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**Section:** Creative criticism

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**Keywords:** Book of Ruth; Mieke Bal; Walter Benjamin; Laurie Anderson; bereavement

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**Received:** 17 April, 2023.

**Accepted:** 24 May, 2023.

**Published:** 15 July, 2023.

**How to cite:** Campbell, Shelley. “‘Painting’ Ruth: the *mise en abyme* of loss.” *Inscriptions* 6, no. 2 (July 2023): 29-40.

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# 'Painting' Ruth: the *mise en abyme* of loss

Shelley Campbell<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In accordance with the idea of *mise en abyme*, Mieke Bal and Harold Fisch identify aspects in the Book of Ruth that allude to earlier episodes in the Old Testament. As well as building the House of Israel and Ruth's role in it, there are textual references to the laws of family (Levirate Law) and land (Redemption). While Fisch sees moral progression through the allusions to Ruth's foremothers, Walter Benjamin does not countenance the notion of progression in the domain of history. Instead, Benjamin extracts the details of history from the detritus of the past to explain the present and forecast the future. With Fisch and Bal, I am learning to live with loss by removing the linearity of time that *mise en abyme* affords. From Benjamin, I am collecting fragments of family stories by ploughing into the past in order to understand the present.

**Keywords:** Book of Ruth; Mieke Bal; Walter Benjamin; Laurie Anderson; bereavement

The term *mise en abyme* encompasses a range of examples from art history and literature to psychoanalysis. André Gide is responsible for pulling the term from its origins and inserting it within the context of narrative. The first definition of *mise en abyme* is a motif in heraldry; *abyme* translates to "the abyss." Thus it is a shield within a shield, a second shield at the centre or the heart of the shield. Some examples portray a third shield at the centre of the second, producing telescoping replicas of three. As the most felicitous metaphor and interchangeable term for the activity of the *mise en abyme* in text, Lucien Dällenbach settles on the reflecting surface of the mirror.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is a (sub-)text within the text.

Before launching into the creative potentials of encountering "the abyss," it is prudent to consider Nietzsche's aphorism, "Anyone who fights with monsters should take care that he does not in the process become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes back into you."<sup>3</sup> In Freud's definition of the artist, inspiration is freed from the confinement of the locked-away personal and shaped into a formalised object: a painting, a sculpture, a poem, a thing that no longer represents the maker alone. In another manner of drawing out buried content, Walter Benjamin explains to Theodor Adorno that "each idea in the *Arcades* had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness reigns."<sup>4</sup> Whether the source

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<sup>2</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley with Emma Hughes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989): 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1886]): §146, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson, (London, NLB, 1977 [1936]): 127.

is called the abyss, the unconscious, or the ruins of Benjamin's historical materialism, this territory is for visiting and not residing. And the fragment that is procured is hard won.

There is, then, a *mise en abyme* of reflection, and another *mise en abyme* that is tucked away and more difficult to access. For many of us, the occasion for noticing reflections, discovering hidden impressions, and fathoming the depth of our resources, is misfortune. My daughter took her life in October 2020. Apart from being immersed in the deepest recesses of despair, I am developing the means to live with the inconceivable reality of her death. A mourner of bereavement by suicide is thrown into the condition without rehearsal; it is an experience for which one cannot prepare or escape. Without establishing a full version of the technical aspects of Immanuel Kant's epistemology, we can conceive that the occurrence of a sensory intuition – in this case, it is the shock of not only the loss but also its manner – without an adequate concept cannot be experienced. This kind of loss, then, does not have an attendant concept into which the trauma can be perceived as an object of experience. The rule is that sensuous intuitions – the concrete data we experience through our senses – must be brought under adequate concepts (the abstract, or perfect/pure forms) to sustain a sense of inner unity. In Kant's taxonomy, an intuition without a concept is rendered "blind."<sup>5</sup> For those struggling to comprehend a crisis, they are cast adrift; their rational power to understand or to integrate is broken. Unity, the goal of the process of experience and comprehension, cannot be achieved.

This project is finding a way back. As Emily Dickinson says, "The Truth must dazzle gradually Or every man be blind --"; loss cannot be synthesised in one fell swoop. It is a rational process of unifying the experiential/conceptual separation that shock elicits. While learning

to live with bereavement, there are stages, and one can never aspire to returning to the kind of "normal" that existed before the adversity. To bring about the process of recovery, then, I am borrowing the *mise en abyme* condition of unhooking the linearity of time.

Without the saturnine beat of time, I have gathered the mothers and daughters of my household into a single work in this case, a "shield." When I say, "mothers and daughters," I am referring to my grandmother, my mother, myself, and my daughter. Each of us is both a "mother" and a "daughter" – considerably different family roles – except for my daughter who was ever only a daughter. Throughout the essay, I refer to we four as "the mothers and daughters." While we cohabit the same instance on the timeline, I am granted another perspective.

When I started this project, it came with the title, *Painting the Bible*. Although the connection was unstructured and generous, the Bible, or an aspect of the Bible, had to prevail through the artwork I produced. When my daughter died, I could only focus on her and my desperate feelings of loss. If I were to continue with the project, I had to incorporate my personal experience into the research. When I read Mieke Bal's analysis of the intertextual technique of *mise en abyme* in the Book of Ruth, I found the idea of cascading time dove-tailed into my idea of grafting the mothers and daughters onto a single timeframe. In this way, we can share the same moment and by doing so, there is a fruitful opportunity for exploring loss.

Once I had the visual prompt of the shield, the subsequent stages of the project had their origins in an overwhelming desire to feel togetherness with the mothers and daughters. Without having a final work in mind, each step I took brought about the next. From an inner drive to interact with the mothers and

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A112.

daughters together with Bal's *mise en abyme* of Ruth, the shield image prompted the next exploration: what would we say to one another? To bring about a kind of communication, I wrote my side of a conversation. I shortened my statements to the fewest possible words, and for responses, I used de-contextualised sentence fragments from Ruth.

While I was becoming accustomed to removing the meaning of text from its narrative, I read *The Berlin chronicles* by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's childhood recollections prompted the idea of writing family stories to provide "voices" for the mothers and daughters. I pared down each account to the fewest possible words and undertaking the same process, I abridged the already shortened stories to single words or parts of sentences. Paradoxically, by reducing the text to incoherence – for Benjamin, "traces" – I am searching for unity. As a work in progress, its outcome is unknown.

Accordingly, to begin the process of rebuilding cohesion and unity – living with loss – I am exploring through practice Bal's identification of the intertextual literary technique *mise en abyme* in the reflecting surfaces of Ruth. Equally, Harold Fisch identifies instances in Ruth that allude to a series of transgressions throughout the lineage of the Genesis family. For Fisch, these trespasses are corrected in Ruth. In the first instance, then, Ruth appears to consist of a domestic matter on a single timeline. But by engaging in intertextual activity between Ruth and the Pentateuch, both Bal and Fisch identify wider states of affair, such as family, property, history, and jurisprudence. Through allusions and correspondences, the book's reach extends from the history of the Genesis family to the Davidic dynasty in Psalms, from Abraham to David.

Equally, by undoing the sequence of time, the fan-like expulsion of memories afforded by the stories is an oxymoron. According to Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, overturning time for space will not provide an over-

arching pattern or all-encompassing image that shares similarities or repeats patterns in a totalising structure of progression. For Benjamin, the idea of "progress" is anathema within the framework of history. Instead, through the atomisation of the past – the ruins, fragments, discredited, rubbish, marginal, forgotten, etc. – the harbingers of the future reside. The analyses of Ruth, especially through Fisch, expresses the idea of progress, while the idea of history as a series of progressions is disproved by Benjamin. For my purposes, I am selecting from Bal and Fisch the *mise en abyme* of intertextual referencing through allusion and the disturbance of sequence and time. But on the idea of progression, I turn to Benjamin. With Benjamin, I cannot accept a notion of lineal progression especially when the latest development in the history of the mothers and daughters is suicide. Instead via Benjamin, I am extracting "fragments" from the lives of the mothers and daughters to provide opportunities for intertextual reflection. Benjamin's portrayals of his childhood in Berlin are a prototype for sketching episodes I know or have been told about my family.

To learn to live with loss, then, I have been searching for meaning: How did I get here? Do my circumstances reach back to my mothers' lives? My daughter's life? Does my daughter's suicide "reflect" an aspect of my mother's life, or her mother's, or for that matter, mine? What Benjamin calls "traces," I have represented as family stories and photographs, see Figures three and four. By the single fact that particular accounts have registered in my memory, I am raising them to the status of sub-text for the condition of living with loss. And in order for the women to speak to me, I use the text of Ruth. To bring about dialogue, I remove the context and meaning from Ruth and similarly the content from the family extracts. Kibbled to single words, I establish a connection between the "remains" of Ruth with the "remains" of the family stories.

Within the body of the essay, I have interspersed images, family stories, and invented conversations. As selections from a work in progress, I am including two abridgements of the thirty-six stories I am writing. These accounts generate the sub-text that furnishes opportunities for *mise en abyme* reflections. At this point, I cannot anticipate an outcome for the project; the presentation in this essay is an explanation of process with its theoretical underpinnings.

I am defending my approach, first, through Bal’s analysis of the activity of *mise en abyme* in the Book of Ruth. From another point of view, Fisch’s identification of the Old Testament sub-text in Ruth proposes an idea of progression within covenant-structure by addressing early trespasses which, importantly for Fisch, are corrected in Ruth. Leaving aside the notion of progression, I endorse drawing out family stories as data for examining the reflecting surfaces of *mise en abyme* by offering an account of Benjamin’s process of considering his childhood as a tableau of the historical present he found himself: in the rise of fascism between the wars, a Jew in Europe. To illustrate the point about the elusiveness of memory, I present Laurie Anderson’s story about the death of her mother.

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To remove the constraint of chronology from the lineal roster of births, deaths, marriages, and issue, I produced a “shield” of the four generations of women in my family. It is in opposition to the sequencing of autobiography, and instead expresses a network of associations. In the image of a shield, the order of events disappears. The construction presents an impression of the mothers and daughters embodying a moment outside the nomenclature of past, present, and future. By cascading time into space, I have created an illusion of togetherness and

simultaneity.



Figure 1: Clockwise from top left: Faye Jean Vick, 2014, 1989–2020; Anna Yantha (on the right), c. 1920s, 1899–1927; Faye Campbell (Faye Dawson/Frances Josephine Kosabuski), c. 1950s, 1921–1983; and Shelley Campbell, 1988, 1962–.

Up to a point, the shield-image brought me some solace. At the same time, it created a new problem. Now that we were assembled together, it brought about a desire to communicate. What do I want to say to my daughter, my mother, my grandmother who I have never met? What do I want to know? How can I get them to talk to me?

I was longing for contact, but I was unable to compose the questions that would lead me to the kind of responses I wanted to hear. Nor did I know what I wanted to hear. I removed the urgency of having to put the entire world into one sentence. Rather than articulating finely tuned queries, I wrote my side of a conversation that occurred while examining the images on the shield. I removed the restriction of coherence: nothing had to make sense. Without knowing what I was asking, my words started to flow. I composed thirty-six statements. I condensed, simplified, and cut out as many

words as I could. The final expressions are simple and sometimes abstract: I don't see *it*; Please may I have *it*?; What is *it*?; I'm alone.

But once I found my stride, something else happened. I grew increasingly desperate. I wanted to create a shape, find a pattern, and feel fortified through the articulation of the feelings and ideas I possess regarding the presence and absence of these women. But instead, I became even more divided. The process was churning up rather than settling down.

The presentation of the words that normally float anchorless in my mind seemed incomplete. Although it was helpful to shift the repetitive murmurings onto a sheet of paper, I wanted to hear their voices; "Speak, speak or be damned!" Donatello says to his life-like sculpture, *Il Zuccone*, in a moment of frustration.<sup>6</sup> Pushing the *mise en abyme* analogy I was studying in Ruth, I decided to create conversations with the mothers and daughters by finding their responses within the text of Ruth.

I printed two translations of Ruth – NIV and NRSV – and as a condition, I began to separate the story of Ruth from its component parts: words. By removing the context, I atomised the text by considering the words alone. Although I come back to them as the work progresses, at this point, I ignored the questions I wanted to ask. From the text, I highlighted parts of sentences: those that resonate and expressions I liked. Afterwards, I co-ordinated my outpourings with the sentence fragments I had isolated from Ruth. Through the text of Ruth, the mothers and daughters "spoke" to me.

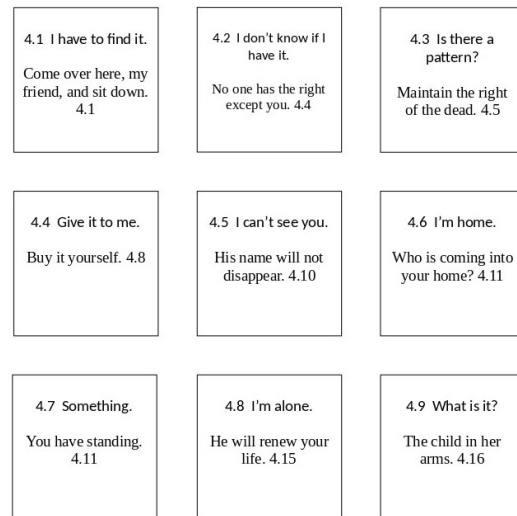


Figure 2: *Detail. Nine of thirty-six text images. The first quote is my pared down query or comment. In the second, text from Ruth is used as a response from the mothers and daughters.*

\*

In this section, I am conveying instances of the reflecting surfaces of Ruth according to Bal and Fisch. Due to brevity, I cannot represent all the intertextual allusions and instead, I focus on the Levirate Law and the law of Redemption. In Levir, a childless widow expects a kinsman of the deceased – usually a brother – to marry the widow and the first child of issue takes the name of the first husband. In this way, the dead man's name is not lost to posterity (Deut. 25.5–6). Redemption is a provision for the preservation of the title of the dead man's land. Once sold, the package is either bought back, or after a period of time, it is returned to the family (Lev. 25.23–55). The two laws ensure the protection of family

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 [1550]): 152.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the structure of covenant history," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 4 (October, 1982): 435; and, Robert L. Cohn, "Overcoming otherness in the Book of Ruth," *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana V. Edelman (New York, Bloomsbury, T &

and property. While these are prioritised, the principles embody an endowment for widows.

For some commentators, the apparent bucolic romance of Ruth instead resurrects long ago indiscretions in the Genesis family and legitimates their moral legacy.<sup>7</sup> Added and connected to those "corrections" and as Ruth is a foremother of King David, there is an urgency at stake. The House of Israel is built upon two doctrines: family and land, "... the building of the house of Israel, against all odds..."<sup>8</sup> In Ruth, the family's lineage is finally recovered after a stage-by-stage progression through Genesis. First, to prepare the field for restoration, the outstanding family severance between Abraham and Lot is addressed and repaired in the *mise en abyme* allusion of Ruth (who descends from Lot) "clinging" or "cleaving" to Naomi (from Abraham) (1.17).<sup>9 10</sup> The term's appearance invokes the kind of "cleaving" that refers to marital bonding (Gen. 2.24). To add significance to this interpretation, Ruth imparts a curse should anything but death separate her from Naomi in her remarkable declaration of devotion (1.16-17).

As a Moabite, Ruth's ethnicity is incanted repeatedly drawing attention to the dynasty that came about through Lot's trespass: Moab, the child of Lot and his eldest daughter. Lot's daughter's deception, then, is a most compromising affair (Gen. 19.33-38). This type of depravity at the foundation of Ruth's ancestral dynasty – and, importantly, David's – be-

gins to be transformed by Boaz's ancestral line: Judah and Tamar. Judah denies Tamar's entitlement to the Levirate Law and accordingly, Tamar designs a tryst in order to receive what she is rightfully due. When her pregnancy is announced, Judah's hostility towards Tamar – "have her burned to death" (Gen. 38.24) – is hardly a condition for atonement.<sup>11</sup> On learning his paternity regarding Tamar's child(ren), and the length she went to acquire the dispensation, Judah finally admits, "She is more righteous than I." (Gen. 38-26). As the father-in-law and not the father, the encounter between Judah and Tamar starts to relieve the pressure of Lot's unalloyed transgression.

Although there is a bit of guile from both principals, the union of Boaz and Ruth transcends Lot's debauchery, Judah's disavowal of Levir, and Tamar's procurement of the Levirate bequest on her terms. In Ruth 3, the threshing floor scene elicits allusions to Lot's daughter's seductions and Tamar's role-playing. In another *mise en abyme* moment which implies Levir but not Redemption, Naomi calls Boaz a "kinsman," but not a redeemer (3.2). Perhaps, then, Naomi is considering a Levir union – family, posterity – and not a land settlement. Or, if Levir is successful, the land settlement might be raised later. In either case, Naomi's special interest is the birth of a child. Before approaching Boaz, she advises Ruth to wait until he is sufficiently *full* (of wine) (3.3).

T Clark, 2014): 168.

<sup>8</sup> Mieke Bal, "Heroism and proper names, or the fruits of analogy," *Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001 [1993]): 66. See also J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: cultural representations of biblical women* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996): 144-145; and, Adele Berlin, "Ruth and the continuity of Israel," *Reading Ruth: contemporary women reclaim a sacred story*, eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Teimer (New York, Ballantine Books, 1994): 256-257.

<sup>9</sup> Fisch, *Structure of Covenant History*, 435.

<sup>10</sup> From this point, all references to Ruth are cited by chapter and verse, i.e., (2.4). All other biblical references include book, chapter, and verse. All citations will be in text.

<sup>11</sup> The death of the first son, Er, makes Tamar a widow. The second son, Onan, unites with Tamar, but obstructs a full union. Onan's withdrawal from Tamar angers God, and he is punished with his life. Judah, the father of the three sons, blames Tamar for the deaths and prevents his third child, Shelagh, from satisfying the Levirate Law on behalf of the first son (Gen. 38).

Why Naomi's emphasis on Boaz's status as a relative, and not that of a redeemer? I suggest she has remembered Ruth's ancestors, the daughters of Lot. She wants Ruth to employ a peculiarly Moabite talent—the seduction of drunken elder relatives.<sup>12</sup>

Judith McKinlay puts it this way, "A chorus of intertextual allusions to other sexually questionable foreign or outsider women, including that ancestral daughter of Lot, can be all too clearly heard [in the text of Ruth]." <sup>13</sup> Once Ruth's identity is revealed to Boaz, the similarity between Lot's daughter and Tamar is transformed. In the first instance, Ruth identifies Boaz as both kinsman *and* redeemer. In other words, her presence on the threshing floor is not a trifling seduction. By naming Boaz's duty – what Tamar hid from Judah – Ruth's motivation is clear; she wants to solemnise the encounter. Since Ruth's original motivating factor is Naomi's wellbeing (1.16-17), her aspiration is for both posterity and redemption; in tandem, the following actions of the men at the gates and the women in the neighbourhood move the drama from the personal sphere into the respectability of the public.

Invested in Obed's legitimate birth, the two branches of the family are corrected, and the accrued impiety of ancestral trespasses is adjudicated.<sup>14</sup>

For Harold Fisch, the three stories are similar – each follows a structural pattern: descent, disaster, abandonment, redemption, "the bed-trick," celebration, levir, and issue – but in each

account, the conditions of the repeating elements are more than mere reflection.<sup>15</sup> Fisch identifies a "clear moral advance."<sup>16</sup> At this point, Fisch breaks from a structuralist reading of Ruth because the identification of patterns leads to different outcomes. For Fisch, although the discovery of the structural threads yield an illuminating cluster of signs, it is insufficient. While the stories refer one to the other, "the biblical text is seen to reveal not just a pattern within the brain, but rather a path of salvation; not just structure, but covenant-structure."<sup>17</sup>

As the analysis presents, the instance of Naomi's reference to Boaz as a guardian-redeemer (2.20) invokes a catalogue of associations. By calling Boaz a guardian-redeemer in the threshing floor scene (3.9), Ruth presents herself as a receiving subject of the laws of Levir and Redemption. Accordingly, she calls on Boaz's sense of responsibility to fulfil his duty, and under this urgency – he knows she knows he knows – the matter is addressed and legislated at the city gates the following day. The utterance of the term "guardian-redeemer" abbreviates hundreds of years into a single instant.

Although "guardian-redeemer" evokes a depth of material, its resonance is not immediately relevant. A reader may not focus on this component alone to locate what is important about Ruth's story. It is hiding in plain sight. Likewise, I am writing the mothers' and daughters' stories without any certainty about which element will resonate, or indeed whether or

<sup>12</sup> Neil Glover, "Your people, my people: an exploration of ethnicity in Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 3 (2009): 304.

<sup>13</sup> Judith A. McKinlay, "A son is born to Naomi: a harvest for Israel," *Ruth and Esther*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 155.

<sup>14</sup> Fisch, *Structure of Covenant History*, 430-432.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Cohn, "Overcoming otherness," 171. Cohn refers to recurring episodes as "fairly fixed ordered series of plot elements or motifs" that are updated taking into account earlier versions but spinning "the tale differently." By providing "a counterhistory, a tale of union rather than dissolution, the book provides a fresh basis for legitimating an inclusive post-exilic Jewish identity." *Ibid.*, 171, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Fisch, *Structure of Covenant History*, 434.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 437



not an abridged instance will yield any kind of result.



For allusions in Ruth, the Pentateuch provides a readymade text for the raw material of *mise en abyme*. For the mothers and daughters, I have a few photographs and an assortment of short accounts I have been told, once, twice, or three times removed. Nor are the stories heavily endowed occasions exploring God's nature as in the binding of Isaac. Instead they are snapshots from an ordinary life: the day the dog buries a bone in a horse's manger, the day the pie falls on the floor, and the day she tries to reverse up the drive. But as reflecting surfaces, these excerpts anticipate the current circumstances I find myself.

In its provision of locating invaluable data in the banality of over-looked and forgotten material, writing excerpts from a family's life is endorsed by Walter Benjamin's historical materialism. By prising out a fragment from an over-arching context, Benjamin, the allegorist, collects a series of unrelated particulars and pieces together a montage of unity. Again, in a paradoxical manner, disparate elements illuminate a unified whole.

In Terry Eagleton's essay on Benjamin, he raises a cautionary note regarding the union of a classical text with a contemporary and ordinary account.<sup>18</sup> As Homer's *Odyssey* is the classical sub-text of a day in the life of Leopold Bloom, Eagleton has James Joyce's *Ulysses* in

mind. For Eagleton, by linking and levelling the two on par, each realm is divested of its "distinctiveness." "Allegory is in this sense symbolism run riot, pressed to a self-undoing extreme; if anything can now fulfil the role of a 'concrete universal', nothing is particularly remarkable."<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, the resulting effect produces elements of contemporary content that are reduced, and yet equivalent, to the totalising envelopment of the classical form under which they are gathered. But for Benjamin, the location of salvation is within dialectical agitation and brokenness. Thus a de-contextualised vista evokes "the ghostly traces of paradise ... in its sheer antithesis."<sup>20</sup> Allegory provides a structure through which a scavenger pulls single units from the detritus. For the allegorist, fresh meanings are established, readings go against the grain, and startling discoveries are disclosed. Removed from their contexts, these objects "can be plucked from their environs and woven together in a set of estranging correspondences."<sup>21</sup>

From a methodology of sifting through, foraging in, and dredging out the leftovers of an epoch, Walter Benjamin collars that era's prophecies of the future within its pits and ditches.<sup>22</sup> In order to examine his personal complexities, Benjamin practices the procedure through his childhood recollections in *A Berlin chronicle* and *Berlin childhood around 1900*. In the vignettes of his childhood, he uncovers "early traces of his later life."<sup>23</sup> In one instance, Benjamin recollects his tiring attempts to get to school on time, "The clock over the school playground seems as if damaged.... The hands

<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton, "The marxist rabbi," *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-327.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, "Introduction," *One-Way Street*, eds. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, NLB, 1979): 12.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Szondi, "Hope in the past: on Walter Benjamin," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 3, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, Spring (1978): 498.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 72.

stand at: 'Late'.<sup>24</sup> Once he arrives, his fatigue is overwhelming. He connects his "painful effort" of attending school to an adult version of it, "it was not until much later ... when I became aware that the hope I cherished of a position and an assured livelihood had always been in vain."<sup>25</sup>

In *A Berlin chronicle*, Benjamin describes an episode of sitting in a café and being overwhelmed by imaging a diagram of a kind of "map" of his life. From the fleeting impression, he draws a network of associations and connections resembling a "labyrinth." He gives little importance or significance to the mystery inhabiting its core, but instead emphasises "the many entrances leading into the interior."

These entrances I call primal acquaintances; each of them is a graphic symbol of my acquaintance with a person whom I met, not through other people, but through neighbourhood, family relationships, school comradeship, mistaken identity, companionship on travels, or other such ... situations. So many primal relationships, so many entrances to the maze.<sup>26</sup>

The "map" analogy addresses a set of linear data which metamorphoses into a visual portrayal. In other words, what is needed is "a visual, not a linear logic."<sup>27</sup> The chief insight is to enliven a lineage of associations – and the idea stretches beyond to other domains: history, law, religion, art, etc. – through the collection of fragments.<sup>28</sup> Benjamin wants to extract historical objects from their positions within the teleological narrative of the historians and con-

struct alternative meanings. By atomising the prevailing accounts of the nineteenth century, he discovers "the origins of the present" in the ruins of the past.<sup>29</sup> In the *Arcades* project, Benjamin visually constructs the era as a "textual montage."

Through Benjamin's courage to carry out an approach is both bold – for its innovation – and modest (for its primary source material), the hard work has already been done. By investing so heavily in the discounted and abandoned, and by according so little significance to time, Benjamin's textual montage produces visual portraiture. With Benjamin's locus of associations and map-making, I am writing passages from the lives of the mothers and daughters with some confidence that there is potential for illumination. If nothing else, the process has been insightful. By being fully absorbed in the matter at hand, I am taming the uncompromising experience of "bereavement by suicide" by bringing it under the concept "living with loss."



The final point is a caveat: the characteristic capriciousness of memory. As Benjamin considers the project of writing about Berlin, he realises that the topic "accustomed for years to waiting in the wings, would not so easily be summoned to the limelight."<sup>30</sup> For years, memories can squat unnoticed until suddenly offered "anew as if by chance."<sup>31</sup> As I indicated at the beginning of the essay, some memories and their presence in the clutter of the chron-

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin childhood around 1900*, 38, cited in Szondi, "Hope in the past," 498.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin chronicle," *One-Way Street* (London NLB, 1979 [1932]): 318–319.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades project* (Cambridge, MA/London, MIT Press, 1995): 218.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 305.

<sup>31</sup> Szondi, "Hope in the past," 495.

icles of a lifetime are hard won. In Kantian terms, sometimes a record exists but its significance is in arrest until an adequate concept is available. To illustrate this idea, Laurie Anderson's film *Heart of a Dog* portrays an autobiographical set of accounts of loss amongst which a latent impression is brought forward regarding her mother. Only after the death of her mother, Anderson possesses the capacity to integrate the meaning of the memory. In the film, she assembles sound, music, hand-drawn animations, dream fragments, and narratives as a cluster of expressions to document grief. Mark Kermode calls the work a "refractive musing on matters of life and death."<sup>32</sup>

Almost at the end, Anderson relates an episode about visiting her mother, who is nearing the end of her life. Anderson is worried because she does not love her mother and she decides to speak to a respected friend, Father Pierre, to ask advice about how to handle this dilemma. The priest advises her to take some flowers and to tell her mother that she has always cared about her. Anderson thinks, "I can do that."

When she arrives at the hospital, her mother's room is chaotic. It is loud and confusing, and the hospital staff is rushing around. There are no flowers, and there is no chance to say, "I've always cared about you." Then, suddenly, her mother is dead.

Anderson decides to practice a Buddhist exercise called the Mother Meditation. When you cannot feel anything, you undertake a kind of contemplation that asks you to find a moment when you felt your mother loved you without reserve. As you focus, you imagine that you have been everybody's mother, and they yours. Anderson searches but cannot find the moment when her mother's love conquered all doubt.

At this point in the film there is an interlude, and the narration stops. Anderson sings and the visuals present atmospheric 1970s footage of children ice skating on a small lake with an island at its centre. As viewers are watching the skaters, the narration begins again.

We lived by a lake and every winter it froze. We skated everywhere. One evening I was coming home from the movies and I was pushing my little brothers, Craig and Phil, in a stroller. I had decided to take them over to the island to look at the moon that was just coming up. But as we got close to the island, the ice broke. And the stroller sank into the dark water. And my first thought was, "Mom's going to kill me."

And I remembered the knitted balls on their hats as they disappeared into the black water. So I ripped off my jacket and I jumped into the freezing water and dove down and got Craig. And pulled him up and threw him on the ice. Then I dove down again, but I couldn't find the stroller. It had slipped down the muddy bank further down under the ice. Then I dove in again and I finally found the stroller and Phil was strapped in and I ripped the strap off and pulled him out and pushed him up onto the ice. Then I ran home one twin under each arm, frozen and screaming.

I ran in the door and I told my mother what had happened. And she stood there and said, "What a wonderful swimmer you are. And I didn't know you were such a good diver."

And when I think of her now, I realise that was the moment I had been trying to remember.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Mark Kermode, "Heart of a Dog review – portrait of the artist and her pooch," *The Guardian*, 22 May, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/22/heart-of-a-dog-laurie-anderson-review-haunting>.

<sup>33</sup> Laurie Anderson, *Heart of a Dog*, 2015.

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As already discussed, in the reflecting surfaces of Ruth, I discovered the *mise en abyme* of citing family stories while enduring bereavement by suicide. Over the years, I have heard a number of anecdotes about the mothers and daughters. Sometimes it seems that I have invented the stories. For the project in its entirety, I am amassing these fragments in a wall-mounted collection of records.

According to Bal and Fisch, Ruth's story "corrects" earlier transgressions in the history of the Genesis family. Although linear time is suspended to invoke reflecting surfaces through allusions, it is restored to identify incremental moral improvement from the violation of Lot's daughters, and the deceptions of Tamar and Judah, to the legitimisation of the marriage and issue of Ruth and Boaz. In other words, there is a kind of linear moral development in preparation for the Davidic covenant. While I have used family history for the reflecting surfaces of *mise en abyme*, I am unable to accept the idea of "progression" as a component of our broken lineage. But through Benjamin, I can forego this conclusion. According to him, there is a direct and immediate severance of any notion of progression, which is the central feature of his version of historical materialism.

Without the dispensation of hindsight, I cannot trace a dialectic of improvement in my family. But, following Benjamin, in the presentation of the stories, I am searching for the precursors that are embedded in the past. It is not only my memory I am fossicking, but my mother's accounts from her already edited repertoire. Accordingly, I do not possess the source to find those relics waiting "in the wings."

For my concluding remarks, I am presenting two paragraphs, excerpts from their stories, and the corresponding responses in Ruth. This, then, is my strategy for untwining the past.

While I am processing these long-ago impressions for explanatory precursors, the mothers and daughters are responding through the text of Ruth.



Figure 3: *Cherry Pie*. "Jackie shall have a cherry pie." Ruth clung to her (1.14). "Accidents happen." By speaking kindly, you have put me at ease (2.13).



Figure 4: *Frank Murphy*. "Molly, her dearest friend." Deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me (1.17). "He looks at Doreen." In someone else's field you might be harmed (2.2).

In a series of works, each lays the foundation for the following piece. At first, I was overflowing with distress, sorrow, and longing. To address my desire to be with the mothers and daughters and prompted by Bal's analysis of the *mise en abyme* of Ruth, I began the project by making a shield of our images. As a shield, the four of us seemed to inhabit the same time-frame, so naturally, I wanted to communicate with my family. Using the authority of Benjamin's historical materialism, I used the text of Ruth shorn of its content to respond to my personal expressions and queries in the midst of grief. To provide "reflecting surfaces" through which I can find associations, connections, and the relations that Benjamin encounters in the labyrinth of his family and friends, I am creating sketches from the remains I possess of our family mythology. Following, by removing

context, content, and meaning from Ruth and now from the short stories, I control a collection of words that have produced a medium. Reduced to a handful, I am looking to restore consensus in the fewest possible words. As I showed with the term "guardian-redeemer," I am aiming to write a single-word story for the mothers and daughters. With Benjamin, a bare fragment gleaned from the past has the power to portray the enigma of the present and the auspices of the future.

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**Received:** 17 April, 2023.

**Accepted:** 24 May, 2023.

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author's own expense.

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Campbell, Shelley. "Painting' Ruth: the *mise en abyme* of loss." *Inscriptions* 6, no. 2 (July 2023): 29-40.