, as far as the complexities and pitfalls of maternal experience are involved, that Freud offers only a massive *nothing*” (Kristeva 1986: 178-179; emphasis in original). Kristeva argues that, during pregnancy, there is no clear distinction between the woman who is pregnant and the child she is pregnant with. As such, the pregnant body challenges the differentiation between ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘self’ and ‘other’. Therefore, Kristeva proposes the maternal body, both during pregnancy and after having given birth, as a starting point to deconstruct the supposedly coherent and solid western subject.

Despite her critique on Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva nevertheless remains faithful to Freud and Lacan in that she, too, believes subject-formation to begin with the child's separation from its mother. According to Kristeva, however, the moment a child becomes a subject takes place before both Freud's oedipal phase and Lacan's mirror stage. For her, it starts before the child has access to the linguistic system with what she has called abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva argues that the abject “is

¹² Although Ettinger herself does not explicitly refer to a specific theorist, Irigaray lost her position at the University of Vincennes, where she taught at the Department of Psychoanalysis of which Lacan was in charge, after publishing her second book *Speculum of the Other Woman* in 1974 (Whitford 1991: 5-6).

something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from object”, such as “an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung” (Kristeva 1982: 2; 4). What is expelled from the subject’s body at that specific moment – which includes the rejection of the maternal body – is not the same as the subject, but it is also not radically different from it. As such, the abject “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982: 4). That Kristeva does problematise the dualism between self and other does, however, not take away the fact that she, too, situates the onset of subject-formation after the child is born. Pregnancy and mothering might have an effect on the woman who carries and births the child, but the womb does not, for Kristeva, have a subjectivising quality in itself.

2.2 The ‘I’ in *The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?, and The Gathering*

For Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, a child’s subjectivity does not begin to form until after the child is born and begins to separate itself from its mother. In Enright’s work, the instability of the subject, and thus the instability of identity, is one of the main themes. In this sub-chapter, I will analyse how, in *The Wig My Father Wore* and *The Gathering*, the two female protagonists make sense of their unstable selves. Since, in *What Are You Like?*, the female protagonist Maria Delahunty is never the narrator and is only occasionally given the role of focaliser, I will analyse how the external and non-perceptible narrator explains Maria’s sense of self.

2.2.1 'How could I look into the mirror as a child?'

In most of Enright's literary work, mirrors are recurring objects. In *The Wig My Father Wore*, they take up a very significant place. Whether it is a mirror at home, at her parents' house or at work, it is an object with which Grace has a peculiar relationship. When Grace discusses her father's preference for mirrors over cameras halfway through the narrative – "because they forget you when you walk away" – Grace asks herself the following: "How could I look into the mirror as a child? [...] How could I fall in love with myself, when the place behind the mirror (the place where he [Grace's father] lives now) was The Land Where Wig Is King?" (*The Wig*: 109-110). As Lacan has argued, the child has to go through the so-called mirror stage to take up the only subject-position available in the symbolic order. The mirror stage is a metaphor for the process in which the child, through the acquisition of language, learns to understand itself as an individual entity. For Lacan, this linguistic process can be compared to the first time a child looks in the mirror and sees itself as being different from the one who is holding it. Where, before the mirror stage, there is no question of differentiation because the child *is* the world, after the mirror stage the child understands itself to be *a part of* the world. Despite the subject's need to understand the self as a solid and coherent entity, Lacan already acknowledged that the wholeness we see in the mirror is an illusion. The only available subject is a split, and thus unstable, subject: to become a subject, we have to cut the self off from our maternal environment and thus give up something which had, up to then, been a part of it. As such, "[t]he mirror stage raises the awkward situation of needing to identify with an alien image (that is decidedly not oneself) in order to have a primordial notion of being an "I"" (McAfee 2004: 21-22). Since we can only make sense of the structure we are living in through a language which is by definition based on binary thinking, we cannot but think of the self as something solid and coherent.

The title of the novel already alludes to the prominent role Grace's father's wig has within the narrative. When Grace was younger, she used the presence of the wig and the silence with which it was treated in her environment to answer some very important questions in life: "For years my father's wig felt like an answer. I could say 'I am the way I am because my father wears a wig.' I could say 'I am in love with you because I have told you, and no-one else, about my father's shameful wig'" (*The Wig*: 26). During that specific period of time, Grace thus understood her father's wig as having a great influence on who she had become. She might no longer use the wig as an explanation of how she turned out to be, but her narrative makes it evident that the damage is already done. The presence of the wig, which Grace believes to be in control of the place behind the mirror, made it difficult for Grace to look at herself in the mirror when she was a child and thus prevented her from passing through the mirror stage and learning to see her self as whole. However, Grace does not blame the wig for this, or the man who owns the wig, but her mother.

Due to the presence of the angel Stephen in her house, Grace's body gradually begins to change. He, for example, takes away her cellulite and her pubic hair. When Grace attempts to blame him for the confusion she experiences due to this transformation, he tells her that "[t]here's no point in blaming me" (*The Wig*: 169). Stephen, being an angel, has no body and is thus mere spirit. Next to that, he has no relationality to the maternal: he has no navel (*The Wig*: 128). As such, Stephen is the perfect representation of the white western transcended male who is no longer hold back by his actual body or that which has been associated with the body: the feminine. Grace's immediate reaction to Stephen's statement is to blame her mother instead: "So I blame my mother. I blame her because that is what mothers are for. I blame her for the wig and for middle age, for the small corpses she hid behind the sofa and in the wardrobes. Which is to exaggerate, of course. Which is to exaggerate" (*The Wig*: 169). That Grace blames her mother for everything, will not come as a

surprise. In her research, Ettinger has identified “a *mother-monster readymade*” which is offered as an explanation when no “obvious trauma is found in the real life history” of the subject (Ettinger 2006c: 106; emphasis in original). As she explains, there are three recurring figurations of the mother: the “*originary not-enough mother*”, the “*abandoning mother*” and the “*devouring mother*” (*ibid.*; emphasis in original). It immediately becomes clear that the symbolic order does not leave room for a positive relationality to the maternal. On the contrary, the mother is positioned as the person par excellence to be blamed for the instability we experience due to the necessary split from her when we enter society: first, we have to cut her off in order to become a subject, and second, we cannot return to her once we realise how incomplete we are without her. Although it is her father's wig which has made it, according to Grace, impossible for her to (mis)recognise her self in the mirror and take part ‘normally’ in society, it is her mother who is blamed.

2.2.2 ‘Because I am the one who loved him most’

In *The Gathering*, Veronica's relationship with her mother is everything but unproblematic. Nevertheless, the latter, according to Veronica, has not been the largest influence on who she has become. Having been raised in a family of twelve – “the whole tedious litany of Midge, Bea, Ernest, Stevie, Ita, Mossie, Liam, Veronica, Kitty, Alice and the twins, Ivor and Jem” – it is her brother Liam with whom Veronica spend most of her childhood and adolescence (*Gathering*: 7). At least, that is what her narrative makes the reader believe: the larger part of the memories Veronica discusses involve Liam. Even when she is relating to the time in which both she, Liam, *and* their sister Kitty were living at their grandparents' home in Broadstone, one of Dublin's many districts, Veronica tends to focus on her and Liam first.

Sometimes, she cannot even remember whether Kitty was present or not and adds her to the narrative just in case she was:

we trooped in the door: me, who was supposed to be in charge, my brother, gangly and raw in his grey school jumper, and Kitty coming up behind. And now of course I must add Kitty in from the start, my little sister, trailing up the stairs behind us, because she *must have been there too*. (*Gathering*: 66; my emphasis)

In the seven pages that cover the event Veronica is describing here – their saying goodbye to their dead grandfather Charlie – the first reference to Kitty is made on the last page. Liam is thus, within the confines of the narrative, the one who plays the largest role in Veronica’s memory. In fact, the bond between them is so strong that Veronica, who is already in Brighton, England, to identify her dead brother’s body, visits the place where Liam drowned himself. Without making it explicit why, she takes the time to imagine how it would feel like, to enter the sea at night in the dark, to feel “the lapping around my waist of black salt water” (*Gathering*: 76). Here, she is imagining herself in Liam’s place, trying to dissolve the boundaries between her and Liam’s body, in an attempt to experience what Liam must have experienced himself when he took his own life.

During one of her attempts to remember what she thinks she saw happening to Liam – him being sexually abused by their grandparents’ landlord – Veronica is not actively trying to dissolve these boundaries, but utterly fails to make the distinction between her and Liam. The first time she describes this real or imagined event, she is the one witnessing what is happening to Liam: “What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door” (*Gathering*: 143). However, during a later attempt to narrate what might have happened, she suddenly sees herself in the position of the victim: “And on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand” (*Gathering*: 221). She has not trade places with Liam in

this memory, since the one who is watching her is not Liam but their grandmother Ada. Instead, Veronica is no longer able to tell the difference between her own body and Liam's, between what might have happened to hers, even though she is quite convinced it did not, and what might have happened to his (*Gathering*: 224).

Precisely because the relationship between Veronica and Liam was exceptionally close, it was anything but unproblematic. Although Veronica believes herself to be “the one who loved him most”, a thought the people in her direct environment seem to share, and “the one who has lost something that can not be replaced” while her mother, for instance, “has plenty more” left, she also contradicts these feelings (*Gathering*: 11; 23). After all, it is the lack of boundaries between her and Liam which make Veronica feel unstable and uncertain about who she is. Where Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, blamed her mother for this feeling, Veronica blames her brother. At the night of Liam's wake, Veronica is chiding her oldest daughter Rebecca for complaining about wanting to go home: “I didn't even like him,” she says, in a final, terrible whimper, and this makes me laugh so much she stops crying to look up at me. ‘Neither did I, sweetheart. Neither did I’” (*Gathering*: 2000). Before admitting this to her daughter, her sister Kitty had asked Veronica to stay with Liam's body, which Veronica refers to as “the corpse” (*Gathering*: 193). Veronica tells her she does not want to: “‘No,’ I tell her. She does not understand. The whole business is finished for me now, it is beyond finished. I just want to get the damn thing buried and out of the way” (*Gathering*: 193-194). On the one hand, Veronica thus claims to be the one who loved Liam the most, but on the other hand, she says she did not really like him. On the one hand, she believes she is the one who has lost something irreplaceable, but, at the same time, she is also desperate for his remains to be gone.

This contradiction seems to be running not only through Veronica's life but also through that of Liam's. In one of the chapters, Veronica recalls that they were constantly

leaving each other. After having discussed the time she walked out on him when she was staying at his place in London, she starts the following chapter by saying: “This was not the first time I left my brother, and it would not be the last. In his later, drinking years, I left him every time he arrived. But even before he hit the bottle, there were times when I just had to roll my eyes and walk away” (*Gathering*: 124). Trying to explain what was exactly wrong with Liam’s often socially inept behaviour, she remembers the time he took her home phone with him (*Gathering*: 126). According to her, one of the reasons he had to steal it was “because he sensed that he was going to disappear for a while, and he wanted to have something of mine with him, when it was time to leave. He wanted to keep the connection” (*ibid.*). A symbolic connection, since Liam knew that Irish phones did not work in England, and Veronica was not able to literally connect to him: “All I know is that when I rang for the next six months, no one picked up an Irish, British, or any other phone” (*ibid.*). Despite the continuing need to create a distance between each other, they also both felt the need to keep connected, albeit symbolically.

2.2.3 ‘She was small for a monster. She was not enough’

From the beginning of *What Are You Like?* onwards, it is made clear to the reader that something is wrong with the protagonist Maria, or that something should be wrong with her. At the end of the first chapter, Maria’s father Berts tells Evelyn, his second wife and step-mother to Maria, about the time when Maria was born:

It was then that Berts told her about his wife on the bed, the child filling her stomach and the tumour filling her brain. How they wheeled her down to the operating theatre, her pelvis surging and her face blank. How they took out the child and turned off the machines, and waited. (*What?:* 14)

After Berts has informed her about the death of his first wife, Evelyn asks herself the following questions: “What kind of child comes out of a dead woman? A child with no brain? A child with two heads? Or no child at all?” (*ibid*). Although Maria does not seem to have acted in a particularly strange way during her childhood, the implication that something will have to be wrong with her is already made early in her life. Not explicitly answering the abovementioned questions, Evelyn goes on to almost repeat the opening lines of the narrative: “She was small for a monster. *She was not enough*” (*What?: 15*; my emphasis)¹³. Making this statement after having asked herself what could become of a child who is born out of a dead mother, it becomes clear that Evelyn believes this specific experience to have rendered Maria incomplete. Evelyn's feeling that something is not quite right about Maria is thus linked to the absence of the latter's mother and the cold and technological way in which she was born.

It is not until near the end of the narrative that Evelyn finds out about the existence of Maria's twin-sister. It will thus come as no surprise that Evelyn has linked the lack she sensed in Maria to the absence of her biological mother. Although I am convinced that her mother's absence partly explains the continuing feeling of dislocation which haunts Maria throughout the narrative, a feeling which makes her unable to even begin to address the ontological question I have asked at the beginning of this thesis, it is the absence of her twin-sister which is ultimately offered as an explanation by the narrator. As Juliana de Nooy explains in “Reconfiguring the Gemini: Surviving Sameness in Twin Stories”, “twins threaten our notions of discrete bodies and indivisible individuals” and “disturb the opposition between same and different, between self and other” (de Nooy 2002: 76).

The picture Maria finds of Rose belongs to Anton, a boy she met “in a café, high up in Spanish Harlem” (*What?: 19*). She instantly falls in love with him and, meeting him again three days later in the same café, “realized that she would take him home” (*What?: 21*).

¹³ The narrative opens as following: “She was small for a monster, with the slightly hurt look that monsters have and babies share, the same need to understand” (*What?: 3*).

During the week he stays with her in her room, Maria, who is sure from the start that he would disappear from her life again, is overcome by the need to memorise him. After she has “searched every inch of him, trying to memorise the way the hair grew, the swirls and shifts, the pattern of the follicles”, she goes through the one bag he has with him (*What?:* 25). It is in this bag that she finds “a photograph of herself when she was twelve years old” (*ibid.*).

Except, it is not a photograph of herself, but a picture of Rose with two adults Maria does not recognise – Rose’s foster parents – and a boy she recognises to be Anton. The first time the narrator mentions Rose and tells the reader about her life in England and the time Anton spend with her family as a foster child when Rose was twelve, we learn that he was the boy with whom Rose had her first kiss (*What?:* 103). The boy Maria fell in love with when she was twenty years old is thus the same boy her unknown twin-sister had similar feelings for when she was twelve. That this is more than a mere coincidence is made clear through the large variety of locations in which Maria and Rose meet Anton. The kiss between Rose and Anton, who was born in former Czechoslovakia, happened in Leatherhead, Surrey, in England. Maria, who was born in Dublin, meets him in a random café in Spanish Harlem, New York. After Maria confronts Anton with the picture, he does not want to comment on it and explain who the girl in the picture is and what their relationship is or has been. He is, however, both the one who makes Maria consciously aware of a connection she, in retrospect, has always felt unconsciously and the one who, having met the two girls at two different times in two radical different places, underlines the strength of this relationality.

When Maria, who has lost all sense of self after having found the photograph of Rose, tries to commit suicide, the unconscious connection between Maria and Rose is stressed once again. On New Year’s evening, Rose is alone in her room listening to music, when the following happens:

At two in the morning, her eye was caught by a lampshade hanging over an archway in a flat across the road. For a second it looked like a body hanging there: the archway was as a dark coat, and the lampshade was the head, broken at the neck like a blossom on its stem. (*What?:* 154)

Although Rose realises after a split second that she is not watching a hanging human body, she does start to wonder about the woman who lives in the apartment opposite of hers, and what she would and could do if she were to witness the woman attempting suicide. Discussing different possibilities in her head, which all seem to be equally useless, Rose begins to panic, shouting: “NO!” (*What?:* 156). Immediately after Rose's exclamation, the narrator switches to Maria, who is in the middle of a suicide attempt: “The pills are in her hand. She could not wait for them. She held them in her fist to keep her wrist taut as she dug through the skin to something white that flooded with red” (*What?:* 157). Although it is not made explicit, the abrupt switches made by the narrator – which are not made elsewhere in the novel – create the idea that the two events are happening at the exact same time. When the narrator switches back to Rose, the latter is still caught in the moment. After she has calmed herself down, she looks outside of her window again, only to find the woman living opposite of her sitting in her rocking-chair, looking at Rose. Having just blamed herself about not having tried to get to know this woman or at least acknowledge her existence when they, for example, meet on the streets, Rose answers her look and “gives her a slight, tentative wave. ‘Hello’” (*What?:* 158). After Rose's utterance, the narrator again switches to Maria, who is still in the process of taking her own life. Leaning against a mirror, she, while “trying to open the bottle with her teeth”, suddenly “looks into *her own* eyes. ‘Hello.’” (*ibid.*; my emphasis). The moment Rose acknowledges the presence of the woman who lives opposite her – who has become a metaphor for Maria – by looking at her, Maria also recognises her self, or feels recognised, by looking at herself in the mirror.

Maria and Rose were thus, albeit unconsciously, already aware of the destabilising connection between them before they found out about each other's existence. After finding the picture of Rose, Maria recalls one of the moments in her childhood in which she was not sure about her self. After her First Holy Communion, Maria colours the black and white pictures of that day with crayons. Although she is the one in the pictures, she did not recognise the girl as herself: "This is the other girl" (*What?:* 35). She did not know what it meant at that specific time, but, in retrospect, she explains the feeling she had that day through her newly acquired knowledge. This is why, when Maria and Rose finally meet each other, it does not seem to come as a shock to either of the girls. On the contrary, despite Rose being unaware of Maria's existence up until that very moment, it only seems to confirm what she, somehow, has known all along: "*It was true*, [Rose] thought, she did not exist" (*What?:* 253; my emphasis).

2.3 The subjectivising moment in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering*

Since Maria is only occasionally given the focal point in *What Are You Like?*, and never the role of narrator, she does not herself explicitly discuss the origin of the destabilising connection she has with Rose. Nevertheless, the source of their connection could not be any clearer. The only thing which differentiates twins from other – 'regular' – siblings is that the former were in their mother's womb simultaneously. As such, the uncanny bond between Maria and Rose can be traced back to that specific place. Before they were separated from their mother and from each other (literally – through death, the cutting of the umbilical cord, and the adoption of Rose – and symbolically – through their entrance into the symbolic order), they were in their mother's womb together.

In *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace also traces the problematic relationship between her and her mother, whom she blames for her inability to fit into society, back to her experience of having been in the latter's womb (*The Wig*: 54). According to Grace, who was at the moment of her birth three weeks overdue, "[m]y mother held on to me like a pervert. I know because I was there" (*The Wig*: 170). Obviously, Grace was too young to consciously remember the event, but that fact does not keep her from arguing that, while she is herself accusing her mother of clinging on to her "like a pervert", her mother is holding Grace responsible for the development of toxemia:

And so I poisoned my mother, nearly killed my mother, who let me go, astonished, violated and clawing at the anaesthetist. I was shot out in a spasm of disbelief that any child could be so ungrateful. We had reached, you might say, a premature understanding. (*ibid.*)

Even though the relationship in *The Gathering* does not fit within the twin or the mother-daughter framework, Veronica also turns towards her mother's body to find an explanation for the strong connection between Liam and her. As Veronica points out, there were only eleven months between her and Liam's birth: "We came out of her on each other's tails; one after the other, as fast as a gang-bang, as fast as an infidelity. Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside" (*Gathering*: 11). Although they have not actually been in their mother's womb at the same time, Veronica does refer to this organ and the short period of time between the two of them in her attempt to explain their close but destabilising relationship.

2.4 The signifying womb

For Lacan, the symbolic phallus is the primary or transcendental signifier: to become a subject, one has to position the self vis-à-vis the phallus. Since women are misled into believing that they are the only ones not able to have access to this symbol, they are always already positioned in opposition to the norm. Precisely because the phallus is considered to be the transcendental signifier, and because the womb has not been allowed to be taken into account, Freudian psychoanalysis has been unable to adequately fit women into its theoretical framework. Whether the organ is considered to be anatomical or symbolic, the child's entry into the symbolic order is still looked at from the point of view of the universal male. As Grosz has rightly pointed out, "it makes no sense at all to claim, as Freud and Lacan do, that the girl too sees the whole world on a model derived from the boy's experience" (Grosz 1994: 58). If there are (at least) two anatomically different bodies available, then why would women take the male body as example, and not the female body?

Although both Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva did not understand the womb to have a subjectivising quality, the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore* and *The Gathering*, and the narrator of *What Are You Like?*, do turn to the maternal womb to explain the nature of the relationship to their mother, their brother, and their twin-sister, respectively. Lacan, however, has argued that whatever happens before the symbolic order, and thus before the child's acquisition of language, can never be recaptured. In her foreword to Ettinger's *Matrixial Borderspace*, Butler criticises this very stance:

What does one do with early childhood? Or rather, what does early childhood do with us? There are psychoanalysts who think they might tell us a story about how it goes, or that we might learn to tell the story about how it goes. And there are others, Lacan

most prominently, who tell us that this early time, if it is a time, is foreclosed, that whatever we will say about it will be belated, phantasmatic, untrue. (Butler 2006: vii)

Although Kristeva has already pushed the boundaries set by Freud and Lacan back by arguing that a child's subject-formation starts before the beginning of language-acquisition, Ettinger goes as far as to posit the womb as a potential signifier. Following Lacan's own strategy, she takes this womb to be symbolic: it is not "the organ but a complex apparatus" (Ettinger 2006a: 141). By taking the womb as signifier, Ettinger is not trying to replace the phallus. Instead, she argues that the phallus is not *the* signifier, but *a* signifier, and she understands the womb to be exactly the same.

In her understanding that the structure we are living in is a phallic one, and that it has not been able to accommodate and explain every human experience, Ettinger does not want to try to move beyond or completely away from it. However, by adding the womb as another signifier, she tries to address those questions Freudian psychoanalysis have not been able to answer. Through the articulation of the matrixial borderspace – *border* because happening at or beyond the boundaries of phallic thinking – she wants to provide us with a theory which will enable us to discuss those "elements of subjectivity that phallogentrism cannot articulate, fantasise or symbolise" (Pollock 2009b: 9). While she acknowledges the existence of the symbolic order, Ettinger argues that there is more to it than Lacan wanted to admit. For her, the matrixial borderspace is an integral part of it. It is thus not a question of *either* the symbolic order *or* the matrixial borderspace, but one of both. As Ettinger, who uses Freudian and Lacanian terminology interchangeably, explains, "[t]he matrix informs all three registers, the originary, the primary, and the secondary, participating in the Real, the Imaginary, and the *broader Symbolic*¹⁴" (Ettinger 2006a: 64; emphasis in original). The matrixial borderspace is thus a psychological stratum which exists both before, beside, and beyond the symbolic order.

¹⁴ Ettinger's use of the term 'broader' underlines the aim of her theory in which she does not attempt to overthrow the symbolic order, but wishes to add something to it.

Before, because the matrix is the structure in which we live prior to our entrance into the linguistic system. *Beside*, because we do not lose the matrixial sphere when entering the symbolic order, we merely lose the ability to articulate it through the limitations of language. *Beyond*, because the matrixial borderspace does not only affect the subject but also transcends and goes beyond it. As such, Ettinger stresses that, despite the predominant position of the symbolic order, this is not where it ends, and not where it begins.

To explain the subjectivising quality of the womb, Ettinger has turned to what she has called the “*late* intrauterine encounter” between becoming-mother and becoming-child, an event which, being pre-symbolic, takes place in the matrixial borderspace (Ettinger 2006a: 81; emphasis in original). According to her, it is in the third trimester¹⁵ of pregnancy – when the infant is still both physically and mentally connected to its mother – when the child’s subject-formation begins. Where Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva have argued that the subject can only become through a split or cut, Ettinger has a radically different understanding of subject-formation. In her theory, subjectivity is rearticulated as subjectivity-as-encounter. Instead of coming into the world through our separation from the maternal, Ettinger argues that the pre-natal child co-emerges with the mother, and that the latter, simultaneously, co-emerges with the former. Without the mother, the child will not be able to become, and, without the child, the mother will not be able to become. In other words, our subject-position is based on our *encounter* with the mother, and not on our *separation* from her. Since the formation of the subject is based on an encounter which happens when both the child and the mother are still part of each other, the subject can no longer be understood to be a whole and coherent individual. On the contrary, instead of maintaining the misrecognition, it is readily acknowledged in Ettinger’s theory of the matrix that the subject is always already partial.

¹⁵ Referring to the work of Donald Winnicott, Ettinger argues that, by the third trimester of pregnancy, we can “assume that its phantasy life has begun” (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1997: 635).

2.5 A reproductive encounter

Although the relationships between the female protagonists and the person who, according to themselves or the narrator, has the largest influence on how they experience their sense of self is explained in reference to their mother's womb, not every destabilising connection can be traced back as straightforwardly to that maternal space. Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, has, indeed, been in her mother's womb, and Maria and Rose, in *What Are You Like?*, have been in there together. In *The Gathering*, Veronica and Liam were not in their mother's womb at the same time, but they did emerge from the same womb. Veronica even describes the memory in which she is not able to tell the difference between herself and her brother – the one of the alleged abuse of Liam – as coming “from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from *the very beginning of things*” (*Gathering*: 221-222; my emphasis). She thus locates her inability to distinguish between herself and her brother in the place where, according to Ettinger, everything begins indeed: the maternal womb. The words and actions she tries to recall cannot be put together correctly because what has happened in her mother's womb cannot be put into language.

However, in both *The Wig My Father Wore* and *The Gathering*, there is also a destabilising relationship between the female protagonist and the man she is in love with. Near the end of *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace's relationship with the angel Stephen turns into a sexual one. During the act, Grace is literally lost for words: “The alphabet abandons me as his hand reaches the top of my legs, which quite simply separate as I change from I to Y, though upside down. The words garble in my head” (*The Wig*: 178). Although Lacan has argued that there is no experience before language – if we cannot find the words to describe something, it does not exist – Grace describes her being at a loss for words as following: “So although I had no words for how new it was, I saw it all *and remembered it all*” (*The Wig*:

178; my emphasis). Being parallel to Veronica's abovementioned description of the origin of her memory in *The Gathering*, Grace also refers to an experience which cannot be put into language, but can be remembered nevertheless. At the end of *The Gathering*, Veronica echoes her description of her memory of Liam in her discussion of her husband Tom. When Veronica looks back on the good times she has shared with the latter, she can "remember, some afternoon, when he sat at the end of the bed in the white curtains' light, and he looked like someone I knew *from the very beginning*, whenever the beginning might have been" (*Gathering*: 260; my emphasis). Since Grace and Veronica are not related to Stephen and Tom genealogically, they cannot have met each other through their mother's womb. If we want to explain the origin of these relationships, it is thus not enough to merely look at the matrixial encounter-event as intrauterine.

Although the matrixial encounter-event has its origin in the encounter between becoming-mother and becoming-child, it is not limited to the moment of pregnancy. For Ettinger, the child's encounter with the still unknown mother-to-be is merely the first time it experiences its subjectivity as depending on and co-emerging with an other it does not (yet) know. This is not a proposal of how we should be relating to one another: according to Ettinger, we are already aware of this ability. The original encounter-event might happen before the child's entrance into the symbolic order, but, as Ettinger has argued, the matrixial borderspace does not only exist before it, but also next to and beyond it. We have, however, not been able to lay our finger on *how* we feel and *what* we feel precisely in our relation to others because the language through which we make sense of the world forecloses such a partial understanding of our subjectivity. That, in *The Gathering*, Veronica's encounter with Tom, and, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace's encounter with Stephen, do not depend on an actual meeting inside the maternal womb or an emergence from the same womb, does not mean that these connections do not spring from that specific place. As Ettinger explains,

“[w]e all carry a unique set of matrixial traces” with us throughout our lives (Ettinger 2006a: 70). They might thus not literally know each other from the very beginning, but Veronica, Tom, Grace and Stephen have all gone through the matrixial-encounter event with their own mothers and, as such, share the same experience. Since the knowledge of the matrixial borderspace remains, albeit unconsciously, with the subject after its entrance into the symbolic order, these four protagonists and characters are also able to repeat this encounter with someone else.

2.6 A beyond-the-phallus feminine field

Despite the womb having been foreclosed by many, an analysis of how the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* experience their sense of self and how this can be explained, has led us to that exact place. In her theory of the matrix, Ettinger has taken the womb as the starting-point par excellence to re-articulate the western subject. Through her understanding of the womb as another signifier – one that does not replace the phallus, but exists before, beside and beyond it – she has created room to look at what the womb could mean for our understanding of the self. Arguing that the child's subject-formation does not start after it is born, but in the third trimester of pregnancy, Ettinger has moved away from the belief that the subject was whole before it entered the symbolic order. Where, from within the symbolic order, the subject is understood to become through separation of the mother and the other, Ettinger argues that the subject, who is always already partial, co-emerges into existence through matrixial encounter-events with them.

For Ettinger, the matrixial borderspace is a feminine space by definition. Throughout her work, she refers to this specific sphere as a “beyond-the-phallus-feminine field” (Ettinger 2006a: 64). In “Chapter III – The Present”, I will first take up the notion of the ‘feminine’

through an elaboration of the on-going sex-gender debate between Anglo-American and French feminist theorists. Through a comparative analysis of the female protagonists and the female and male characters of *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering*, I will then discuss Ettinger's attempt to move beyond this debate and challenge our current understanding of sexual difference.

Chapter III – The Present

3.1 A matrixial feminine sex-difference

In her claim that a discussion of the womb and its effect on subject-formation should be brought into academic thinking, Ettinger touches upon a contemporary debate in feminist theory. As Ettinger has explained, her theory of the matrix is meant to articulate a sexual difference which goes beyond the parameters of phallic thinking (Ettinger 2006a: 59). This is why, for her, the matrixial encounter-event – between becoming-mother and becoming-child and between other partial subjects – takes place in what she has called a “beyond-the-phallus *feminine* field” (Ettinger 2006a: 64; my emphasis). In her discussion of what Freud had to say about the womb complex – fantasies or anxieties related to the womb – Ettinger refers to the different paths girls and boys have to follow to enter the symbolic order: “boys move from Oedipus to castration, Freud says, while girls move from castration to Oedipus” (Ettinger 2006a: 48). Precisely because, in the symbolic order, it is inevitable that girls position themselves differently vis-à-vis the symbolic phallus than boys – by which a difference between the two sexes is maintained – Ettinger argues that “the inclusion or noninclusion of

the intrauterine complex within¹⁶ the castration complex should” also be treated as a matter of sexual differentiation (*ibid.*). However, the sexual difference she wishes to discuss is not the one we are all familiar with – the difference between women and men – but “an originary feminine sex-difference”, or “a sexual difference concerning both sexes” (*ibid.*).

During her interviews with Emmanuel Levinas in the early nineties, Ettinger urged him to discuss this particular topic with her. Levinas, however, advised her “to make only a few allusions to the subject of the difference of the feminine” (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 138). Ettinger disagreed. She told Levinas that “I believe that your philosophy will be more and more central for talking about difference and the alterity of the feminine, and that we have not yet really measured its potential in this matter” (*ibid.*). Again, Levinas warned her not to treat the topic of the feminine too lightly: “you will be attacked, they will say that you have said too much or not enough. It would be better for you not to become entirely involved, stay on the edge” (*ibid.*). The reason for Levinas’s reservations to discuss the feminine is the highly controversial nature of this term in feminist theory. Referring to his own work and his own attempt to articulate the feminine, he explains to Ettinger that “the feminists have often attacked me...” (*ibid.*). To understand not only why they would attack Levinas, but also why these feminists would want to attack those trying to discuss a feminine sex-difference, I will briefly discuss what I have called the sex-gender debate.

3.1.1 Sex and/or gender

In 1949, with the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir claimed that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 1997: 295). Throughout the book, she argues that the differences between women and men are far from being biologically

¹⁶ As I have already explained, Ettinger is not trying to do away with the symbolic order. On the contrary, she is trying to broaden it, so that it will be able to include those experiences which have been foreclosed.

determined. In fact, she argues that these differences are socially constructed and have nothing to do with the anatomy of our bodies. In 1968, two decades after the first publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, it was Robert J. Stoller who coined the term 'gender' (Stoller 1968). Through the use of this term, he was able to differentiate between biological *sex* – male and female – and the socio-cultural *gender* – masculinity and femininity. Feminist theorists took up this distinction to explain in a theoretically informed way what De Beauvoir had been arguing since 1949: being a woman [gender] has nothing to do with being born female [sex], but with the socially constructed roles [gender] that are laid out for those who are born female [sex]. The differentiation between sex and gender proved to be “essential to feminist scholarship” since it provided feminism with a political ground (Davis 1997: 8). If the differences between women and men are socially constructed instead of biologically determined, then these differences could be changed.

Despite having been essential to feminist theory, both the term gender and the division between sex and gender have been criticised by a number of feminist thinkers since the 1980s. Among the critiques were the observation that the sole focus on socially constructed differences “obscured the crucial point that ‘sex’ itself was a social construction and thus was a part of and not separate from ‘gender’” and that “changing social practices have led to changes in the body” (Nicholson 1998: 290-291). We do not, by nature, divide human beings along the lines of two mutually exclusive sexes, and, since bodies change over time, biological differences cannot be seen as entirely fixed. The critique on the sex-gender distinction led to a division between those feminists who are still in favour of a rigid separation between the two terms and those who argue against such a divide. The former – whom Braidotti has called the “American-based gender” theorists and whom have what Grosz has called an “inscriptive approach” – see the body as ascribed with socially constructed meanings (Braidotti 1998: 298; Grosz 1993: 196-197). In their work, the body is treated as a

blank slate which bears no inherent meaning. The latter – “French-oriented¹⁷ sexual difference theorists” who have a “lived body approach” – are more concerned with the lived reality of the body and do not believe in its neutrality (*ibid.*). On the contrary: these thinkers want to “explore, and at times celebrate, sexual differences and femininity” (McLaughlin 2003: 101).

While the term gender is still widely used and valued due to the dominant position of Anglo-American feminist theory throughout the world, I have always been fascinated by those matters discussed within continental or French philosophy, such as the constituting function of language and its effect on the subject. From the moment continental and/or French feminist theorists started to criticise Freudian psychoanalysis for its inability to adequately theorise about women in the seventies to their contemporary critique on the post-structuralist and postmodern devaluation and deconstruction of the subject, they have been trying to rearticulate the feminine. Precisely because women have not yet been able to formulate a subject-position of their own, French feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Braidotti have “reject[ed] other feminist endeavours to develop a gender-free position” (McLaughlin 2003: 104). Although the ultimate goal for feminist theorists might be to achieve a world in which gender or sex no longer matter, French feminist theorists argue that we first need to explore “the forms of subjectivity that could be open to women amidst the deconstruction of Woman” (*ibid.*). Instead of doing away with the subject altogether, they have argued that it is time to consider what the subject can be, and, more importantly, what it can be for women.

¹⁷ As is often the case, this division is not as clear-cut as it is being represented here. As Janice McLaughlin, who herself also differentiates between Anglo-American and French feminism, explains “this distinction has become less sustainable due to internal divisions and the emergence of important writers from Australia, The Netherlands and outside of the West” (McLaughlin 2003: 101). However, I will for the sake of clarity distinguish between Anglo-American and French feminism only in my discussion of this specific debate.

3.1.2 A different difference: feminine P vs. Feminine m

Ettinger's turn to the maternal body and her wish to articulate a feminine sex-difference places her within the tradition of French feminist theory. Anglo-American feminist theorists, who are afraid that a discussion of the anatomical differences between women and men will undo everything they have achieved so far in the area of women's rights, are not only suspicious but can be outright hostile to this latter philosophical field. In her critique on those feminists who instantly denounce attempts to discuss the feminine, Pollock asks whether we should not

give ourselves some space to think, to take wrong turns, to revise and explore if there is any thing to be said about the feminine *qua* feminine? Might we not allow ourselves to take the risk and find out if it has any specificity or contribution to human subjectivity, rather than policing any exploration before it has even begun [...]?

(Pollock 2009b: 10-11; emphasis in original)

Although Ettinger does articulate a specific feminine dimension in her theory, Pollock explains that “[t]he Matrix is not about biological determinism, anatomical essentialism or any of the other bogeys that feminism fears” (Pollock 2009b: 5). It is not about the ‘feminine’ in opposition to the ‘masculine’, but about “a *different* difference between the sexes” – a ‘feminine’ which already exists prior to the phallic structures of the symbolic order (Ettinger 2006a: 105; emphasis in original). Although Ettinger herself does not explicitly differentiate between these two different readings of the feminine in her work, Pollock does. In her introduction to Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace*, she distinguishes between ‘feminine P’ – the feminine as seen through the phallic model – , and ‘Feminine m’ – the feminine as seen through the matrixial model, and thus as already existing before one's entrance into the symbolic order (Pollock 2006: 25-28). Where feminine P only comes into being after the

acquisition of language and the binary thinking which corresponds to it, and can as such only exist in opposition to the masculine, the latter already exists before we can speak. As such, “the matrixial-feminine difference emerges neither as ‘essential’ or biological nor as a social construct or gender” since it “evades the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity” (Ettinger 2006b: 219). It cannot be thought of in opposition or relation to man, since it springs from a time before we begin to understand the world through excluding and hierarchical binaries.

Where the phallus signifies the male-female and the masculine-feminine distinction, the womb signifies the Feminine m, or the matrixial feminine. By taking the womb as signifier, Ettinger is not, as did Freud and Lacan in the case of the penis/phallus, differentiating between those who can have it and those who cannot have it. As such, she does not posit the womb as that to which we mirror our selves in either a positive way – I possess this – or a negative one – I lack this. Instead, she looks at the womb as the one place we all have encountered, regardless of whether we are ourselves in possession of it. This is not to say that we do not all encounter the phallus as well when we enter the symbolic order. Whether we like it or not, we do have to enter the latter, and in order to do so, we have to position our selves vis-à-vis this signifier. However, by taking the womb as *another* signifier, Ettinger takes into account an encounter which, first of all, everybody has experienced. Secondly, since it originates in a pre-symbolic moment, it is an encounter which everyone experiences before being confronted with the phallus and thus before we understand our selves along sexual or gender lines. As such, the Feminine m, “is not just about women or for women, but for all of us, for we are all born of woman. Boys and girls, men and women, straight and gay/lesbian, frigid, celibate, childfree, or child-bearing” (Pollock 2006: 29). The matrixial feminine borderspace is thus not foreclosed to either women or men (or those not fitting this binary), but includes every single one of us.

3.2 Sexual difference in *The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?, and The Gathering*

For Ettinger, the matrixial feminine is open to every human being, whether male or female. However, in *The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?, and The Gathering*, there does seem to be a difference between how the male characters and the female protagonists and characters respond to events in which their relationality to an other undermines their sense of self. Although there are innumerable events which can have a destabilising effect on the self, I will focus specifically on what can be understood as matrixial encounter-events between self and other. One of the experiences in which the presence of an other causes instability is being pregnant and being a mother. Kristeva, who only takes into account the experience of the mother and not that of the child, argues that, during pregnancy, there is no clear distinction between the woman who is pregnant and the child she is pregnant with. This inability to properly differentiate between one's self and one's child remains even after having giving birth: "[a] mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh" (Kristeva 1986: 178). As such, Kristeva argues that, during and after childbirth, the self will no longer be able to create the illusion of being whole again. Another event in which one's identity is severely threatened by the presence of an other, is sexual behaviour. In Freudian psychoanalysis, sexuality is understood to be "intolerable to the structured self" (Bersani 1986: 38). To engage in sexual behaviour is thus equated with the shattering – the destruction – of the subject.

3.2.1 'There is nothing like taking the clothes off a restrained man'

A recurring topic in *The Wig My Father Wore* is Grace's sexual attraction to the angel Stephen, which she herself finds "quite disturbing" (*The Wig*: 4). For the larger part of the

narrative, the attraction does not seem to be mutual. The first time she mentions her sexual feelings and tries to seduce Stephen, he reacts by saying that “he thought that nymphomania was out of fashion now” (*The Wig*: 4-5). After one of their nightly conversations, in which Grace “told him about one man or another”, she again tries to persuade him to sleep with her: “I told him that I was in love with him and that having sex was the only way to get rid of it” (*The Wig*: 40-41). Later in the narrative, after Grace has made another “pass at Stephen, just for the sadness of it”, he does not explicitly turn her down but he tells her about a time before he took his own life: the time he found out that his wife was pregnant (*The Wig*: 114). When Grace wonders aloud whether they would be able to have a child – him “being sort of conceptual” – Stephen tells her the story of “the Angel Amezyarak who, with two hundred followers, copulated with the daughters of men. Children were conceived” (*The Wig*: 116-117). As he explains to Grace, these angels are “flogged every day in the third circle of Paradise” (*ibid.*).

Although this would make an excellent reason for Stephen not to sleep with Grace, there seems to be another reason. As Bersani has explained, sexual behaviour is understood to destroy one’s sense of self. According to him, Freud could not grasp why people would want to engage in behaviour that, despite it giving them pleasure, made them feel shattered: “[t]he *mystery* of sexuality is that we seek not only to get rid of this shattering tension but also to repeat it, even to increase it” (Bersani 1986: 38; emphasis in original). When Grace and Stephen, on the latter’s initiative, do sleep together, Grace needs to comfort him throughout:

He cried. So I made love to him carefully; using my hands carefully to remind him where his body was and where it stopped, to remind him where it stopped and where it turned into something else. Because he was so substantial outside of me but inside there was no end to him. (*The Wig*: 180)

Although Stephen, according to Grace, “seem[ed] solid enough” the next morning, during their sexual encounter he was no longer sure of his own boundaries and he needed Grace to point out the difference between her and him.

Earlier in her narrative, Grace tells the reader about the Englishman who was her first love. According to Grace, “[h]e was restrained” in his sexual behaviour: “There is nothing like taking the clothes off a restrained man” (*The Wig*: 56). Although they, despite his apparent reluctance, did sleep together, “[h]e used to run a bath after we had made love” (*The Wig*: 57). According to Grace, it was his attempt to “wash my smell away” (*ibid.*). Having just experienced the shattering tension that is an integral part of sexual behaviour, he seems eager to get Grace out of his system and to regain his sense of self immediately after the act.

When Grace realises that Stephen is trying to seduce her, she describes her body as being “still all in bits, and all different ages” (*The Wig*: 178). Although she is herself no longer sure about her body, about what it can, and where it came from, she is the one comforting Stephen during their sexual encounter and not the other way around. In her relationship with the Englishman, Grace is also the one less affected by the shattering of her sense of self. She does admit that being in love with the Englishman could be difficult: “It wasn't easy, this difference between one and two” (*The Wig*: 56). The inability to properly articulate the difference between herself and the Englishman even made her think “about death all the time because it was simpler, his death, my death, his funeral, my funeral” (*The Wig*: 57). Despite Grace experiencing her self as instable when she sleeps with both Stephen and the Englishman, she is, in contrast to the two men, nevertheless anything but restrained when it comes to sexual behaviour. She also does not need to make herself aware of the boundaries of her own body during or immediately after the experience, something both Stephen and the Englishman are in need of.

3.2.2 'And he thought again how strange women are'

In *What Are You Like?*, there is also a brief reference to the unsettling effect of sexual behaviour. Here, too, the experience seems to be more troublesome for the male character than for the female protagonist. Halfway through the novel, the narrator returns to the moment in which Maria falls in love with Anton. Working through the childhood memories Anton has shared with Maria, the narrator arrives at the following moment: "One night he started to cry. They were having sex enough *to make you mad*. He was coming softer and softer, until she thought her heart would break" (*What?:* 132; my emphasis). Although they both have been engaging in an amount of sexual behaviour which cannot but have a serious effect on one's sense of self, Anton is the only one who, in the end, has to cry. Maria did feel as if her heart might break, but it is made explicit that the reason for it to break would be Anton's gradual breaking down and not the amount of sexual behaviour they were having.

The supposed difference between women and men in *What Are You Like?* also becomes evident when we compare how Berts and Evelyn experience their relationality to Maria. The first event narrated in the novel is the visit of unspecified people – most probably Berts' relatives and/or acquaintances – to the newborn Maria. During this event, the narrator underlines the distance between Berts and his daughter. It is immediately stressed that *his* mind – in contrast to the minds of women, who are supposed to, once they have given birth to a child, think of this child 24/7 – is not that occupied with his newborn daughter: "In fact her father was thinking of the ceiling, when he leaned his head back, and of the wallpaper, when he faced the wall. When he looked at the baby, he thought of the baby; and when he looked at the fireplace, he thought about coal" (*What?:* 3-4). While looking at Maria, Berts "thought, once, about how he had made her – the map on the sheet when he was done" (*What?:* 4). While understanding that he was involved in the process of making her, he does not refer to

her as his own flesh and blood, as being part of him: “She was another country, that was all. She was something else again” (*ibid.*). For Berts, it thus seems necessary to underline that he and Maria are two different human beings. He even stresses that “[h]e loved her by choice. He made the choice to love her. That was important” (*ibid.*). By making Maria into an other – an other he can choose to love – he is able to assure himself that he is in control over what he is feeling towards her.

For Berts, it is clear that women do not have the same amount of control over how they feel and relate towards an other. When Maria is discharged from the psychiatric hospital or ward she had been admitted to after her failed suicide attempt, she does not return home to her family. She also does not go back to college to finish her engineering degree. Instead, she rents a flat and gets a job as a shop assistant. When Evelyn informs Berts about Maria's new job, he reacts as if she should not have bothered him with the news: “‘So what do you want me to do about it?’ he said, and his silence spread and became unpleasant” (*What?:* 66). Although this does not mean that Berts is not affected by the situation, he is not actively trying to improve the situation. Evelyn, on the other hand, visits Maria at the shop “[e]very couple of weeks” (*What?:* 63). Since “Maria spent her day handing out plastic numbers to women who came through the curtain”, the only way Evelyn could talk to Maria was by pretending to be trying on new clothes (*ibid.*). However, every time Evelyn pays her a visit, Maria is trying to provoke her:

‘How are you?’ she said in a skirt with her top off, in a blouse with her legs on display.

While Maria stood there, in a plain white shirt and black skirt – the only one who never had to change.

‘Suits you,’ she would say. ‘No, really.’ The little bitch. She wouldn’t get rid of her that easy. (*What?:* 64)

Despite Maria's attitude, Evelyn, who continues throughout the narration of her visits to stress that Maria "was not even her daughter" and even recalls that Maria tried to strangle her with her necklace when they first met, keeps returning to the shop (*ibid.*). Contrary to Berts, who describes his own daughter as being radically different from him, Evelyn is searching for similarities – however minor or seemingly insignificant – between her and Maria to explain why she feels the need to go down to the shop and check up on a woman who is, firstly, not even related to her and, secondly, treating her without the least sign of respect:

And Evelyn would change back into her own clothes with a grim smile. Because *this is what they shared* – they owed nothing to anybody, not even to each other. And this is what brought Evelyn back through the streets [...] to see a woman who wasn't even her daughter, but *who had the same embarrassing laugh*. (*What?: 65*; my emphasis)

Evelyn's search for similarities indicates that she is not consciously aware of why she continues to care about Maria. When Maria returned to Dublin, "she was glad to have her back in the country" (*What?: 63*). She did not know why – "God knows why. Just in case there was a funeral to attend. It would save the cost of a flight" – but she felt relieved nevertheless (*ibid.*).

Although Evelyn herself is not aware of why she feels the way she does, Berts seems to do. When Evelyn is introduced into the narrative in the first chapter, the following is said about her: "Evelyn was a nice girl. Berts knew she would grow to hate him and he welcomed it as his due, but she surprised him with love and he thought again how strange women are" (*What?: 12*). Although the narrator does not immediately explain what the remark entails, a similar statement is made in the final chapter. When Maria brings Rose back 'home' – which is also the first time Maria herself visits her parental home since her return to Dublin – Berts is surprised by Evelyn's reaction:

Evelyn tried to make tea, but kept forgetting when the kettle was boiled. She could not stop looking. She could not even hear what they were saying. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and Berts was astonished, again, by women. *How they have no choice.* (*What?': 254; my emphasis*)

Where Evelyn reacts emotionally, Berts retains his distanced posture. According to him, it is the most logical and rational way to behave: "He did not know this person. He might know her, but he did not know the person she was" (*ibid.*). Berts is not unaffected by the event – he cries in bed the night Evelyn found out that Maria has a twin-sister – but he is, in general, more in control over his emotions than Evelyn is. That the latter, who is not even the biological mother of Maria and Rose, is clearly affected by what has happened and what is happening seems to underline the statement Berts makes at the beginning and the end of the narrative: women are much more affected by their relationality to an other than men are.

3.2.3 'And your father took one look at you and ran out the door'

In *The Gathering*, Veronica also explicitly differentiates between how women and men experience their relationality to an other which undermines their sense of self. In one of her discussions of her husband Tom, Veronica refers to the last time they went on holiday. In this particular memory, Rebecca and Emily are asking questions about the development of their relationship from the backseat of the car. The question and answer session between Veronica and the girls ends as following: 'And what happened then?' 'Then we got married.' 'And then what happened?' 'Then we had you!' 'Yes!!!' (*Gathering: 70-71*). In her head, Veronica continues the conversation: "And your father took one look at you and ran out the door" (*Gathering: 71*). Instantly being aware of the dreadful nature of her claim, she immediately adds in brackets "(And that is certainly not true. Look! he is still here)" (*ibid.*). Although

Veronica holds the belief that he would have rather run away from his family, Tom never did such a thing. However, that he did not literally fled the scene when his daughters were born does not mean that he is not troubled by the experience. Referring back to the time when Rebecca, the eldest, was still a baby and they were taking turns in working on their careers and minding her, Veronica says:

I know how unhappy he is. There is no doubt that my husband is unhappy, but also excited with his new business, and surely the mess can not last. Other people have children. Other fathers do not feel, as he does, *unmanned* by it – by the lack of money and the mayhem. (*Gathering: 72*; emphasis in original)

Because Tom was not able to handle the new situation as well as she did, Veronica “gave up work so that we would not be so much *in his way*” the moment Tom’s new business started to make enough money to pay the bills (*Gathering: 71.*; emphasis in original). Despite her efforts to make his life easier by taking over the care of their daughter – and, later, daughters – Tom, despite the love he feels for them, nevertheless feels burdened by their and Veronica’s presence: “And when he looks at his children, I do not know what he sees. He loves them, but they are *in his way*. And, whether he loves me or not, I too am *in his way*” (*ibid.*; emphasis in original).

In contrast to Tom, Veronica does not seem to be negatively affected by the sacrifices she has had to make when their children were born. In fact, Veronica’s discussion of Tom’s unhappiness follows from her narration of the moment in which she realised that *she* was happy with their situation:

I was opening the car door for the girls one day before Liam died and, as it swung past, I saw my reflection in the window. It disappeared [...]. Then the reflection swung back again, swiftly, as I shut the door. The sun was breaking through high-contrast clouds, the sky in the window pane was a wonderful, thick blue, and in my dark face

moving past was the streak of a smile. And I remember thinking, 'So, I am happy.

That's nice to know.' (Gathering: 68)

Veronica might not have been consciously aware of her own happiness until she witnessed her reflection in the window of her car – she is, after all, single-handedly keeping their family going – but the fact that she is shows that the presence of her two daughters has a radically different effect on her than it has on Tom.

3.3 Not less equal, but not the same

Although Ettinger has argued that the matrixial feminine is open to both women and men, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* there is a difference between how women and men experience their relationality to an other which undermines their own sense of self. In many discussions of the feminine, and especially of the maternal, there is an exclusive focus on women. Baraitser, for example, makes it explicit in her work that she only focuses on women in her attempt to articulate a maternal subjectivity: "I use the maternal to signify any relation of obligation between an adult who identifies as female, and another person whom that adult elects as their 'child'" (Baraitser 2009: 22). She is not exclusively focussing on women who have given birth – she takes into account every woman who has some sort of responsibility towards another human being – but she is leaving men out of the equation. If the matrixial encounter-event is indeed experienced by and open to every single human being, then why is there a particular focus on women? Are we still assuming, despite our attempts to not be as exclusive as our white male predecessors have been, that the feminine, and what we associate with the feminine, can only concern women?

Whether it is actually experienced by men as such, there is a widespread assumption that they do not quite understand what a woman goes through when she is pregnant and when

she has become a mother. On the blurb of Enright's *Making Babies: Stumbling Into Motherhood*, Tóibín underlines this assumption by stating the following: "I have always wanted to know what it's like to have a baby, but have been afraid to ask. Now, courtesy of Anne Enright, we have the true facts in all their gore and glory" (Enright 2005). Obviously, men will be unable to experience the physicality of having a baby, but Enright's account is not limited to descriptions of what pregnancy and childbirth do to one's body. It also discusses what happens on the level of the mind; what the presence of someone who is dependent on you 24/7 does to your sense of self. If the matrixial encounter-event, as Ettinger has argued, is shared by everyone, why do both women *and* men still believe that men are less open, or not open at all, to this experience?

Since all women and men have had the same encounter with their mother-to-be, "men and women are *not less* equal in the symbolic Matrix" (Ettinger 2006a: 70; emphasis in original). They are, according to Ettinger, however "not the *same*" (*ibid.*; emphasis in original). Women, like their own mothers before them, have the ability to become the original source for the matrixial encounter-event between mother-to-be and child-to-be. Both women and men come into being through their mothers' wombs, but those who have a female body are the only ones who are able to repeat this pre-maternal/prenatal event. Pregnant women re-experience their subjectivity-as-encounter without having to open their selves up to it. In the process of becoming-mother, they will always experience that specific relation with and connection to the partial-subject which is not entirely other, but also not the same. However, Ettinger is "in no way implying that women must be mothers" (Ettinger 2006a: 180). Whether they have or do not have children, and whether they can or cannot have them, "[f]emale subjects have double access to the matrixial sphere" (Ettinger 2006a: 143). As Ettinger explains, both women and men "experience the womb [...] as an archaic out-site and past-side" – outside of and before the symbolic order – but the former also experience it "as an in-

side and future-side—as an actual, future, and ‘posterior’ time” (*ibid.*). In other words, women have a privileged access to the matrixial borderspace. Whether they actually repeat the original encounter-event, or whether they are able to repeat it, women will nevertheless be aware of the supposed capacity of their female bodies.

Since girls are not supposed to take the same path as boys, the Freudian psychoanalytic explanation of a girl's entrance into the symbolic order is not as complete and logical as the boy's. Although this is one of the reasons why Freudian psychoanalysis suffers critique from within the field of feminist theory, it might not only show that Freudian psychoanalysts have been unable to account for the persistent white heterosexual male perspective in their work, but also that the oedipalisation – which includes a rejection of the maternal – of boys is indeed more severe than that of women. As Ettinger argues, “male subjects are more radically split from this archaic space and time of potentiality” (*ibid.*). Where, for women the experience of the womb lies both in the past, the present, and in the future, the only link men have to the matrixial borderspace lies in the pre-symbolic past. Not only because the latter have a different physicality – they cannot be the source for the original matrixial encounter – but also because men have always been believed to be better at transcending their bodies and repressing those aspects of life which do not fit within the patriarchal symbolic order:

For men, the maternal prenatal Thing can go through an originary repression and remain an absolute absence, inasmuch as it remains the forever before and outside. For women, inasmuch as their own bodily specificity vibrates and echoes the prenatal Thing as a potential present or future as well, and as both archaic outside and invisible inside, the archaic-m/Other-to-be as a partial-subject is never severed, like a total absence or like a radical Other. (Ettinger 2006a: 194)

Women were never asked to participate in what is still a man's world – they had to put up a fight in order to be included – but men's ability to function according to the rules of the symbolic have always been taken for granted, whether men have actually been able to do so or not.

Although women are indeed more vulnerable to the matrix, it is thus open to men as well. Women might be in the position to repeat the original encounter-event, but that does not mean that men cannot relate to others in the exact same way: just as we are all part of the same phallic structure, we also all have had the same matrixial encounter. For men, the original experience may forever be in the past, but they, “like women, are in contact with this time and space” (Ettinger 2006a: 143). They might be more stuck in the symbolic order than women are, but that does not mean that they are not able to experience their subjectivity as partial. On the contrary, “the matrixial apparatus serves both males and females who can yield to and tolerate this fragile positioning vis-à-vis their I, the Other, and the world” (*ibid.*).

3.4 When a man meets the matrix

The comparison between how the female protagonist and the female and male characters experience their relationality to an other makes it clear that men handle this matrixial encounter-event differently than women. For Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, it is much more easy to engage in sexual behaviour than the Englishman and the angel Stephen. This is also true for Maria and Anton in *What Are You Like?*, in which the latter breaks down due to the amount of sexual intercourse they have together. Evelyn, in the same novel, seems to be more heavily affected by her relationality to an other than Berts is. Veronica, in *The Gathering*, does not experience the arrival of their two daughters in a negative way, but it has caused Tom to be unhappy. As such, the comparison shows that these men are indeed not

(yet) able to “yield to and tolerate this fragile positioning” Ettinger has called subjectivity-as-encounter (*ibid.*). Before I will elaborate on how the female protagonists respond to an encounter with the matrixial borderspace in the next chapter, I will analyse how the male characters react when they are confronted with the matrix. Not only to show that men are indeed open to the experience, but also that the subject-position they have to take up when entering the symbolic order forecloses their inability to embrace this feminine sphere.

3.4.1 ‘It is a difficult thing for a man to understand’

During Stephen's sexual encounter with Grace, his confrontation with the matrix, which frightened him, was unavoidable. Another moment in which Stephen is confronted with the matrixial borderspace is during his wife's pregnancy. When he shares this story with Grace, he tells her that “when he came home one day there were some playing cards in the snow of the yard and the britches frozen so hard on the line, they near snapped his hand” (*The Wig*: 115). At that moment, he was not quite sure yet what it meant, but he did know that something was going on: “He expected her to be gone, but she was there when he walked in through the door. He expected her to be gone and when he found her sitting there he knew that she was pregnant instead” (*ibid.*). Although, in retrospect, Stephen believed the playing cards and the frozen britches to be signs, they are, in relation to pregnancy, not very significant. In other words, he already understood the situation before his wife told him the news. Despite having figured the situation out on his own, which underlines his ability to understand it, Stephen nevertheless argues that “[i]t's a difficult thing for a man to understand” (*ibid.*).

While telling the story, he tries to explain to Grace what he experienced when he looked at his wife's pregnant body: “He saw his own face in the whiteness of her belly [...].

He saw things lost, he saw things strewn in the ditches, he saw new grass and things that would rot in the rain” (*The Wig*: 116). Although he acknowledges the recognition of his own face, Stephen finds it difficult to hold on to that reading:

for a moment he saw his own face there, or *some face*. He thought that if he could paint he would paint on her belly, stroke by stroke and colour by colour, *that face*. He would paint a picture of what was inside, a rope in a ditch. He would paint a picture of his own face which was, just then, *the face of an angel*. (*ibid.*; my emphasis)

Every time he returns to the recognition of his own face, Stephen immediately moves away from that particular reading, questioning whether it actually was his own face he saw. He is thus able to recognise his self or something of himself in his wife’s pregnancy, but this recognition does not last long: it is immediately made undone. Unable to explain what he saw exactly, Stephen again argues that “[i]t is a difficult thing for a man to understand” (*The Wig*: 116). Since Stephen is of the male sex, his split from his mother is understood to be more severe than that of women, and, as a corollary, his entrance into the symbolic order is believed to be more complete. Throughout the novel, the rope is a metaphor for the umbilical cord and thus the relationship between mother and child. That the ‘rope in a ditch’ is amongst the *lost* things he saw in his wife’s pregnant belly makes it clear that, for Stephen, this relationality entirely belongs to a past he has very little access to. He immediately realises when his wife is pregnant, and he also, to a certain extent, recognises something of himself in her pregnancy, but he is simultaneously unable to acknowledge the connection he evidently still has to the matrix.

3.4.2 'She would leave him alone'

In the early stages of the narrative, it is made clear that Berts feels the need to understand his daughter Maria as a radical other. Although this underlines his wish not to open his self up to a matrixial relationality, in which the other is understood as part of the subject, this has not always been the case for him. In the seventh chapter of *What Are You Like?*, which is the chapter narrated and focalised by Berts' first wife Anna, she provides the reader with a description of Berts' ability to open his self up and connect to an other:

After we made love, I would turn on the lamp to go to the bathroom and Berts would lift his head, still asleep, his eyes pure green and the pupils like pins. 'It's you all right,' he'd say, like he was dreaming of me. Another man might be startled and try to flush me out, but I knew by that blind green that I was in the very centre of Berts.

(*What?:* 241)

Describing what Grace's Englishman used to do in *The Wig My Father Wore* – taking a bath immediately after the sexual act – Anna argues that Berts was not that kind of man. During their matrixial encounter-event, she was not only in his very centre, but he was also not frightened by that destabilising experience. Unlike the Englishman Grace was in love with, Berts let Anna remain inside of him.

After Anna's death, Berts did become the kind of man that would want to flush the other out. In his attempt to make sense of his own self with Anna, who was a part of him, gone, Berts tried to figure out how he could reclaim his own subjectivity: "I need to go away, he thought, imagining a journey where he travelled the coast all the way round and back to the house again" (*What?:* 10). He convinced himself that the "house would be the same when he got back, but it would be better the second time around, or at least different. His wife would be dead, but he would be alive, with a circle inscribed around that life. She would leave him

alone” (*ibid.*). Since Anna was in the very centre of Berts when she was still alive, he is now desperately trying to separate his self from hers. The desire to succeed with his plan is so strong that, after two pages of agitated wondering which route to take and how, he eventually panics and breaks down:

Out in the streets, he clung to one side of the road and it led him, around corners and up alleys, all the way to Phibsboro. He took his courage and crossed at the traffic lights. Then he stood on the far side of the road turning this way and that, sick and dizzy, until, back in his bed, he started to cry. (*What?!*: 11-12)

Although we never find out whether Berts has been able to do so – he meets Evelyn and nothing more is said about his obsessive attempt to ban Anna from his life – his wish to do so sheds another light on Berts’ view on the difference between women and men. At the beginning and the end of the narrative, he argues that women have no choice but to be affected by the presence of another, which he deems a strange quality (*What?!*: 12; 254). Understanding the process Berts went through after the death of his wife, the difference between how he and Evelyn respond to Maria and Rose does not simply underline that, indeed, women have less control over these relationships than men. On the contrary, Evelyn does not seem to be afraid of such a relationality. Therefore, she also does not feel the need to guard the imagined boundaries of her self. Before Anna died, Berts also did not seem to be afraid of the vulnerability of these boundaries. However, with her death, this vulnerability became evident to such an extent that Berts became afraid to lose his sense of self any further. Having experienced the loss of an other who has been a part of him, he now tries to protect his self through a repression of other matrixial encounter-events and deems it strange when somebody does not do to the same.

3.4.3 'I wonder, briefly, if Liam would still be alive if he had been born a woman'

In the discussion of her husband's misery, Veronica refers to his very own explanation of why he became the person he is: "Tom was taught by the Jesuits – which explains it all, he says" (*Gathering*: 71). Due to this patriarchal Christian upbringing, "[h]e is very clear-sighted about the world" (*ibid.*). Although being clear-sighted might be understood to be a very positive trait within the symbolic order, it does not help one's understanding of the destabilising effect of the matrixial encounter-event. This explains why Tom does not seem to be able to handle the presence of his wife and daughters. Instead of questioning his phallic worldview, "he questions himself, constantly" (*ibid.*). Precisely because Tom's upbringing has caused him to be extremely stuck in the symbolic order, he is not able to embrace an alternative understanding of the subject. On the contrary, when Veronica looks at her husband, she sees "him, a big, sexy streak of misery, with his face stuck in a glass of obscure Scotch, as he traces the watermark of failure that runs through his life, that is there on every page" (*ibid.*).

Where Tom has become too stuck in the symbolic order to open his self up to the matrixial borderspace, it is made clear throughout the narrative that Liam never fitted or wanted to fit into the system. He was not only an alcoholic, but he was also unmarried and he had the tendency to discuss topics he should have left alone in particular circumstances: "After Tom's father died he did nothing but talk about rot" (*Gathering*: 125). At the end of one summer holiday, their grandmother Ada sent Veronica and Liam to a school in Broadstone. It is here that they first realise that there is a difference between them: "He went in one doorway, and I went in another, and though we were still sleeping in the same bed during night, during the day he was a boy and I was a girl" (*Gathering*: 126). Although it is necessary for both women and men to understand which of the two assigned roles they have

to take up in the symbolic order, it is made clear that this differentiation is more important for Liam than for Veronica: “and he could not be seen to talk to me in the school yard” (*ibid.*). A few chapters later, Veronica tells about the time Liam was arrested by the Gardai – the Irish police. Because he never told anyone in their family what happened, Veronica “wondered, for a long time, what the cops had lifted him for. I thought about it a lot” (*Gathering*: 169). In the end, she even starts to wonder whether it had to do with a girl named Natalie, “who was weepy and shouting at the corner of the road”: “What if he had raped her? Isn’t that one of the things that men do?” (*Gathering*: 170). When Veronica finally asks Liam whether his arrest had something to do with that particular girl, the already growing distance between them becomes even more evident:

Liam looked at me. And the gap that opened up between us was the gap that exists between a woman and a man – or so I thought, at sixteen – the difference between what a man might do, or want to do, sexually, what a woman might only guess at (*ibid.*).

Although Veronica, being sixteen years old at the time, thought that this is what caused the gap between her and Liam, it actually seems to be created by Liam’s realisation that not only the world, but also the person he feels most closely connected to, could think such a thing of him, simply because he is a man.

Despite this last event being part of what Veronica has called “the closing days of our unholy alliance”, it remains difficult for Liam to keep the distance between himself and Veronica intact (*Gathering*: 171). As I have discussed in “Chapter II – The Past”, they continually left and returned to each other. Although the first time Veronica left Liam the distancing was physical, she is, in the remainder of the narrative, the person who is left by Liam, and to whom Liam returns. She does argue that she left him as well – “there were times when I just had to roll my eyes and walk away” – but she does not physically abandon him

(*Gathering*: 124). While Liam moved to England, Veronica still lives in the same city as their mother, the city in which they were both born. Liam's constant leaving of Veronica is thus also an attempt to separate himself from their maternal origin. Although both Veronica and Liam have had a problematic relationship with their mother – after stating that Liam “didn't even like her”, Veronica refers to the day he threw a knife at her – he was the one who has left his mother country (*Gathering*: 6). That Veronica has an entirely different relationship to this matrixial space is made clear when we realise that the one time she did physically abandon Liam, she left him to return back to their parental home in Ireland (*Gathering*: 123). Where Liam thus felt the need to distance himself from her and their maternal environment physically, Veronica has been able to remain close to the origin of their relationship.

On her way to Brighton to identify Liam's body, Veronica is sitting beside a young man who “is dozing in the flickering, sexual sunlight, lulled and unsettled by the movement of the train” (*Gathering*: 52). The dozing does not leave the man unaffected: “I can sense the blood pooling in his lap; the thick oblong of his penis moving down the leg of his suit” (*ibid.*). Being on her way to the body of a man who has taken his own life, the event makes Veronica wonder what it means to possess this particular organ: “Given the state I am in, I find the hydraulics of it more than usually peculiar. Such small things to have such large consequences” (*ibid.*). She does not explicitly discuss what these large consequences might be, but it is in this very moment that she asks herself “if Liam would still be alive if he had been born a woman and not a man” (*ibid.*).

Although Veronica eventually settles for the sexual abuse argument, she does wonder about different explanations for Liam's death early in the narrative. While reflecting on his alcoholism, she suddenly wonders “if he had diabetes, if that was what was wrong” (*Gathering*: 55). After realising that, even if it was due to this illness, it was already too late for Liam, Veronica reaches the following conclusion: “And, of course, his drinking was an

existential statement, how could I forget? There was certainly nothing *metabolic* about it. There was no cause” (*ibid.*; emphasis in original). Indeed, the cause of Liam’s death does not seem to be physical or chemical. His failure to maintain the distance between himself, his sister and his maternal environment made him unable to take up the only available subject-position in the symbolic order. Being unable to repress the original matrixial encounter-event which happened both between him and his mother and between him and his sister, he could not but feel existentially inadequate.

3.5 A fragile positioning

Despite their being a remaining focus on women when it comes to the feminine and the maternal, an analysis of *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* has shown that, despite the evident discussion of sexual difference in all three narratives, men are indeed open to the matrixial borderspace as well. However, despite their encounters with this feminine sphere, the male characters in the novels find it almost impossible to acknowledge its existence and/or to deal with the vulnerability of the matrixial encounter-event. For Stephen, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, it is impossible to relate to his own encounter with his mother because, for him, the encounter lies entirely in the past. Berts, in *What Are You Like?*, did stay in contact with the original matrixial encounter-event, but he tried to separate himself from the matrixial borderspace the moment his wife died. *The Gathering* shows that, whether a man is too stuck in the symbolic order to understand the matrixial encounter-event with the other, like Tom, or not able to separate himself from the matrixial borderspace altogether, like Liam, the presence of this feminine sphere underlines their inability to take up the only subject-position available. For Tom, this has led to a feeling of defeat. For Liam, the consequences were much graver.

Although the male characters in *Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* are not able to “yield to and tolerate this fragile positioning vis-à-vis their I, the Other, and the world”, for Ettinger, it is precisely in the ability to acknowledge and accept one's inevitable vulnerability where the future of the subject lies (Ettinger 2006a: 143). In the fourth chapter, I will discuss the ethical implications of this matrixial fragility. Through an analysis of the moments in which the female protagonists try to protect the imagined boundaries of their selves, I will demonstrate what we can learn from this feminine sphere when we are ready to open our selves up to it.

Chapter IV – The Future

4.1 Matrixial trauma

As Ettinger has argued, both women and men stand in connection to the matrixial borderspace, albeit in a different way. Where men experience this feminine dimension only as “an archaic out-site and past-side”, women both experience the matrix as something which belongs to the pre-symbolic past *and* as something which entails a potential present and future (Ettinger 2006a: 143). Because of this double connection, women have an advantage.

However, being more open to the matrixial borderspace is not simply a cause for celebration.

As Ettinger emphasises, a woman’s “privileged access to a matrixial time and matrixial space is far from being a source of pleasure or privilege in social or cultural terms. Rather, it is access to a surplus-of-fragility” (Ettinger 2006a: 182). Since subjectivity-as-encounter takes place between two or more partial subjects, it is inevitable for the subjects involved in the encounter to be vulnerable. The event can thus not take place without a certain experience of pain and anxiety. Being based on “the transgression of individual boundaries”, which include the “self-relinquishment and fragilization” of the self, the encounter is even “potentially

traumatizing” (Ettinger 2006b: 219). Where, from a phallic perspective, the subject can choose to only deal with its own individual suffering, in the matrixial borderspace the experience of trauma is threefold: “*I am not only concerned with my own traumas; the encounter with the Other is traumatic to me, but I am also concerned with the trauma of the Other*” (Ettinger 2006: 125; emphasis in original).

In “Chapter III – The Present”, I have argued that the subject-position available to the analysed male characters in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* did not make it impossible for them to encounter the matrixial borderspace. However, due to the position they have to take up, they have become unable to acknowledge and embrace the its existence. Understanding the traumatising potential of the matrix, this does not come as a surprise: “[i]n matrixial encounter-events we are extremely fragilized, and the fear of being abused, devoured and abandoned is therefore at heights” (Ettinger 2006c: 125). This is why, for example, Berts, in *What Are You Like?*, began to protect the boundaries of his self after the death of his wife. The female protagonists and characters I have discussed are indeed more open to the matrixial borderspace: Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, and Maria, in *What Are You Like?*, are less affected during sexual behaviour than the men they sleep with; Evelyn, in *What Are You Like?*, does not seem to feel the need to protect her self and has, as such, a more open relationality to her nonbiological daughters than Berts, the biological father, has; and Veronica, in *The Gathering*, is, contrary to Tom, not negatively affected by the presence of her daughters. She, in contrast to Liam, is also able to remain close to her maternal environment. Be that as it may, this does not mean that the encounter with the matrix cannot be traumatising to them too. In each narrative, there is one event in which the female protagonists’ sense of self is undermined to such an extent that even they do not know how to continue with their lives. Before I will enter into a discussion of the ethical implications of Ettinger’s work, I will first analyse the female protagonists’ initial reactions to

these specific events. Having discussed these, I will then be able to demonstrate the process the female protagonists go through and the ethical lesson they learn before the end of each narrative.

4.1.1 ‘Bitch,’ I said, and gave up politics’

Although Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, seems to have been troubled by the relationship between her and her mother from their very start, there does seem to be one moment in which she feels so disappointed by the maternal that she turns her back on it. After her father’s first stroke, Grace moved to England. Although she, at first, “thought it was a political thing, because a girl has to grow up any way she can”, she eventually realises that at least one of the reasons why she left Ireland was an attempt to enlarge the distance between herself and her parental home (*The Wig*: 56). Although she does return to her home country, she gets on a plane back to England the moment the Englishman she fell in love with during her stay abroad asks her to have his child (*The Wig*: 57). Referring again to the current political climate, she even sarcastically responds to his request by saying that “[i]n Ireland we have babies just like that. We have them all the time” (*ibid.*). However, although Grace herself “wanted him all right [...]. I wanted him so much I thought that it would never happen, never end, this love you could hear, like a song in the room”, her body did not share this feeling (*The Wig*: 58). Instead of becoming pregnant, something Irish women are supposed to be very experienced in, Grace “was quite surprised to find that my body had deserted me in its finest hour, that it had slammed the door and pissed off home” (*ibid.*). Although her description of what had happened precisely between her and the Englishman, *and* between her mind and her body, remains quite abstract, Grace blames her womb for everything that went wrong in that specific moment: “‘Bitch,’ I said, and gave up politics” (*ibid.*).

Having been abandoned by her own womb in what is supposed to be its 'finest hour', this is the moment Grace turns herself away from the feminist cause. Although she never explicitly explains to which political movement she is referring throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that she is talking about the second feminist wave. She, for instance, describes her sister Brenda as someone who's decision to sleep with people of the same sex "is entirely political" (*The Wig*: 53). She also refers to England, in contrast to Ireland, as "a country where women didn't bury their babies in silage pits" (*The Wig*: 56). This is why Grace, at first, thought that her moving to England was a political statement: at that period, "[e]xile was mainly a question of contraception" (*ibid.*). Although Grace was thus engaged with feminist thought, she gave up on it the moment her womb turned itself against her. Having been violently abandoned by both her mother's and her own womb – she compares her womb's refusal to carry the Englishman's baby to "spitting out even the thought of him – so hard I was afraid I might turn inside out" – and realising that she cannot have active control over her own body, she decides to no longer share in the fight for a woman's right over her own body (*The Wig*: 58). After this event, she also does no longer want to have children, as she makes explicit to Stephen early in the narrative (*The Wig*: 38). Giving up on feminist politics and refusing to repeat the original matrixial encounter-event, which she can only relate to in negative terms, Grace forsakes the feminine and the maternal.

4.1.2 'Finally. She had wiped herself off the map'

In my discussion of sexual difference in *What Are You Like?*, I have focused on the differences between Evelyn and Berts, and only referred to the difference between Maria and Anton briefly. I will, however, now return my focus to the female protagonist, Maria, to demonstrate how she, like the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore* and *The*

Gathering, eventually learns from her heightened vulnerability. Before Maria found the picture of Rose in Anton's bag, she was already in search of her self. This is why she, instead of finishing her degree, flew to New York to get a job cleaning houses. However, it is only after having found the picture that Maria loses control over her own life. Instead of finding what she was looking for – her own self – her trip to New York leads her to find out that she is indeed not able to know her self: “Maria had never seen herself so clearly. She looked like a perfect stranger” (*What?:* 36). Although this realisation makes perfect sense to Maria – “She had always felt like someone else. She had always felt like the wrong girl” – she does feel the urge to become aware of the boundaries of her own body again (*What?:* 37). In order to do so, Maria takes a knife and cuts herself in her leg. For a moment, this extreme measure brings her exactly what she is in need of: “after the cut, there was a pleasure so clean it make [*sic*] her eyes close. When she opened them again, she could feel everything, even the pain” (*What?:* 40). It is, however, not enough to make Maria regain her own sense of self again. Fleeing her room before Anton wakes up, Maria – with blood still flowing down her foot – walks through the streets of New York in search of her self. While she is expecting, “at any moment, to see herself – her real self – turn a corner and wave, and say hello”, all she can see in the windows of the shop she passes by is “the ghost of her reflection” (*What?:* 55-56).

After Anton disappeared from her life, Maria continued to walk the streets of New York after finishing work to find her self back: “she wanted to see herself, her old self, or a different self, passing her by and escaping down the street” (*What?:* 145). On one of these nights, Maria suddenly finds herself unable to go home. Sitting down on the ground to gather her thoughts, it finally crosses her mind “that it was wrong to put her life to the test like this, that it was very wrong” (*ibid.*). The realisation that she has to change the way in which she has been behaving recently enables her to get up from the pavement and walk home. However, on her way back to her room, Maria's sense of self suffers the ultimate blow: “She

passed a sad-looking woman who ignored her, and recognised, too late, her own reflection. Even she did not know what she looked like any more. Finally. She had wiped herself off the map” (*ibid.*). Having been shattered to what seems to be a point of no return – Maria is no longer able to recognise her own face – she, instead of trying to save her life, concludes that the only way she can make the hurting stop is by taking it.

When Rose finds out about the existence of her twin-sister two years later, she goes through a similar experience. Walking into Maria in the changing room in which the latter works, the first thought to go through Rose's mind is the following: “It was true, she thought, she did not exist” (*What?:* 253). Like Maria, her own confrontation with a person who looks exactly like her makes Rose question the validity of her own self and the life she has lived: “Everthing she had done – the hard choices, the willed compassion, her difficult, educated heart – all a joke. No wonder they had given her away. They had another one, just the same” (*ibid.*). Although their encounter does not lead Rose to follow the steps Maria has taken when she found out, it is clear that it has triggered a similar feeling.

4.1.3 ‘I am waiting for things to become clear’

In *The Gathering*, during Liam's funeral, Veronica's husband Tom tells their youngest daughter Emily, who is clinging to her mother, to stop touching her. Veronica silently agrees: “Indeed. I have been so much touched these last few days. [...] Everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I might want, or what my body might want, whatever that might be – God knows it is a long time since I knew” (*Gathering:* 244). As her final remark shows, people have been making claims on her self for as long as she can remember. However, it is only after Liam's death that it is shattered to such an extent that she has lost faith in her own body: “I can not feel the weight of my body on the bed. I can not feel the line

of my skin along the sheet. I am swinging an inch or so off the mattress, and I do not believe in myself – in the way I breathe or turn” (*Gathering*: 133). Since she is no longer sure of who she is, Veronica is desperately trying to be recognised. When she goes by her mother’s house to inform the latter of Liam’s death, her mother does not seem to remember her name: “Of course she knows who I am, it is just my name that escapes her. Her eyes flick from side to side as she wipes one after another off her list” (*Gathering*: 4). When her mother eventually settles for “Darling”, Veronica feels “like shouting at her. ‘You called me Veronica!’” (*Gathering*: 5). Although this event happens immediately after Veronica has received confirmation that the body found in Brighton is indeed Liam’s, the necessity to be reassured of her own self remains throughout the narrative. When she finally sits down to write about the sexual abuse she thinks has happened to Liam, she needs to take a break: “I pause as I write this, and place my own hand over my face, and lick the thick skin of my palm with a girl’s tongue. I inhale. The odd comforts of the flesh. Of being me” (*Gathering*: 146). In order to be able to retain the difference between her and Liam, something she does, particularly in the case of this specific memory, not always succeed in, Veronica has to break away from her memories and reassure herself that she is still there and that here body is still hers.

In her attempt to gather the shattered pieces of her self back together, Veronica is trying to create a distance between herself and her family. She has reversed her own day-night rhythm – she sleeps during the day and stays up until her husband gets out of bed – and has, as such, removed herself from the timeframe in which her family continuous to live. Since she does pick up her daughters from school and “ferry them to their ballet or Irish dancing or horse-riding, or just home”, it becomes clear this reversal is more because of Tom than of their children (*Gathering*: 37). Veronica even makes it explicit that one of the reasons for altering her rhythm is that she does not want or is not able to share their bed: “I can not sleep with him, that is all” (*ibid.*). As Bersani has explained, in Freudian psychoanalysis sexuality is

understood to shatter the subject. Veronica, whose sense of self is already severely undermined due to her brother's death, seems reluctant to sleep with her husband precisely because she does not believe she can manage another blow to what is supposed to be a structured self: "So my husband is waiting for me to sleep with him again, and I am waiting for something else. *I am waiting for things to become clear*" (*ibid.*; my emphasis). The last thing Veronica needs is to become even more confused about her sense of self than she already is.

As the narrative continues, Veronica begins to feel the need to enlarge the distance between herself and her family. Where, at first, the silence and empty rooms of the house were enough to give her a feeling of "sanity", she eventually leaves the house (*Gathering*: 218). Starting with her drinking a glass of wine in their car in front of their house, she, after a couple of nights, starts to drive away from it. First through their own neighbourhood, but then through the streets of Dublin and beyond, to the places that have been occupying her memories since Liam's death. On her last trip within the narrative, Veronica finds herself standing at the graveyard of a former mental institution, where her mother's brother is buried. Of all places, this is where Veronica begins to realise that she is on the verge of losing her sanity: "I stand there and think that there is no worse place for me to go. This is the worst place there is" (*Gathering*: 237). Although she immediately argues that her case is not that bad – "If this is as mad as I get then it is not too mad" – she does realise that she needs to pull herself together and start living her life again (*ibid.*). However, instead of driving home, back to her life, she drives towards Dublin airport and gets on a plane to London (*Gathering*: 254). The moment she realises her situation cannot get any worse, she flees her mother country and creates the largest distance between herself and her family since her growing need for separation began.

4.2 A matrixial potential for healing

As Ettinger has explained during a lecture she has given at The European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, in 2007, the moment in which the subject is fragilised, it can indeed be hurt more easily¹⁸. To protect their selves against further hurting, the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* take specific measures to make it stop. Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, abandons the feminine and the maternal. In *What Are You Like?*, Maria tries to take her own life. Veronica, in *The Gathering*, flees her family and her mother country. That women have a different relationality to the matrixial borderspace does, then, not mean that it cannot be traumatising to them as well. That the matrixial encounter-event has a traumatising potential is, as Freudian psychoanalysis has made very clear, due to the phallic framework in which we are living: it does not leave room for us to understand our selves as being anything *but* coherent and solid. Precisely because the ‘I’ we see in the mirror is a misrecognition, we continue to see and chase an image of the self as whole. In our inability to reach this false image, we take others – most often the literal or figural mother – to be responsible for the existential inadequacy we experience throughout our entire lives. Since we are not (yet) able to articulate our subjectivity in an alternative way, we continue to understand our selves as being under threat. This is why, for Freudian psychoanalysts, the other is apprehended through hate¹⁹: “paranoia” is the “dominant social structure” of the symbolic order (Bersani 1986: 47).

Being born in Israel as a second-generation Holocaust survivor two months before Israel declared itself independent, it will come as no surprise that Ettinger links her theory of the matrix to what is being considered the greatest atrocity in human history. The perpetual feeling of being under threat – which is at some times experienced to a larger extent than at

¹⁸ Bracha Ettinger, “Psychoanalysis + Matrixial Borderspace,” The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, 6 Aug. 2007. Video 6. <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/bracha-ettinger/videos/>>

¹⁹ *ibid.* Video 8.

others – by those whom we see as being radically different from ourselves, explains, according to Pollock, the “horrendous social forms of intolerance and antagonism” such as “racism, homophobia, misogyny”, and, indeed, the Holocaust (Pollock 2006: 11). Since we are living in a linguistic structure which does not provide us with adequate words to describe our relationality vis-à-vis the other in non-negative terms, we experience our always already existing partiality as a threat. Therefore, we continue to see the other not as “a partner in the human web” but as “the figuration of [our] hurt” (Pollock 2009a: 52-53).

4.2.1 Ethical implications

For Ettinger, who has taken both her experience as an artist and as a psychoanalyst as a starting-point for her theory, the implications of her work stretch beyond these two fields into, amongst others, the field of ethics. Although the term ‘ethics’ is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘morality’, they are not the same. As Selma Sevenhuijsen explains, “[e]thics provides theoretical reflection on dominant values, moral codes and moral convictions. It studies ‘how morality works’ and makes claims about the bases and sources of moral judgement” (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 37). In western society, ethical thinking is based on the ability to judge with reason and rationality in every situation (McLaughlin 2003: 70). From within the framework of western ethics, it is one’s independence and autonomy which decides how capable one is of moral judging. This line of thinking poses two major problems for feminist thinkers. First of all, it has been argued that women are unable to reach the same level of moral judgement as men since women will never be as independent and autonomous as men, supposedly, are (*ibid.*). Secondly, those feminist theorists who are engaged with the question of western ethics and argue in favour of a re-articulation of the ethical relationship

have questioned the valuing of reason and rationality over notions of care and interdependence (*ibid.*).

In *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*, Simon Blackburn explains that, according to philosophical thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, our ethical environment – “the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live” – “shapes our very identities” (Blackburn 2001: 1). What we consider to be right or wrong is thus “largely or even essentially a consciousness of how we stand for other people”: we look at the world through our understanding of the self-other relationship (Blackburn 2001: 1-2). How we see the other thus influences what we consider to be appropriate behaviour towards this other. According to Blackburn, who also takes the Holocaust to explain his point, this severe crime against humanity did not happen because the human race is inherently bad or because they have been trained to follow their leaders blindly (Blackburn 2001: 3). On the contrary, he argues that people were very able to think for themselves but that the ethical climate from which they could draw their understanding of their selves “had roots in misapplications of Darwinism, in German Romanticism, and [...] some aspects of Judaism and Christianity” (Blackburn 2001: 3). It was this available perspective on the world which determined how far these people could go in relation to the other.

After the conversations Ettinger has had with Levinas in the early nineties, the former came to the conclusion that, for her, femininity “is the kernel of ethical being, the ultimate measure of the ethical relationship” (Ettinger 2006a: 190). However, we will not be able to understand the matrixial feminine as being at the centre of ethics if we continue to look at the world and the ethical relationship within that world from the phallic perspective of the symbolic order. By taking the womb as an other signifier, Ettinger is able to distinguish between two different perspectives from which we can look at our selves and our relation with the other: a phallic and a matrixial perspective (Ettinger 2006c: 102). According to her, “[i]n

the phallic paradigm, each imaginary other to which the *I* relates, including the exiled, is a parasite destined for annihilation either by assimilation or by banishment” (Ettinger 2006a: 110; emphasis in original). Since the other can, from the phallic perspective, only be a radical other who has absolutely nothing to do with the ‘I’, we, “[i]n the phallus, [...] confront the impossibility of sharing trauma and phantasy” (Ettinger 2006a: 90). Contrary to the phallic perspective, “[i]n the matrix, the stranger, neither cut out from the system nor assimilated to it, *cannot* be articulated as a parasite and cannot be rejected” (Ettinger 2006a: 110; emphasis in original). Instead of being unable to share the trauma and the fantasy of the other, there is, “in the matrix [...] *an impossibility of not sharing* them” (Ettinger 2006a: 90; emphasis in original). From a matrixial perspective, our identities are thus constituted through an encounter – the matrixial encounter-event – with other partial subjects who are both “a *partner* in the situation” – we all (have to) share in each other’s trauma – as well as “a *partner-in-difference*” – we might leave traces of our selves in other subjects, but we never become entirely the same (Pollock 2009b: 6; emphasis in original).

Despite matrixial encounter-events to be necessary for our subject-formation, they always also entail the experience of pain. Indeed, it

does not promise peace and harmony, because joining is first of all a joining with-in the other’s trauma that echoes back to my archaic traumas: joining the other matrixially is always joining the m/Other and risking mental fragmentation and vulnerability. (Ettinger 2006a: 147)

However, that these encounter-events underline the instability of the self, and might even lead to the shattering sensation so feared by Freudian psychoanalysts, does not mean we have to protect our selves against these encounters. As Ettinger explains in her lecture, there can be a certain therapeutic power to the fragilisation entailed by this feminine sphere²⁰. We should

²⁰ *ibid.* Video 8.

thus not try to protect our selves against them because “they may also solace something profound in us that undoes the absolute binary of pleasure/pain and forms the basis of our being able to share the suffering of another, or feel with another’s trauma” (Pollock 2009b: 17). If every human being is afraid of being shattered to a point of no return, why would we voluntarily visit Auschwitz or the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin? Why would we read and even enjoy books and films that make us feel empathetic²¹? Why would we willingly continue to listen to the stories of those who are suffering? Yes, the encounter-events in which we share in an other’s trauma do make us “fragile and vulnerable” (Pollock 2009a: 45). But, they will not lead to the absolute dissolution of our subjectivity since the pain and the trauma we experience during the encounter is “not overwhelming but humanizing” (*ibid.*).

4.2.2 The feminine is/as the future

During their conversations in the early nineties, Levinas has admitted to Ettinger that, for him, “[t]he feminine²² is the future” (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 141). According to him, the feminine

is that human possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own, that the death of the other is more important to me than my own death, that the Other comes before me, that the Other counts before I do, that the value of the Other is imposed before mine is. (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 142)

Although he himself repeatedly stresses that he is “not emphasizing *dying* but, on the contrary, *future*” and that “the ‘dying’ of a woman is certainly unacceptable”, his articulation

²¹ For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* has sold over thirty million copies in 65 languages. The Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam, which opened in 1960, has had over 20 million visitors. Donald Snyder, “Anne Frank’s Chestnut Tree Slowly Dying,” [FOXNews.com](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,262525,00.html) 29 March 2007, 24 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,262525,00.html>>. The film *SCHINDER’S LIST* is placed seventh in The Internet Movie Database Top 250. “IMDb Top 250.” [The Internet Movie Database](http://www.imdb.com/chart/top). 12 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.imdb.com/chart/top>>.

²² Here, Levinas refers to the matrixial feminine – “[t]he feminine in its feminine phase, in its feminine form” (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 141).

might be considered to be problematic, especially so for feminist thinkers (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 141; emphasis in original). In her attempt to re-articulate the western subject and to deconstruct the binary between “joy and pain”, Kristeva already tried to move away from the masochistic mother figure which is still present in contemporary society (Kristeva 1981: 30). According to Kristeva, the love the (becoming-)mother feels for her child(-to-be) comprises “the slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself [...] without masochism and without annihilating one’s affective, intellectual, and professional personality” (Kristeva 1981: 31). Although she does not elaborate on how such a non-masochistic attitude towards the child might be achieved, she does argue that the mother should be freed from the masochism implied in her role within the symbolic order.

According to Ettinger, the negative connotation of Levinas’s argument changes if we look at it not from the phallic perspective, but from the matrixial: “in the matrixial sphere, what this vulnerability implies is not a sacrifice of myself in a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness” (Ettinger 2006a: 145). Since the matrixial encounter-event does not affect every involved partner equally – the becoming-child depends much more on the mother-to-be – the ability to sacrifice the self for the other is not entirely absent in the matrix. However, “the sacrificial potentiality [...] is supplemented with potentiality for non-sacrificial grace, inasmuch as for living the non-I that is yet to come *requires* the living of the I” (Ettinger 2006c: 133; my emphasis). In other words, one does not sacrifice oneself for the other entirely, but they both need a certain loosening of the self in order to be able to emerge together²³. As such, in the matrix, “‘sacrifice’ and either/or and subject/Other dichotomies move to the margins, and grace, solace, coemergence, besidedness and co-fading move to the fore” (Ettinger 2006c: 114). While we partly disappear together

²³ Bracha Ettinger, “Psychoanalysis + Matrixial Borderspace,” The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, 6 Aug. 2007. Video 6. <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/bracha-ettinger/videos/>>

with the partial subject(s) we share the encounter with, traces of these others become part of our selves in our co-emerging. As such, we become part of them, and they become part of us. These others can therefore no longer be seen as radically different from the self because we now share in a subjectivity which goes beyond the individual. For Ettinger, this transsubjective aspect of the matrixial borderspace is able to explain why, as Levinas has argued, “the feminine is that incredible, unheard of thing in the human by which it is affirmed that *without me the world has meaning*. [...] It is the possibility of believing that there is a reality *without me*” (Ettinger and Levinas 2006: 143-144; emphasis in original). Precisely because we leave traces of our selves in the other, and vice versa, during our matrixial encounter-events with them, “*even death doesn’t destroy the matrixial web*” (Ettinger 2006c: 115; emphasis in original). The encounter might indeed be painful, and it might sometimes even be painful to an extent which seems intolerable to the self. However, a matrixial understanding of the subject might also solace what seems to be the subject’s greatest fear: to no longer exist.

4.3 The ethical feminine in *The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?, and The Gathering*

Despite the different relationality women and men have to the matrixial borderspace, it can indeed be traumatising to them both. In some cases, the initial reaction of both the male characters and the female protagonists were similar: although Liam, in *The Gathering*, succeeded, Maria, in *What Are You Like?* also tried to take her own life. Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, does not attempt to commit suicide within the narrative, but the arrival of the angel Stephen, who also took his own life, shows that she was strongly considering to follow in his and Liam’s footsteps. However, where the male characters in *The Wig My*

Father Wore, What Are You Like?, and *The Gathering* either have succeeded in ending their lives or remain stuck in their unhappiness because they were and are not able to handle the fragilising of the self inevitable in the matrixial encounter-event, the female protagonists are able to learn from the experience.

4.3.1 'For a woman, nothing has to die'

Although Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, is not too happy about his presence at first, she eventually begins "to feel the benefit of Stephen's care" (*The Wig*: 124). However, immediately after she has admitted this to herself and the reader, she looks in the mirror of her bathroom and is shocked to see that her body has been altered: "The white breasts, uncomfortably high, the long, pubescent slope of the belly and my hands and wrists, my feet and ankles too slender to be much use anymore" (*The Wig*: 126). When she calls Stephen into the bathroom to confront him with what he has done, she, to her own surprise, demands her body back: "It surprised me as I said it, but I missed the lines and the markings and the moles ticking away like timebombs. I missed my mother's knees and my Granny's hammer toes" (*The Wig*: 126-127). Instead of giving back the references to Grace's maternal genealogy – her *mother's* knees and her *grandmother's* toes – Stephen continues the process by removing Grace's left nipple. Although she, associating it the maternal she turned away from years earlier, "had never been wildly attached to the nipple", there is one place she absolutely does not want to give up: "As I stand there in dreadful one-eyed asymmetry and time drips on, his hand moves in gathering sweeps down my body to a place I value more highly – and I am resolved that no matter what he did to my breast, he isn't going to touch my belly button" (*The Wig*: 128-129). Although Stephen tries to persuade her to give it up by saying that it is "[j]ust a piece of old rope", Grace suddenly is reminded "of what it had been tied to – a dead

piece of my mother and me they hadn't bothered to bury" (*The Wig*: 130). Precisely because a return to the mother is believed to mean the end of the subject, Stephen – who also does not have a navel – is trying to save Grace by making her cut from the maternal as severe as his. However, the moment he tries to take it away from her, Grace realises, contrary to Freudian psychoanalytic thinking, that it is not the return to but the removal of the maternal which would mean the end of her: "He was looking for death, but I did not want to give him mine" (*ibid.*).

The second time Grace looks at her body in a mirror, "[t]he body that looks back at me is nine years old, or fourteen mixed with nine, or my own, mixed with all the bodies I used to have" (*The Wig*: 137). Although Stephen has been transforming Grace's body in his attempt to remove everything that could remind her of the maternal, the exact opposite happens: Grace is remembered of everything her body has been through and is made conscious of what it is still connected to. Because her body is still "all in bits, and all different ages" when she sleeps with Stephen, Grace is suddenly able to repeat the original matrixial encounter-event and re-establish the maternal lineage she at first tried to discontinue by refusing to bear children. Her becoming pregnant even brings her back together again: the morning after her sexual encounter with Stephen, Grace is happy to find "a hopeful glow of pink fighting back through the white where Stephen left his mark" (*The Wig*: 180). Although Stephen had removed it in his attempt to make Grace forget about her maternal history, it returns immediately after the original matrixial encounter-event she once participated in herself is repeated.

Soon after Grace realises what Stephen is trying to take away from her, she decides to make him disappear through the airwaves during the last episode of the Love Quiz (*The Wig*: 138). Although she, in the meantime, becomes pregnant with his child, Grace nevertheless continues with her plan. Although she was the one to stage his disappearance, he appears to

her in her dreams after she has exchanged the metropolitan Dublin for the thinly-populated County Mayo. After each dream, Grace wakes “up grateful and sick with grief” (*The Wig*: 183). Even though his physical absence causes her grief, she simultaneously experiences “the joy that he was there and that he was real” (*ibid.*). That his absence does not only bring her pain makes her realise that “nothing died when we made love. Apparently that is what it is like for a woman. For a woman, nothing has to die” (*The Wig*: 215). Needing him to get away from her because she was afraid to that his influence would make her lose her sense of self completely, she knows that he, whether he has disappeared forever or not, is not really gone. In their encounter, they have literally become part of each other through their bodies – the body hair Stephen took away from her appeared on his own body – and through their conceiving of a child who is made of both him and her.

At the beginning of her narrative, Grace's mother asks Stephen what she has done for Grace to turn out the way she has:

‘Where did I go wrong?’ she said. ‘The summer I was pregnant with this young woman, I swam in the sea every day, in the sun and in the rain. And I said to God that this would be my prayer for the child – whoever it was, whoever it turned out to be. And now,’ she said, ‘now look at her.’ (*The Wig*: 8)

At the end of the narrative, when Grace has moved to Mayo, we find out that she is repeating her mother's behaviour exactly: “This morning I went for a swim. I swim every morning in the sea, in the sun and the rain and I say to God that this is my prayer for our child, whoever it is, whoever it might turn out to be” (Enright 1995: 214). By copying her mother, Grace is following the available framework within the symbolic order: in Freudian psychoanalysis, the only position available to the girl is that of her mother. As a consequence, “women do not become separate or have an autonomous identity, they remain merged with the mother” throughout their lives (Whitford 1991: 74). From within a phallic perspective, this will lead to

a never-ending competition between the mother who does not want to give up the only position available to women and the daughter who needs to take up that position to properly fit within the symbolic order. Grace's description of her own birth – her mother was a clinging pervert and Grace was ungrateful – thus fits very well within this phallic framework: Grace blames her mother for trying to keep her from entering society, and her mother blames Grace for being so eager to want to become part of a society in which she will have to kill her mother symbolically that she almost actually kills her mother²⁴. However, Grace's altered mental and physical state at the end of the narrative implies that, if looked at from within a matrixial perspective, the acknowledgement of the connection to her mother and the repetition of the matrixial encounter-event does not bring death but life. At the beginning of the narrative, Grace was a woman who, first of all, was close to committing suicide, and, secondly, was not able to and did not want to repeat the original matrixial encounter-event. At the end of the narrative, Grace has learned that, despite it being both painful and pleasurable, it is the acknowledgement of our relationality to our mother and the other which will make us feel alive and will enable us to give life and continue with our own lives.

4.3.2 'The fact that there were two of them made it somehow easy'

Maria's destabilised sense of self, which led to the inability to recognise her own reflection, resulted in a suicide attempt. Although the attempt fails and Maria is admitted to a mental hospital or ward, it is clear that she, after the attempt, has become stuck in space and time. Since the time she spend at the hospital is focalised from Maria's confused perspective, it remains unclear how long she has stayed there: "She tried to figure out how long she had been there, and the fact that she couldn't remember made her despair, sweetly, made her feel

²⁴ As I have discussed in "Chapter II – The Past", Grace's mother developed toxemia when she was pregnant with Grace.

important" (*What?:* 168). After she has been released from the hospital, in which time seemed to stand still, Maria becomes stuck in the changing room at her new job. Not literally – she does have a flat she goes home to – but, except for three lines, the only events narrated in which Maria plays a role after being released, whether from the focal point of Evelyn or that of herself, take place within the mirrored walls of this room (*What?:* 188). Where Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, was not able to look at herself in the mirror, Maria is trying “to forget what she was looking at” (*What?:* 201). Not because she did not recognise the person in the mirror – “as she straightened up, Maria caught a glimpse of her own eyes” – but because it reminds her of the fact that she is not able to know her self: “She was someone else again. [...] Some days she was just nothing. Some days she was a woman who was just waiting for herself to walk in the door” (*What?:* 202). Unsurprisingly, this changing room is also the place where Rose, who flew to Dublin after finding out the name of her father, meets Maria: “They each took two steps. Who was it raised her hand first? Perhaps it was Rose. Who was it laughed? When they turned to the mirror there were four of them” (*What?:* 253). It is only after meeting her twin-sister – the girl she saw in the mirror instead of herself – in that space, and having looked in that mirror together, that Maria's situation changes and her life takes place outside of the changing room again: in the next event narrated, Maria takes Rose to meet Berts (*What?:* 253-254). Rose's arrival thus marks a point in time in which Maria, for the first time since she found the former's picture, becomes an active agent in her life again, and not a passive bystander.

Rose, being her twin-sister, is Maria's most obvious partner in the situation and partner-in-difference: they have shared the exact same original matrixial encounter-event and yet, despite also having the same appearance, they are not entirely identical. That they are the same but different becomes clear when we, for example, look at the girls' birth names.

Although Berts only named Maria, the Sister who took care of Rose's adoption gave her the

name Marie (*What?:* 89). For the Sister, whose chosen name was Misericordiæ, the last letters of the girls' names belong together. These letters were, like the two sisters, not the same and could therefore be understood as separate – Sister Misericordia “had to lose the ‘e’” since “it wasn't grammatical, apparently” – but they could also be seen as being part of each other (*What?:* 82). Although their face-to-face encounter might have caused Maria, who is already experiencing her self as severely fragilised, to protect the boundaries of her self or to try to take her life again, the focus in the remainder of the narrative is on their togetherness. For example, they visit their parental home together, and they also leave together. Next to that, the narrator provides the reader with three lists of the things in which Maria and Rose are or are not similar to each other (*What?:* 255-256). Although they do not find out about every single thing on these lists, the narrator explains that “[s]ome of these became apparent to them *over the years*” (*What?:* 256; my emphasis). Although it is not made explicit where the girls live after they have met – did Rose return to England, or did she move to Dublin? did they live on their own or together? – it is made explicit that Maria and Rose no longer see themselves apart from each other.

Although the third list provided by the narrator contains “some intriguing differences” between the two twin-sisters, the focus of the narrative is on their similarity: the first two lists contained a summary of the similarities they did and the ones they did not discover (*What?:* 255-256). That Maria and Rose are more similar than not is also made explicit in the narration of their arrival, which is focalised by Berts:

At three o'clock, the taxi pulled up and he saw his daughter getting out, twice. He saw his daughter pay the driver while his daughter put her hand to her throat and looked at the house. He saw his daughter walk up the path while his daughter shut the gate. He saw his daughter smile at his daughter, who was also smiling. He saw his daughter

look his way, while his daughter looked his way, and he saw one of them nod hello.

(*What?:* 251)

The event is narrated in such a way that, without an understanding of the situation – the focaliser is looking at two identical twin-sisters – it makes no sense to the reader. Despite the obviousness of the similarities between them, which Maria was not able to handle before she met Rose in real life, they do not seem to bother her now. Maria even discovered that “[t]he fact that there were two of them made it somehow easy. They could be happy and sad at the same time” (*What?:* 254). Despite the continuous reminder that her life does not stand on its own and that she can no longer convince herself of her own unique individuality, Maria is able to share in the matrixial encounter-event without being further traumatised now that she and Rose are sharing in each other's trauma.

4.3.3 'there was love that put me back together again'

When Veronica, in *The Gathering*, flew to London instead of driving home to her family, she told herself that she wanted to walk “along the Brighton front one last time” (*Gathering:* 254). In order to continue with her life, of which she has just realised the necessity, she first wants to say a final goodbye to Liam, who drowned at Brighton beach. However, after having checked in at one of the airport hotels to get some sleep, she “realised that I did not know how to leave” (*ibid.*). She is not only unable to go to Brighton to part with Liam, but she also does not know how to return back to the other “people I never chose to love, but love all the same” (*Gathering:* 259). Despite having “a terrible yearning for a woman in a rasping white coat whose pressing and patting fingers will stick my face back on, where it is in danger of falling away”, Veronica realises that, no matter how much distance she creates, she will never be

able to split her self from them: “And what a pathetic attempt this is, at running away from them all. Gatwick bloody airport” (*Gathering*: 255-256; 259).

Although her bond with Liam has proven to be the most fragilising to her imagined sense of self, he is indeed not the only one who is able to destabilise Veronica’s identity. Throughout the narrative it becomes clear that Veronica, despite having tried to distance herself from her mother, from whose womb she emerges, is not always able to keep her guard up:

We pity our mothers, what they had to put up with in bed or in the kitchen, and we hate them or we worship them, but we always cry for them – at least I do. The imponderable pain of my mother, against which I have hardened my heart. Just one glass over the odd and I will thump the table, like the rest of them, and howl for her too. (*Gathering*: 185)

The same goes for her little sister Kitty, who came from their mother’s womb after Veronica. Despite being critical of Kitty throughout the entire narrative, she is the one Veronica calls when she is at Gatwick airport trying to decide whether and how to get back to her life (*Gathering*: 259). While in her hotel room, Veronica also realises that, although she has physically distanced herself from her two daughters, who have emerged from her own womb, she can never separate herself from them: “But there is no leaving the girls, they are always with me. [...] Rebecca Mary and Emily Rose. They stay with me now in my sleep” (*Gathering*: 257).

The one person Veronica does seem able to distance herself from is her husband Tom, the only main character to whom Veronica is not related through either her mother’s or her own womb. Halfway through the novel, she even explicitly refers to his body as being “separate” from hers (*Gathering*: 133). But, even though Tom is the only person Veronica does seem to be able to cut her self off from, this is not what she wants to do. Looking at the

list of departures at Gatwick airport, and pondering where she wants to travel next, she realises that the only place she wants to go to is home: "I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here. I do not want a different life" (*Gathering*: 260). She only wants "to be able to live it, that's all", something that has become quite difficult since Liam's death (*ibid.*). However, she does not only realise that she still wants Tom and the life they build together to be her destiny, she also realises that, "for every time he wanted to undo me, there was love that put me back together again – put us both back together" (*ibid.*). According to Veronica, the problem is that she has trouble remembering these matrixial encounter-events in which her sense of self was simultaneously undermined and constructed: "If I could remember each time, as you remember different places you have seen – some of them so amazing; exotic, or confusing, or still. If I could say this is what it was like the time Rebecca was started, or Emily made herself known" (*ibid.*). Even though Veronica has been trying to distance herself from him, Tom is also part of who she was and who she is becoming, just like the members of her family.

Despite Veronica's realisation that the only destiny she wants is her own home in her mother country, the extreme vulnerability she is still experiencing make her afraid to get on a plane back to Dublin (*Gathering*: 261). After five months of trying to get away from the partial subjects who both need her and who she needs in return, she is feeling as if she has "been falling into my own life" (*ibid.*). Although she is afraid to "hit it now", and is as such still very cautious about her identity, she also remembers that, during other matrixial encounter-events in which her sense of self was extremely fragile – sleeping with Tom, being pregnant, and being a mother – she did not lose her self, but was put back together (*ibid.*). At the end of the narrative, Veronica thus finally understands that, despite the phallic need to protect the imagined 'I', she might actually lose her sense of self if she does not acknowledge

and accept the partiality of her own subjectivity and returns back home to the people who have become a part of her.

4.4 Pain and pleasure

Despite the traumatising potential of the matrixial borderspace, one will not always be able to “choose when to terminate the covenant, or how, or to what extent, if at all” (Ettinger 2006a: 118). Since the symbolic phallus and the symbolic womb are *both* signifiers the child will necessarily encounter, and since the latter remains with the child throughout its life, “the phallus cannot master the Matrix” (*ibid.*). As a result, one will, at sometimes more than at other times, be open to the matrixial borderspace and share in the trauma of an other involuntarily. The question Ettinger raises here is, when being “[l]eft with the enigmatic burden of awareness of the other’s trauma, what will you do?” (*ibid.*). As the analysis of both the female protagonists and the male characters in *The Wig My Father Wore, What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* has shows, the initial response to this question is to protect the self from further harm. However, it are the female protagonists who are – despite the vulnerability it entails – able to embrace the matrixial borderspace and learn from its message. At the end of *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace understands that she, instead of trying to split her self from it, needs to acknowledge that the matrix was there at the beginning and remains with us throughout our lives. Herself having been afraid to lose her mind when she was first confronted with Stephen’s attempt to cut her off this space properly – “I don’t mind my body going, I said to myself, it’s my sanity I miss” – it is the understanding that we remain connected to our mothers and that we need a similar connection to others which, even though it brings us both pleasure and pain, will bring us life (*The Wig*: 126). In *What Are You Like?*, Maria’s inability to move forward in space and time underlines her inability to cut her self off

from the girl in the picture: to live according to the rules of the symbolic order, one has to be able to stand on one's own. However, her real-life encounter with Rose, which confirms everything she has been afraid of, does not destabilise Maria further. On the contrary, the ongoing encounter-event with the one person most similar to her enables Maria to take part in life again. At the end of *The Gathering*, Veronica understands that she needs to go back home and get her life back on track if she does not want to lose her sanity completely. However, she also realises that, although she is very much afraid that it might happen, she has never been shattered completely. As such, she finally understands that, in order to return to it, she needs to acknowledge and accept her self's inherent vulnerability. If we, too, learn to understand subjectivity as being constituted through a positive relationality that is both inevitably pleasurable and non-pleasurable, and realise that we do not need to protect the imagined boundaries of our unified selves because we become through our encounters with the other and not despite of them, we might also finally find a way to celebrate this always already existing relationality.

Chapter V – Conclusion

5.1 The past – the present – the future

In my research, I have always been interested in the ontological question I asked at the beginning of my thesis: ‘Who am I?’ Having been a confirmed world improver for as long as I can remember, I am not only concerned with how we have understood the self in the past and are understanding it in the present, but also in how we might be able to understand the self in the future. This is why, for me, the question should always already address the potentiality and the futurity of the subject: ‘Who will or can I become?’ To be able to address this all-embracing ontological question, I have turned to the two areas who have helped me to get a firmer grasp on this question in earlier research projects: feminist philosophy and literary studies. Working from within these two fields, I have reformulated the question which has been guiding me through this research project into the following research question: ‘How do the female protagonists in *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* experience their subjectivity and how can a matrixial reading of these experiences open up a way of thinking a feminine ethics?’ In my thesis, I have addressed this question

through an analysis of how, in their work, artist, feminist philosopher and practicing psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger and Irish novelist Anne Enright have engaged with both the past and the present, and how and where they see the potential for the future.

In “Chapter I – An Introduction to the Research Material”, I have briefly referred to a number of continental and/or French feminist philosophers who, in their critique on Freudian psychoanalysis, have tried to give a new meaning to the feminine. According to Pollock, however, they, despite the calibre and quality of their endeavours, have not been able to find a way out of the phallic system in which we are living (Pollock 2006: 34). Since they have been unable to re-articulate the subject in non-negative terms, we continue to be afraid of those situations in which the imagined boundaries of the self are crossed (*ibid.*). In order to be able to re-articulate the subject outside of this phallic structure, and provide us with a theory which has potential for the future, Ettinger needed to retrace some of the steps that have been and are taken in the field of psychoanalysis and feminist thinking (*ibid.*).

In “Chapter II – The Past”, the focus of my research was on the past of the subject. In both the theoretical work of Ettinger and the literary work of Enright, this past is traced back to the maternal womb. For the female protagonists in Enright's work, it is the source for the relationships that have a destabilising effect on their sense of self. For Ettinger, the maternal womb is the place in which the formation of the subject begins. In their discussion of the subject's past, both Ettinger and Enright engage with and challenge a theoretical discussion which was supposed to have been settled in the past. Due to Freudian psychoanalytic thinking and the dominant Anglo-American voice in feminist theory, a discussion of the womb has become quite a taboo. By establishing the womb as a significant factor in the subject's life, Ettinger has been able to move around the inevitable encounter of the subject with the symbolic phallus. As such, she has created room to formulate a subject-position which is not trapped in phallic binaries such as man-woman, white-black, and heterosexual-homosexual

because its formation begins before the acquisition of a phallic language. Arguing that the subject is always already partial and comes into being through the original matrixial encounter-event with the mother, Ettinger has reformulated subjectivity as a subjectivity-as-encounter. That we have not been able to articulate the self as such from within the symbolic order, does not mean that we lose our knowledge of this initial encounter: throughout our lives, traces of the matrixial borderspace remain with us, albeit unconsciously (Ettinger 2006b: 220). Since the knowledge of this matrixial encounter-events is never entirely lost, the subject – as the analysis of Enright’s work shows – will be able to experience our encounters with the other in similar terms.

In “Chapter III – The Present”, the focus of my research was on the question of sexual difference. In both Ettinger’s matrixial theory and Enright’s literary work, it is argued that men have a different – less open – relationality to the feminine sphere Ettinger has called the matrixial borderspace. Again, Ettinger and Enright engage with and challenge the dominant discourse of both Anglo-American feminist theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. Despite the ongoing debate within the field of Gender Studies, the theorisation of sexual difference still takes place at the margins. Although Lacan began to address the possibility for a feminine sexual difference in his later – and less known – work, he claimed throughout most of his life that ‘Woman’ and, as a corollary, sexual difference do not exist. Through her articulation of a feminine sex-difference which originates in the pre-symbolic matrixial borderspace, Ettinger has been able to move beyond the phallic masculine-feminine binary in which the former is always already valued over the latter. Having positioned the symbolic womb as the one signifier every subject encounters in the same way, and every subject encounters before it has to position the self either alongside or in opposition to the phallus, she has claimed that the matrixial feminine is a femininity which is thus part of and open to both women and men and those who do not fit within that binary. As the analysis of Enright’s work shows, the position

men have to take up in the symbolic order does indeed not foreclose the encounter with the matrixial feminine sphere. However, due to the ongoing constraints of the symbolic order, Enright's male characters are having much more difficulty tolerating the matrixial borderspace. Despite being able to remember and relate to it, they will, for now, react much more strongly against it than the female protagonists and characters will.

In "Chapter IV – The Future", the focus of my research was on the question of ethics. The analysis of both the subject's past and present in Ettinger's and Enright's work, and the academic discussions of the past and present they have engaged with, show that they have not only been able to radically revisit the subject. Their rewriting has also opened up room to understand the future of the ethical relationship between self and other in a fundamentally different way. In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, in which the subject is understood as an entity in search for a lost wholeness, the fragilising matrixial encounter-event between self and other has to be denied because the enlarged vulnerability poses a danger to the imagined integrity of the subject. Anglo-American feminists have tried to separate women from the relational nature they are still associated with in order to prove the latter's capacity to take up the same role in society as men. Going against both these discourses in her re-articulation of the self-other binary, Ettinger enables us to understand our position vis-à-vis the other not in terms of independence and autonomy, but of relationality and connectivity. As I have shown in my analysis of Enright's work, this re-articulation helps us to understand the origin and the necessity of our traumatic encounter with the other in the feminine sphere of the matrix. Like her female protagonists, this understanding might also enable us to move beyond the pain-pleasure binary and turn the experience into an event which, instead of leading us towards death, "may save our lives and our sanity" (Pollock 2006: 34).

Through her engagement with and challenging of dominant academic discourses, Ettinger has been able to show that, despite their being rejected by the symbolic order, both

the womb and woman do exist and do not need to be repressed (Ettinger 2006a: 89). In her understanding that the subject is affected by and learns from the intrauterine encounter-event of the past, and that women are at present better positioned vis-à-vis the matrix than men, the female body has proven to be the starting-point par excellence for Ettinger's theory of the matrix. Her turning to what has been deemed a foreclosed space has enabled her to articulate a feminine ethical relationality which is by definition open to every single human being who is ready "to think, create, and desire in, of, and from the feminine" (Pollock 2006: 34).

5.2 An encounter between theory and literature

According to Douglas Kellner, the cultural artefacts by which we are surrounded in our lives constitute a large part of the framework from which we can draw an understanding of the self-other relationship (Kellner 2002: 9). As such, they are not only able to illustrate the often complex argumentation made on a theoretical level, but they are often also used as a starting-point for these theories. Ettinger, herself an artist, has also drawn from her own personal experience of both making art and looking at the artworks of others: according to her, the traumatic experiences of the artist and the spectator come together in the matrixial encounter-event between the maker, the object, and the beholder. Next to that, artists often consciously or unconsciously respond to the developments going on in the world. Works of art and theoretical arguments thus often inform each other. For me, reading the literary work of Enright while working my way through Ettinger's complex argument and placing these two writers next to and with each other has helped me to grasp the message they are both trying to bring across.

Where literary work is able to inspire and illustrate academic lines of thinking, and vice versa, reading Enright's work through the work of Ettinger has also shown me that the

awareness of a philosophical argument on the level of the reader can radically alter the literary reading experience, or, for that matter, any experience of a work of art. If we read Enright's work from the phallic perspective provided to us by the symbolic order, *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?*, and *The Gathering* do not offer an explanation as to why the crises of the female protagonists come to an end in the closing lines of the narratives. Grace's existential crisis in *The Wig My Father Wore* is caused by her inability to take up a subject-position deemed appropriate in the symbolic order. Although she is not able to split her self properly from her mother and eventually repeats the latter's behaviour, Grace, at the end of the narrative, no longer wants to take her own life. In *What Are You Like?*, Maria is not able to remove the shattering tension she experiences due to the presence of her twin-sister Rose. On the contrary, by the end of the narrative, Rose has become a permanent factor in her life. Nevertheless, like Grace in *The Wig My Father Wore*, Maria no longer wants to take her own life, but is able to live it. In *The Gathering*, Veronica's crisis is caused by the death of her brother Liam. Although she, at first, responds to this event by trying to create a distance between herself and the people who are able to destabilise her sense of self – a reaction which makes perfect sense from a phallic perspective – she, at the end of the narrative, wants to return back to them before she has been able to secure her own identity.

Reading these works from a phallic perspective, the conclusions of these narratives might indeed cause the reader to experience a certain dissatisfaction. After all, the solutions found by the female protagonists at the end of the narratives can hardly be called solutions from within a phallic framework. However, if we were to read these novels from a matrixial perspective, their messages are intrinsically changed. For Grace, in *The Wig My Father Wore*, the understanding that her mother was there once, and is still with her, enables her to both live her life and give life. For Maria, in *What Are You Like?*, it is not the cutting off of her twin-sister, but the presence of this almost too similar other, which enables her to continue her life.

For Veronica, in *The Gathering*, it is the acceptance of her own vulnerability which enables her to go home and get her life back. Instead of experiencing the conclusions of each of these narrative as discomforting, which is how I initially experienced *The Gathering*, Ettinger's theory enables us to read these endings as a relief. Understanding the subject as always already partial and as in need of matrixial encounter-events with others, a matrixial reading of these novels indeed open up a feminine understanding of the ethical relationship. This understanding has a solacing effect on Enright's female protagonists and it might also have a solacing effect on the reader.

5.3 A case of life and death

As I have explained in the introduction to my research, the question of the subject has been occupying thinkers from within a variety of often overlapping fields. It being a western invention, post-colonial theorists, such as feminist philosopher and post-colonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have both criticised the subject and tried to articulate what it could be for those who have no place within the western world. From within the field of Queer theory, the implied heterosexuality of the subject has been questioned and criticised. Queer theorists, amongst which feminist philosopher Judith Butler is probably the most well-known, have attempted to free the subject from these implications and articulate it in alternative terms. Ettinger is thus not alone in her understanding that the so-called universal subject is in need of a radical rewriting, and in her attempt to provide us with such a revisiting.

Ettinger is also not alone in her attempt to save the subject from the negativity it is always already associated with. In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Donna Haraway has pointed out the destructive nature of the phallic gaze through which western scientists continue to look at the world

(Haraway 1988). In her plea for a different perspective, she has argued that we should use critical theory not to further undermine or deconstruct the subject, but to develop an understanding of it which will offer us life instead of death (Haraway 1988: 580). In *The Freudian Body*, Bersani has also discussed and criticised the violent nature of the symbolic order (Bersani 1986: 46). Like Ettinger, he has returned to Freud's original work to find an opening for a more positive and productive reading. He has, for example, tried to re-articulate the masochistic nature of human sexuality. From within the phallic framework, this masochism can only be understood as suicidal: sexuality entails the wilful shattering of the self. Bersani, however, has argued that, if looked at differently, masochism can also be understood as a productive, and not a suicidal, force (Bersani 1986: 39).

Throughout the last couple of years, I have been addressing the question 'Who am I?' or 'Who will or can I become?', on the intersection of three specific, though interdisciplinary, academic fields: Gender Studies, Post-Colonial Studies and Conflict Studies. Not because I was in search for a definite answer, but because I found that the issues we concern ourselves with in these fields – heterosexism, racism, ethnic conflict, homophobia to name a few – often spring from a misrecognition of the self in relation to the other. Although I have taken Ettinger's work and have placed it within the field of feminist philosophy, it is far from limited to this specific area. On the contrary, the ontological level on which she engages with Freudian psychoanalysis extends far beyond the field of Gender Studies, as well as Conflict Studies and Post-Colonial Studies. I have turned to Ettinger's theory of the matrix because, by bringing back an experience we should have been forgotten but never really did, she has been able to broaden the phallic symbolic order through the inclusion of a non-phallic dimension which was already there in the past, remains with us in the present, and even continuous beyond our individual presence in this world. Despite using the pregnant female body as her starting-point, and articulating a dimension which is, for now, more open to women than it is

to men, the universality of the experience she has described will be able to strengthen and develop those fields in which the question of subjectivity and the self-other relationship remain highly relevant. From the denial of the womb, to the issue of binary thinking, to the (mis)understanding of the self as a coherent entity, Ettinger has moved away from the flaws and pitfalls of Freudian psychoanalysis and opened up a different understanding of the ethical relationship. Not one which is based on negativity, but on a mutual understanding of and sharing in each other's trauma and suffering. By tracing back the steps that have been made and radically rewriting them, Ettinger provides us with a feminine ethics which, even in this man's world, might indeed offer us a chance for life.

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