Margaret Atwood

FEMINISM AND FICTION

FIONA TOLAN

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*Feminism
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INTRODUCTION

> "I live in the society; I also put the society inside my books so that you get a box within a box effect." [1]

Any undertaking to examine the nature of the relationship between fiction and theory is immediately problematic. So many of the most elementary aspects of the discussion are contentious. How can a novelist be said to relate to a particular theory to which they claim no allegiance? How can the abstractions of a theoretical discourse be said to enter into a relationship with a novelist? And further, if such a relationship is to be presumed to exist, is it demonstrable?

This book examines the novels of Margaret Atwood in conjunction with the development of second-wave feminism, and attempts to demonstrate the existence of a dynamic relationship between her fiction and feminist theory. Atwood is an interesting subject for an examination of the connection between theory and fiction for two reasons. Firstly, her career, which for this purpose is dated from the writing of her first novel in 1965, spans the four decades in which second-wave feminism has so actively developed and counter-developed, and secondly, because she is so evidently a culturally and theoretically-aware writer who both uses and challenges the ideas which permeate her culture.

A consequence of this awareness is a tension between the literary theorist who would read Atwood's novels in terms of a prevalent theory such as feminism, and the self-consciously theoretical or political aspects of her novels. This conflict is peculiar to the contemporary writer and is largely a postmodern or metafictional dilemma. It means that the text is no longer a passive recipient of theoretical interpretation, but enters into a dynamic relationship with the theoretical discourse, frequently anticipating future developments yet to be articulated by an academic discourse.

Atwood's political interests are by no means confined to feminist debate – a fact that productively complicates any critical readings of

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[1] Margaret Atwood quoted in Margaret Kaminski, "Preserving Mythologies", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll, Princeton, 1990, 28.

her work – but this book looks specifically at how her novels respond to contact with feminist analysis. The focus on Atwood's feminism is in acknowledgement of the common political ground that Atwood holds with feminist ideology. The last forty years have seen the rapid rise and expansion of second-wave feminism as it has come to permeate literary theory and criticism, interacting with and informing numerous other theoretical and political fields. Indeed, this diversity of connection means that feminism is less a theory – suggesting a coherent trajectory of thought – than a discourse: a discussion of multiple related ideas. "Second-wave feminism" is understood here as an umbrella term that usefully incorporates a wide variety of related but diverse and occasionally contradictory discourses, centring on the subjects of gender, femininity, and sexuality. The broad focus of second-wave feminism is appropriate to Atwood's own political breadth.

An examination of both Atwood's novels and the contemporaneous progression of feminist discourse from the 1960s to the present day quickly reveals a sympathy of concern and a coincidence of enquiry. Consequently, Atwood has repeatedly been pressured to support and endorse feminist politics and to explicitly associate her work with the movement. She has famously refused to be drawn into such an allegiance, and over the years has repeated in various guises the formula perfected after the publication of her novel, *The Edible Woman*, about which she said:

> I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that's what things were like in 1965.[2]

This refusal to be drawn into the feminist camp characterises Atwood's public discussion of her work. However, such denials do not preclude a feminist examination of her writing. Because feminism is not a bounded, monolithic theory, it is insupportable to claim that a novel may react and interact with feminist themes and still operate outside of feminism. In fact, second-wave feminism, by its historical nature, has always contained an internal tension between activism and theoretical discourse, and consequently, a dialectical negotiation between what does and does not constitute "real" feminism has always

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[2] Atwood quoted in Kaminski, "Preserving Mythologies", 27.

been present within the discourse. Such a notion of inclusive and exclusive theoretical discourses will be challenged in the following chapters, which seek to demonstrate that discourse, by its very nature, is connective, permeable, and diffusive.

This study begins with a belief in the importance of fiction writers such as Atwood as instigators of theoretical debate rather than mere passive recorders of its impact. This view in dependent on certain assumptions: it is assumed that the text does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is subject to a multitude of influences and ideas. These ideas form the cultural and political background against which a writer works, and they inevitably permeate the text. Influences are many and varied and frequently interact and inform each other in a manner that generates entirely new areas of thought. To deconstruct the work of any author is to identify a promiscuous intercourse of popular, political and academic influences. If one then seeks to identify the thread of a single idea running through the work of a particular novelist, it is to be expected that the idea will not remain uncontaminated. A theory such as feminism, which is simultaneously political, popular, and academic, immediately negotiates sites of interaction with a myriad of alternative discourses. Consequently, the feminism to be read in Atwood's novels is not the feminism that is to be discovered in feminist textbooks. Therefore, it is to be assumed that the novelist has generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse.

To support this argument, the initial aspect of this book contains two elements: the first is an examination of feminism's influence on Atwood's work; this aims to illustrate the moments in her writing when the absorption of feminist theory is identifiable. Meanwhile, the second element entails a demonstration of how feminist influences are mediated by interaction with other identifiable factors within her work, that is, moments in which feminism as it appears in Atwood's writing undergoes a shift in direction or conclusion.

In addition to being influenced, it is argued that a novelist has the power to influence. It is in this assertion that the third – and central – element of my discussion lies. The novelist absorbs influences from his or her culture, and these influences interact in a manner at once unpredictable and generative, whereby the pure theory that is absorbed undergoes a process of contamination and manipulation by the novel. The third element of the argument is that this altered theory is then

disseminated by the novel, that is, it enters into the popular culture and becomes part of the public consciousness, absorbed by theorists in observations from which they then formulate and develop their theories.

This multi-step process of creation, dissemination, absorption, and adaptation results in a spiral of influence between the novelist and the theorist, or what could be better understood as a symbiotic relationship, with each providing material for the other. Although it is impossible to provide empirical proof of this process of evolution, the following chapters highlight moments when Atwood's work demonstrably anticipates future movements within feminism. Her work is never presumed to be a sole influence or a direct precipitant of feminist development, but it is identified as a salient and intelligent component of a general cultural discourse.

This argument is illustrated by close examination of the first eleven novels written by Atwood. The publication dates of these novels span a period of thirty-four years, from 1969 to 2003. Atwood's poetry is not considered, primarily in an attempt to limit the focus of the argument to manageable proportions. Second-wave feminism is presumed to broadly encompass the final four decades of the twentieth century, although Chapter X introduces the concept of the third wave, which is often dated from as early as the 1980s.

Finally, it is worth noting that the position from which this book begins is largely historicist. The cultural context of the text's production is closely examined, and where possible, authorial intention is considered. However, the analysis is also significantly anti-authorial, as it frequently works against Atwood's much publicised disavowal of feminist intention. This disregard is justified by a general rejection of the belief that the text's meaning is formulated at the moment of its production and remains unchanging thereafter. On the contrary, it is assumed that each reader experiences a dynamic interaction with the text, making associations and uncovering connections, and that the writer is equally a dynamic reader of texts. What results is a view of literature as a product of its time, but also as a shifting product of the time in which it is being read. The text is no longer a stable construct of situated influences, but stands in relation to both its predecessors and its successors.

Writers, readers, and communication

In establishing an understanding of how the text functions in relation to its historical context and its author, it is also necessary to consider how the text relates to the reader. Literary critic Jeremy Hawthorn suggests that literature can enter into the conflicts of ideologies, and "can display such conflicts for those readers willing to approach literary texts as records of complex and changing engagements with historical realities – and as the means whereby more challenging and creative engagements can be negotiated".[3] This view sees the text as a site of interaction, in which the ideological engagement already present can be further developed by readers who bring their own ideological concerns to the text. This is a complicated procedure, and one which is difficult to articulate. Stuart Hall does it very well in his essay "Encoding/decoding", which, although it refers to television viewing, manages to express something of the same process occurring in literature.

Hall addresses the manner in which a message is conveyed by television to an audience. Overturning the traditionally linear model of communication – sender/message/receiver – he proposes that communication should instead be understood as a circulatory process of encoding and decoding, whereby a message is not simply actively sent and passively received, but is first encoded by the sender and then decoded by the receiver in a manner not entirely determinable by the sender. Rather than the "perfectly transparent communication" that the sender desires, what is actually achieved is "systematically distorted communication".[4] The simple three-step process is now better understood as "a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction".[5] This is effectively the same framework being applied here to Atwood and her work. Where Hall traces the sending and receiving of a single message, the following chapters will instead attempt to track the movements of a complex discourse, in which communications are being sent and received simultaneously by multiple parties. The

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[3] Jeremy Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*, London, 1996, 227.

[4] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall, London, 1980, 135.

[5] *Ibid*., 128.

moment of reproduction on Hall's communication pathway is also the moment of further circulation. However, this is not to assume that the path itself is circular, but rather it is conceived of as a spiral, where each previous communication encourages the evolution of the next.

The consequence of this revised system of communication is the promotion of the reader, and the "birth of the reader" has been an increasingly popular topic ever since Roland Barthes declared "The Death of the Author" in 1968. Hawthorn articulates one simple understanding of the role of the reader when he says that "*Response* as well as *communication* is fundamental to the way in which art functions: artworks are items to which different individuals bring different expectations, experiences, knowledge – and, as a result, from which different responses result".[6] This is simply another description of Hall's decoding process. Both writers concur that the reader brings something to the text, and that the text itself is unstable because the completion of its function is reliant upon its being received by the reader, who is, by definition, a site of uncertain and shifting influences.

The argument being presented in this book rests upon an understanding of Atwood-the-author as, simultaneously, Atwood-the-reader. Part of what she is presumed to be reading is abstract: it is the culture as a whole. Atwood describes this in the following way: "novels have people; people exist in a social milieu; all of the cultural milieu gets into the novel."[7] However, the vague concept of the milieu is made more concrete by its distillation into texts of varying kinds: newspapers, novels, and books of theory. These are the influences, referred to above, which form the background against which a writer works, and to which Pierre Macherey was referring in his influential 1966 book, *A Theory of Literary Production*, when he wrote: "a book never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them."[8] This premise can be considered the starting point for the argument being presented here.

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[6] Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, 76.

[7] Atwood quoted in Gregory Fitz Gerald and Kathryn Crabbe, "Evading the Pigeonholers", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 137.

[8] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), trans. Geoffrey Wall, London, 1978, 53.

One of the difficulties posed in the undertaking of an investigation such as this is the collection of reliable information about the texts that Atwood had read before writing a particular novel. On rare occasions, this information was made specifically available. In the Introduction to *The Edible Woman*, whilst defending her work against feminist interpretation, Atwood admits to having read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, whereas in the acknowledgements of *Cat's Eye*, she mentions the work of Stephen Hawking as a valuable source of information. Such references can initiate a very specific comparative analysis, but other, less defined influences are more difficult to trace. There are moments when Atwood seems to deliberately echo another writer, and whilst it remains unclear whether this is a direct reference to an identifiable text, or is rather an intuitive articulation of a simultaneously detected problem or issue, it can reasonably be assumed that Atwood takes her part in a cultural web of reference across which popular ideas pass.

Other influences are not directly textual, such as liberalism, Canadian nationalism, or environmentalism, although they do however find expression in various textual media. These issues, which are typically spoken of in isolation, are for Atwood inextricably related, and the theme of connection is one that characterises her world-view. Asked of her opinions about nationalism and feminism, she responded:

> I see the two issues as similar. In fact, I see feminism as part of a larger issue: human dignity. That's what Canadian nationalism is about, what feminism is about, and what black power is about. They're all part of the same vision.[9]

This cross-fertilisation of her political sympathies goes some way to explaining how a novelist who is generally assumed to be feminist can so frequently disturb the assumptions of her readers. Because, of course, whilst Atwood may be a reader of cultural influences, she is primarily recognised as a writer of fiction, and in her writing her altered vision of themes such as feminism are disseminated to a reading audience.

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[9] Atwood quoted in Karla Hammond, "Defying Distinctions", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 102.

René Wellek and Austin Warren, who wrote one of the most influential early literary theory texts, made the important point that "The writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it …."[10] This understanding is central to my argument, and it is an idea that Atwood has talked about when interviewed. Her own understanding of the idea plays with the contrast between a mirror and a lens; she says:

> A lens isn't a mirror. A lens can be a magnifying or a focusing lens, but it doesn't merely give a reflection …. I recognize my work more as a distillation or a focusing.[11]

The lens through which Atwood is viewing the society that appears in her books is the lens of her own experience, and as such is unique, and consequently the picture that it produces is equally unique. Thus the author's perception of society is inevitably a transformative one, generating new images, new associations, and new ideas.

Each of the following chapters examines one of Atwood's novels, and attempts to trace this elusive spiral of influence between fiction writers and cultural commentators. Because of the potential breadth of the analysis, each chapter, whilst addressing a number of related concerns, generally focuses on one main area. This simplifies the investigative process, but also functions to highlight the main topical influences at work. Frequently, it is apparent that Atwood's articulation of a theme predates the presence of that theme in feminist theoretical literature. However, it is not assumed that the writer somehow precipitates a shift in cultural direction – Atwood herself refutes this idea when she says, "You can articulate change but it's already happening"[12] – but rather that the fiction writer is free to experiment with partially formed ideas in a manner that the theorist, bound by the necessity of a well formulated and considered argument, is not. Working from this premise, the book attempts to demonstrate the central argument that the fictional discourse and the theoretical discourse do not simply coexist, but enter into a significant and mutually beneficial relationship.

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[10] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn, London, 1963, 102.
[11] Atwood quoted in Karla Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 111.
[12] Atwood quoted in Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", 120.

CHAPTER I

THE EDIBLE WOMAN: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EARLY SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was written in 1965 but only published in 1969, by which time the second wave of feminism had begun to rise. Her thematic concern with the consumption of the female body seemingly drew her to the new feminist discourse, but in 1979 she appended an Introduction to the earlier edition, in which she wrote:

> *The Edible Woman* appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed that it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors.[1]

With this Introduction, Atwood located her novel within a pre-theorised discourse: a feminism that was yet to consciously identify itself as feminist. For Atwood, the feminist label is only applicable to those writers who were consciously working within the parameters of the feminist movement, and second-wave feminism has a generally accepted moment of origin in the late 1960s; consequently, she argues, *The Edible Woman* cannot be feminist. This same position was maintained in 1976 in an essay in which she contemplated the comparable assimilation of other mid-to-late twentieth-century women writers by the feminist movement. She wrote:

> When they were undergoing their formative years there *was* no Women's Movement. No matter that a lot of what they say can be taken by the theorists of the Movement as supporting evidence, useful

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[1] Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *The Edible Woman* (1969), London, 1988. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

> analysis, and so forth: their own inspiration was not theoretical, it came from wherever all writing comes from.

By this defensive strategy, she sought to protect her text from unauthorised interpretation by what she saw to be a frequently ideologically conformist and "one-dimensional" feminist criticism.[2]

Subsequently, her relationship with feminism has remained defensive. And yet, Atwood's confident location of the rise of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s presumes an unfeasible rigidity of chronology. In contrast to Atwood's estimation, others have dated second-wave feminism "from 1960 to the present",[3] indicating an element of interpretative freedom in the chronology of the movement. Indeed, the division of feminism into waves is in itself an artificial imposition intended to structure a diffusive philosophical, cultural, and ideological discourse, whereby the concept of waves happily accounts for the shifting predominance and inconsequence of feminism within the dominant cultural discourse.

Feminism, however, did not spontaneously erupt in 1960 or in 1969, and the appearance of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 cannot be considered protofeminist anomalies, but rather expressions of an ongoing, if muted, developing contemplation of gender relations. Whilst second-wave feminism as it is generally recognised refers to the explosion of a highly theorised feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism itself is an ongoing project, in which each feminist-engaged text takes its place within a chain of reference, influenced by the ideas that influenced feminism, and influencing in its turn. From the first, Atwood proves to be engaged with the question of theoretical influence, and her self-conscious defence of her own ideological autonomy purposefully complicates any simple theoretical reading of her work, but it cannot disengage her texts from a pervasive feminist discourse in which they are inarguably implicated.

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

Atwood's casual reference to de Beauvoir and Friedan in the introduction to *The Edible Woman* is indicative of their influence on early second-wave feminism. Whilst Atwood may have disavowed her

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[2] Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Toronto, 1982, 191-92.

[3] *Feminisms*, eds Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, Oxford, 1997, 3.

connection with the movement, *The Edible Woman* is remarkable for the sympathy it holds with the pioneering works of these two writers. This chapter, therefore, will explore the manner in which Atwood can be seen to absorb and contemplate the ideas of anterior feminist theories.

Published in 1949 (1953 in English translation), *The Second Sex* explored the sexual dichotomy, examining its rationale, function, and consequence. Central to de Beauvoir's thesis is her exposition of the fundamental inequality between the sex roles in society. She argued that:

> [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.

De Beauvoir's work was founded in the existentialist tradition and borrowed heavily from G.W.F. Hegel. She reiterated the Hegelian principle of the struggle for subjectivity when she wrote that "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed".[4]

Whilst each conscious being is understood to enter into this struggle, de Beauvoir identified instead a social collusion to maintain the female as the inessential object, thereby undermining the female ego which would naturally posit the female as the essential self. De Beauvoir worked with a Freudian concept of the ego as the consciousness of the subject, and used these terms interchangeably. The ego marks the boundaries of one's self; it is the means by which to be conscious of one's own subjectivity. Following Hegel's belief that consciousness or ego is defined in opposition to the other, de Beauvoir pointed to the central paradox of the female ego: to define herself in terms of the other, the female must necessarily define herself in opposition to herself, which is an impossible concept.

Women, according to de Beauvoir, fail to resolve this paradox logically, by posing the male ego as a retaliatory other, and thereby providing the female ego with a stable defining opposition. Instead, they form male-female alliances – likened by de Beauvoir to Hegel's

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[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, London, 1997, 16-17.

master-slave dichotomy[5] – and undermine female alliance. Rivalry, which might be expected between two sexes so divided, is negated by the assumption of differing purposes. The male is transcendent: his work and invention will shape the world for future generations, thereby affording him a form of immortality. The female is immanent: she produces the next generation in a purely animal way, and does not otherwise affect the future. If the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she can be said to be happy; she is content that her needs are provided for.

However, de Beauvoir asserted the existentialist view that the fulfilment of human potential must be judged, "not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty". This existential notion of human liberty is not based on the freedom to exist peacefully and comfortably. Such animal fulfilment is immanent and therefore stagnant, it is "a degradation of existence into '*en-soi*' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions …". True freedom can only be achieved through transcendence. The subject, wrote de Beauvoir, "achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties".[6] The female experience is a denial of this acquisitive compulsion – the desire to know more, do more, have more. Her liberty is limited and defined, and granted her by someone else, and as such, is no liberty at all.

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[5] In his essay, "Lordship and Bondage", Hegel describes the formulation of self-consciousness as a consequence of recognition by another. The two subjects "*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, 1977, 112). However, this recognition is antagonistic as each subject asserts his self, and thus reduces the other to an "other", denying his opponent's consciousness as an individual "*being-for-self*". A struggle ensues between two competing looks, in which one opponent will concede pure self-consciousness for a lesser, "*immediate* consciousness, or consciousness in the form of *thinghood*": "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman." The two, however, remain in thrall to each other, because "each is mediated with itself through another consciousness" (*ibid*., 115). In de Beauvoir's model, the female (taking the part of the slave) is reliant on the male, both socially and economically, and although the male is equally reliant on the female as his partner, he does not acknowledge this debt. She, however, needs his patronage to protect her in a society that does not recognise her independent validity. "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 20).

[6] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28-29.

In *The Edible Woman*, de Beauvoir's scenario of heterosexual relations is played out with comic force. The protagonist Marian internalises the social idea of women as other to such an extent that she cannot recognise her own self. Mirrors reflect the "eyes of a person she had never seen before" (222), and as she accepts Peter's proposal of marriage, she loses herself entirely and becomes assimilated by his reflection, "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (83). Marian congratulates herself upon her engagement: "He's attractive and he's bound to be successful", which she recognises as the fulfilment of her social obligation: "I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children" (102). But the engagement signals a shift in the text from first person narrative to third person narrative, and it is clear that the realisation of her goal has been achieved at the cost of her subjectivity.

De Beauvoir articulated the sexual dichotomy within a framework of interrelated binary oppositions: the male is the essential subject, the female is the inessential object, he is the rational mind, she is the sensual body. Being other, woman comes to represent all that man is not, all that he desires and all that he fears. (This idea of the inexpressible informed Friedan's title, *The Feminine Mystique*, and later became a central theme of French feminism.) In social life, this abstract opposition of the sexes into self and other is realised in the social male and the domestic female – a division rationalised by biological distinction. De Beauvoir writes: "woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature."[7] Whilst men are of course equally bound by the body, the female appears peculiarly corporeal because of her reproductive function:

> [during menstruation] she feels her body most painfully as an obscure alien thing .… Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself.[8]

De Beauvoir's thesis is founded on the rationalist belief of the schism in human experience as both animal and transcendental being. De Beauvoir implicitly accepted the Cartesian rationalism of western

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[7] *Ibid*., 15.

[8] *Ibid*., 61.

philosophy that privileged the rational mind over the instinctual body, but her argument was nevertheless crucially anti-essentialist. In her famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman",[9] she initiated the sex and gender distinction that later became crucial to the anti-essentialist arguments of second-wave feminism. In Judith Butler's words: "*sex* is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that the body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation."[10]

For de Beauvoir, sex and gender may have been distinct, but they were also mutually influencing; physical difference had been exacerbated by cultural influence, and the female body had become the enabling site of social repression: "Weighted down with fat, or on the contrary so thin as to forbid all effort, paralysed by inconvenient clothing and by the rules of propriety – then woman's body seems to man to be his property, his thing."[11] De Beauvoir recognised that cultural influences were at play in the physical, but she still concluded that female liberation would necessitate the transcendence of the body. The woman's body remained, for de Beauvoir, a handicap to be overcome.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian accords with de Beauvoir's view. Images of femininity in the novel are obsessively related to images of the body and are frequently grotesque. The women in Marian's office "squatted at their desks, toad-like and sluggish" (17-18), her pregnant friend Clara is "a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead" (115), and the bodies of older women are repulsively depicted: "They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel" (166). The association of women with food and bodily wastes is compulsive for Marian, and proves increasingly irrepressible: "What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out" (167). Seeking to stem the tide of repulsion, she paints and clothes her body beyond recognition: "She was afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain" (222). As Clara forcibly demonstrates her femininity through a "bulgingly obvious"

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[9] *Ibid*., 295.
[10] Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 35.
[11] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 190.

(31) pregnancy, Marian subconsciously responds to the prospect of her own imminent motherhood by regulating her body more firmly than ever, denying it essential food and nourishment.

Marian has constructed a pejorative divide between a "thick sargasso-sea of femininity" and a "solid, clear" masculinity (167). This division equates with the unbounded other and the unified self. The bodily identification of the female positions her on the side of the other and thus necessarily precludes her subjectivity. In *The Edible Woman*, Clara is entirely subservient to her biology: "her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers" (37). Following de Beauvoir's principle, it is only when Clara is momentarily released from the binds of reproduction that Marian can experience her as a human being: "She decided on impulse to buy her some roses: a welcome-back gift for the real Clara, once more in uncontended possession of her own frail body" (115).

In pregnancy, Clara becomes, in de Beauvoir's words, "something other than herself", and it is this servitude to biology that de Beauvoir sought to redress when she stated "humanity is something more than a species".[12] Although biology may be both inevitable and significant, it is not, for de Beauvoir, destiny. With technology, women can be freed from reproduction to experience a new liberty: "The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal."[13] This faith in the liberating power of science was later echoed by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*, in which she expanded de Beauvoir's argument to advocate artificial gestation and communal childrearing. In Firestone's revolutionary vision, "pregnancy, now freely acknowledged as clumsy, inefficient and painful, would be indulged in, if at all, only as a tongue-in-cheek archaism."[14] For Firestone, de Beauvoir's argument was supremely anti-essentialist. By overcoming the body, the modern woman could achieve equality, liberation, and ultimately, transcendence.

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[12] *Ibid*., 725.

[13] *Ibid*., 727.

[14] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, London, 1979, 273-74.

In *What is a Woman?* Toril Moi argues that the common feminist belief that de Beauvoir viewed the female reproductive body as inherently oppressive stems from a fundamental misreading of *The Second Sex*. To support this, Moi points to de Beauvoir's proposal that "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming … the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation".[15] By this, Moi contests, de Beauvoir was forwarding an existentialist understanding of human identity as a progressive collection of experiences. According to Moi, the predominant feminist understanding of de Beauvoir's division of the self into sex and gender (as it is understood, for example, by Butler, quoted above) is misguided; de Beauvoir did not envision a biologically sexed body divisible from the gendered body, but instead understood that "the body-in-the-world that we are, is an embodied intentional relationship to the world". And so for Moi, the claim that the body is a situation does not lead to the necessary denial of the reproductive body, as has been understood by Butler *et al*, but suggests instead that "greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman's body, *not* that women will forever be slaves to the inherently oppressive experience of childbearing"[16] (my italics).

There is, however, a slight problem with Moi's argument. She begins by defending de Beauvoir from the accusation that de Beauvoir's belief that woman was trapped in her animal body was basically an essentialist belief. However, it is commonly accepted that de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is an anti-essentialist stance, so Moi's defence is unnecessary. Whilst de Beauvoir undeniably did prioritise the mind over the body (even Moi concedes a certain "ambivalence" in de Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood and the female body), she equally allowed that women could transcend the body just as men had done, and this is the conclusion of her argument. Moi's suggestion that the body for de Beauvoir is a site of possibility and not a fixed destiny is extremely useful in understanding the often seemingly contradictory arguments of *The Second Sex*. However, Moi's assumption that a negative reading of the body in de Beauvoir's text irresistibly leads to the understanding that de Beauvoir believed

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[15] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 66.
[16] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford, 1999, 66-67.

women to be inevitably trapped in biology is untenable. De Beauvoir's modern woman was not trapped in her biology, nor was it immediately obvious that she was experiencing it differently due to new freedoms – it appeared instead that she had *transcended* it.

In *The Edible Woman*, transcendence of the body is a desirable but ultimately unattainable fantasy. For Marian, the intellectual equality attained by de Beauvoir's modern woman, enabling her transcendence, is a culturally prohibited resolution. Biology proves insurmountable, as Marian recognises in her work life, where she could never "become one of the men upstairs" (20). Partial transcendence is attained instead by her wilful collusion in the male desire to restrict and limit the boundless other. Marriage will become, for Marian, a "hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other" (167). In the novel, marriage, like anorexia, is a voluntary diminishment of a repulsive, other-identified self.

Marian's attempt to negate her body through starvation can be read, as Gayle Green reads it, as a covert rebellion against a system that appropriates femininity as a commodity to be consumed. Marian's anorexia, by this understanding, is a rejection of her femininity.[17] But the processes by which Marian starves and petrifies her body paradoxically embrace a socially acceptable image of femininity until, at the height of her self-negation, she becomes entirely artificial, "fake, like soft pinkish white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible" (229) – a situation that Peter finds "absolutely marvellous" (228). *The Edible Woman* is far less optimistic than *The Second Sex*. Both texts reject the immanence of the body, but where de Beauvoir seeks transcendence, Atwood's protagonist aspires only to a secondary association with masculine rationalism, which she hopes will diminish the irrationalism of her female body.

Successive feminists proved uncomfortable with de Beauvoir's analysis of femininity as a redundant or reductive state and the assertion that masculine rationalism should be the goal of the modern woman, and this claim was countered variously. Diana Coole outlines the conflict: "The question was whether human culture represented some neutral undertaking into which women might be assimilated

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[17] Gayle Greene, "Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: 'Rebelling Against the System'", in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, ed. Beatrice Mendez-Egle, Edinburg: TX, 1984, 106.

without loss, or whether it existed as a particularly masculine project which, masquerading as a human norm, had suppressed an alternative feminine culture."[18] Where the former, liberal view was grounded in anti-essentialism, and was the view assumed by Firestone, the latter, essentialist view was taken by, amongst others, ecofeminists and spiritual feminists, who questioned the profitability of emulating male values characterised by aggression and destruction.

A schism appeared between two factions of feminism, where one sought the attainment of rationalism, whilst the other called for its rejection in favour of alternative feminine qualities. Ecofeminists and spiritual feminists in particular were concerned to preserve the supposedly feminine values of nurture, harmony and healing, and championed the positive association of woman with the body and with nature. Feminist theologian Mary Daly, for example, author of *Beyond God the Father* and *Gyn/Ecology*, described Christianity as a barbaric colonisation of ancient goddess myths, and advocated the rejection of patriarchy. With communication and co-operation, she argued, women could begin to rediscover their suppressed natural selves by "speaking our Selves, hearing and following the call of our undomesticated, wild be-ing".[19]

Atwood examined similar feminist positions in her second novel, *Surfacing*, but in *The Edible Woman* they were entirely absent. For Marian, there is no mystical power in maternity, which is instead a dangerous imposition on the female body. Describing her pregnant friend, Marianne notes that "Clara's body is so thin that her pregnancies are always bulgingly obvious, and now in her seventh month she looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (31). Much of the claustrophobia of the novel lies in the impossible resolution of the female role. Motherhood is embodied by Clara: "Look at the mess she had blundered into" (131), and unmarried life is envisioned as "a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater" (21). Marian considers femininity an inescapable burden, but rejects the essentialist's celebration of difference.

Ecofeminism and spiritual feminism were influential in the 1970s, but they prompted criticism for their acceptance of the patriarchal

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[18] Diana H. Coole, *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*, Hemel Hempstead, 1988, 241.

[19] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, London, 1979, 343.

equation of women with nature. By associating women with sensuality, reproduction, passivity and intuition, regardless of the essentialist project to invest these qualities with potent authority, women remained tied to the domestic rather than the social sphere. And Carol McMillan describes the consequences even more seriously:

> From this rationalist position, then, the fact that woman is engaged in many activities which have a counterpart in the animal world has made it difficult for philosophers both to admit that she is human and to say in what her humanity consists.[20]

McMillan discounts the common feminist solution to this challenge to female humanity, which is also de Beauvoir's solution: to prove that women have what Coole describes as "a capacity to transcend their (inferior) sexed nature in order to scale the lofty peaks of human (male) achievement".[21] This view allows that women may with effort overcome their irrationalism, but continues to locate qualities such as immorality, weakness and hysteria in the feminine. At the same time, argues Coole, the alternative belief in "natural and *unassailable* differences between men and women" (my italics) held by essentialists is also a traditionally conservative view, and correspondingly, McMillan's book, *Women, Reason and Nature*, argues that essentialist feminists and conservative rationalists have much in common.[22]

The essentialist feminism propounded by Daly, and the anti-essentialist feminism associated with Firestone, both turn on an implicit acceptance of the Cartesian divide between a superior rational mind and an inferior instinctual body. Where Firestone sought to promote women to rationalism, Daly sought instead to invert the hierarchy and prioritise anti-rationalism. Anti-essentialists assume rationalism to be a gender-neutral ideal to which both sexes should aspire. Essentialists, however, reject this belief and argue instead that (to borrow from Craig Owens' discussion of the modernist aesthetic): "the representational symptoms of the West admit only one vision –

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[20] Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature: Some Philosophical Problems with Nature*, Oxford, 1982, 10.

[21] Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 264.

[22] McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature*, 13.

that of the constitutive male subject."[23] This conflict resulted in a feminist epistemology, with women questioning "how we gain knowledge of the world, what sort of knowledge is thereby attained, by what process it becomes expressed in language and theory, and whether the two sexes might not engage in it in different ways".[24] This debate went to the heart of enlightenment assumptions of a universal rationalism and questioned whether the whole of the western system of knowledge might not be corrupted by its masculine bias.

De Beauvoir's theory of transcendence is rooted in a Cartesian humanism that disregards the possibility that rationalism might, by its very nature, exclude the female subject. Genevieve Lloyd points out that "'transcendence', in its origins, is a transcendence *of* the feminine".[25] And so, as with the conflict of the ego in which woman cannot be defined, to achieve transcendence, the woman now discovers she must transcend herself. This is what Marian is attempting to do in *The Edible Woman.* Her rejection of the feminine body is a rejection of herself, but it does not precipitate her entry into the masculine mind. Instead, it leaves her dislocated, trapped between Peter's alien rationalism and her increasingly intelligent body. Similarly, in its readings of de Beauvoir, early second-wave feminism had become trapped between a liberal call for equality and an essentialist call for separatism. Both positions rested on fundamentally different and irreconcilable understandings of rational culture.

Rather than argue the relative merits of masculine reason and feminine instinct, McMillan has sought instead to disrupt the Cartesian dualism itself, thereby undermining the foundations of the theory of transcendence. "Reason", she argues, "is not a separate faculty operating in isolation from, and in contradistinction to, man's 'animal nature' ... but shows itself in the character and the role that such needs may play in his life as a whole". Consequently, a mother cannot be reduced to sub-humanity simply because her maternity shares certain critical features with other mammals: "The sexual life of women, and that of men too, takes place against a backcloth of values, of an intricately woven web of all sorts of beliefs, intentions,

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[23] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism", in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London, 1983, 58.
[24] Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 266.
[25] Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, 2nd edn, London, 1993, 101.

expectations and customs … which cannot be accounted for simply in biological terms",[26] reasons McMillan.

De Beauvoir argued that man, in viewing woman's body as "a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it",[27] wilfully ignored his transcendence of his own, equally weighty, flesh. McMillan, however, argues that there is no distinguishing barrier between body and mind to be transcended. Typically corporeal concerns, such as eating and sexual relations, are permeated with social significance. In McMillan's words: "in sexual relations people are involved in ethical relations."[28] And so, in *The Edible Woman*, supposedly instinctual attitudes toward food and sexuality are highly charged with social and political meaning. Marian's sexual attitudes are redolent of 1960s magazine-disseminated marital advice, and Peter's choice of unusual locations for sexual intercourse makes Marian suspicious that "he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere" (60). Sexuality in the novel is a product of time and culture, and far removed from animal behaviour.

De Beauvoir assumed a Cartesian prioritising of the mind over the body that Atwood, with *The Edible Woman*, began to question. For Marian, reason and the body become increasingly conflated, as she realises that the site of her self-control has shifted: "whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind certainly, rejected everything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" (152). Gradually, and against her rational will, Marian's body becomes an unconscious site of protest against Peter's metaphorical consumption of her. Although Marian initially accepts the location of the self within the male, and consequently loathes the otherness within her, as the novel progresses, her body begins to assert its own, contradictory, non-rational logic, which proves increasingly irrepressible.

Atwood destabilises the mind-body hierarchy and exposes the insupportable nature of their division and distinction. McMillan argues that a mind without a body "becomes hypostatised as something existing by itself, outside any human activity or institution",[29] and in *The Edible Woman*, Marian has to learn to resist the compulsion to negate her body, which equates with the negation of

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[26] McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature*, 11-12.

[27] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15.

[28] McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature*, 13.

[29] *Ibid.*, 12.

her feminine self. The fantasy of the disembodied mind is exposed as a masculine fantasy of liberation from the reciprocal need of the masculine for the feminine. To unite the two opposing elements is to assert the feminine value of unity over masculine competitiveness. *The Edible Woman* struggles to unite the mind and body so definitively divided in *The Second Sex*. The result is a contradiction of de Beauvoir, but not in the manner of essentialist feminism, which had inverted the Cartesian argument by investing the feminine body with a value denied it by rationalism. Atwood, instead, depicts the body as a locus of intelligence, overturning the notion of a hierarchical divide, and recreating a popular figure of nineteenth century women's writing: the hysteric.

Hysterical discourse

Hysteria, although documented in male patients, is traditionally considered a female malady, the term deriving from the Latin, *hystericus*, literally, "of the womb". Elaine Showalter writes that "by the end of the [nineteenth] century, 'hysterical' had become almost interchangeable with 'feminine' in literature, where it stood for all extremes of emotionality".[30] Commonly diagnosed symptoms included weeping, fainting, immoderate laughter, and psychosomatic physical symptoms such as pains, coughs, and fevers, and were made most famous by Freud's classic case studies in "Studies on Hysteria" (1895) and "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905).

Early feminist readings of Freud were varied but largely negative. Kate Millett wrote one of the first anti-Freudian responses of the second wave, in which she stated: "[Freud was] the strongest individual counterrevolutionary force in the ideology of sexual politics",[31] and Firestone described Freudianism as "the misguided feminism", arguing that "Freud was merely a diagnostician for what Feminism purports to cure".[32] Juliet Mitchell, however, made an important move towards reclaiming Freud for feminism with her book, *Woman's Estate* (1971), in which she argued that feminists should not dismiss Freud because of the conservative direction in which his work had later been taken: "It is post-Freudian empiricism

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[30] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London, 1987, 129.

[31] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, London, 1971, 178.

[32] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 50.

that has trapped most of Freud's tentative analyses of sexual differences into a crude and offensive rigidity",[33] she argued. Feminists, according to Mitchell, should seek to use Freud's theories productively, whilst still maintaining a critical awareness of his culturally situated prejudices: "The Women's Liberation Movement", she argued, "cannot afford to indulge the bad poetry about women, when we have a science we can use, explore, criticize, amend".[34] She later extended this argument in her 1974 book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, in which she argued that:

> A rejection of psychoanalysis and of Freud's works is fatal for feminism …. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it.[35]

Feminist analysis resulted in a re-reading of the significance of hysteria, with Mitchell, for example, suggesting that:

> Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.[36]

Hysteria came to be understood as a frustrated discourse: a means by which the body "speaks" a protest that exists outside of a rational vocabulary.

The second wave saw an increasing interest in language and discourse, and in the theory that madness and hysteria were forms of feminine discourse, vilified because they transgressed patriarchal norms. Phyllis Chesler's influential 1972 book, *Women and Madness*, argued that:

> Male power, which is based on the oppression of some men and all women, belongs to older men in patriarchal culture. Faced with these circumstances, "good" women destroy themselves gracefully, i.e.,

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[33] Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, Harmondsworth, 1971, 167.

[34] *Ibid*., 169.

[35] Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth, 1975, xv.

[36] Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution*, London, 1984, 289-90.

they get depressed and stay at home, or go "mad" and stay in asylums.[37]

There was an underlying belief that women could not speak freely or naturally in masculine discourse, and that hysteria was better understood as a frustrated or muted discourse.

These ideas grew in importance in the 1980s with the translation of Hélène Cixous' work into English, and the consequent introduction of the idea of *ecriture feminine* to Anglophone feminism. This surge of interest in the cultural specificity of madness, an idea well documented in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* and pursued by feminist theorists, lead to a rereading of Freud's most famous case studies, and in 1985, Claire Kahane wrote that "contemporary feminists are reclaiming hysteria as the dis-ease of women in patriarchal culture".[38] Indeed, Showalter argues that the rapid decline of cases of hysteria in the early-to-mid twentieth century can be attributed to the rise of feminism: "The availability of a women's movement in which the 'protofeminism' of hysterical protest could be articulated and put to work, offered a potent alternative to the self-destructive and self-enclosed strategies of hysteria, and a genuine form of resistance to the patriarchal order."[39] This view accords with Atwood's own definition of *The Edible Woman* as protofeminst, and would explain why Marian's protest at her fate is inarticulately expressed in the body.

The Edible Woman opens with Marian apparently stable and secure: "most women are pretty scatterbrained", Peter tells her, "but you're such a sensible girl" (89), but the narrative soon begins to chart her decline into irrationalism. The earliest manifestations of her apparent madness are characterised by a loss of self-control, as Marian's body begins to act without her authority, most notably when she finds herself fleeing from Peter without apparent reason:

> I was running along the sidewalk. After the first minute I was surprised to find my feet moving, wondering how they had begun, but I didn't stop. (72)

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[37] Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, London, 1974, 274-75.

[38] *In Dora's Case: Freud – Hysteria – Feminism*, eds Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, New York, 1985, 31.

[39] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 161.

   This unpremeditated escape is rapidly followed by further irrational activity, as she finds herself seduced by the womb-like space beneath the bed and crawls into the "coolness and solitude" (76) it offers. In both instances, Marian's actions are arrested by Peter, who calls her "childish" (79), whilst her friend Len, who aids Peter's pursuit of her, simply comments: "didn't think you were the hysterical type" (74). If Marian's actions are an unconscious attempt to escape Peter, they conclusively fail with her acceptance of his marriage proposal, and from then on, Marian's covert rebellion turns inwards and begins to find expression in her body.

   Discussing the advent of anorexia nervosa as an identified clinical syndrome in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Showalter writes: "When only the body was regarded as important, anorexic girls paraded physical starvation as a way of drawing attention to the starvation of their mental and moral faculties." In Atwood's novel, Marian displays anorexic symptoms, much to her own dismay: "'God,' she thought to herself, 'I hope it's not permanent; I'll starve to death!'" (152). Much of her experience follows the early pattern of the syndrome plotted by Showalter, who records that "disgust with meat was a common phenomenon among Victorian girls; a carnivorous diet was associated with sexual precocity, especially with an abundant menstrual flow, and even with nymphomania".[40] Correspondingly, Marian's stomach first revolts at beef, and then prohibits all meats, until Marian can only despair at the prospect of vegetarianism before her.

   However, what characterises Marian's condition is her lack of conscious participation in her body's decisions: "The quiet fear … was that this thing, this refusal of her mouth to eat, was malignant; that it would spread" (153). If her temporary anorexia is a protest at the commodification of her body, or at her presumably impending motherhood, it is not a protest that she consciously acknowledges. As the novel progresses, Marian becomes increasingly alienated from her body, and increasingly distanced from its own internal logic. More than anything, Marian wants to be "normal", and Clara reassures her, "you're almost abnormally normal" (206), and Peter echoes: "you're marvellously normal, darling" (207). But despite these assurances, Marian's hysterical symptoms persist, and the novel becomes a battle

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[40] *Ibid*., 128-29.

between her mind's rational desire for normality, and her body's irrational refusal to be cured.

Psychoanalysis and the consumer culture

North America in the 1950s underwent a neo-Freudian conservative revolution that was intimately related to the rise of consumer culture and the corresponding emergence of what Friedan termed "The Happy Housewife Heroine", who was the 1950s and 1960s counterpart to the Victorian Angel in the House. The post-war rise in consumerism stimulated a market-driven compulsion to keep women in the home where they would maximise their product consumption, and which productively coincided with an intellectual wave of conservative family psychology. The pervasiveness of the new psychological vocabulary was the cause of Mitchell's struggle to integrate Freudian theory into feminist discourse; before Freud could be of use to feminism, he had to be reclaimed from the "well-meaning populizers and inadvertent distorters … orthodox converts and bandwagon faddists"[41] against whom Friedan had been battling in *The Feminine Mystique.*

   Friedan's text, published in 1963, examined popular culture and the new psychoanalytical practices in order to explain the disturbingly common emergence of hysterical symptoms in the modern housewife. Friedan documented an epidemic of psychosomatic symptoms in middle-class women across America, ranging from nervous exhaustion to "great bleeding blisters that break out on their hands and arms"[42] and concluded that this "Problem That Has No Name" was a consequence of intellectual and social repression – a conclusion not unlike that reached by Showalter in her examination of the Victorian anorexic. Friedan's twentieth-century subjects were caught between a consumer culture that nurtured insatiable desire, and an intellectual environment that preached fulfilment through marriage and motherhood, whilst neither offered freedom of choice or action; consequently, frustration and guilt were inevitable.

   The cult of the 1950s housewife haunts the pages of *The Edible Woman*, and Coral Ann Howells draws attention to the synchronicity of the novel's themes with Friedan's chapter titles: "The Happy

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[41] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), New York, 1997, 122.

[42] *Ibid*., 20-22.

Housewife Heroine", "The Crisis in Woman's Identity" and "The Sexual Sell".[43] Furthermore, in accordance with Friedan's analysis of the period, *The Edible Woman* is permeated with popular psychology. Peter tells Marian: "you're rejecting your femininity" (80); Joe declares that Clara's "feminine role and her core are really in opposition" (235); Ainsley believes that without a Father Image, her child is "absolutely *certain* to turn into a ho-ho-ho-homosexual!" (181); Clara's son is pronounced "riddled with complexes already" (40); and even Marian offers an analysis, asking: "do you think it has anything to do with the new baby … jealousy perhaps?" (131). The pervasiveness of neo-Freudianism is documented by Friedan but it is comically demonstrated by Atwood.

To Friedan's mind, the mainstay of women's entrapment was clear: "The feminine mystique derived its power from Freudian thought."[44] The new psychoanalysis was developed to limit and to internalise the aggressive rebellion of intellectually frustrated women. In *The Psychoanalytic Movement*, Ernst Gellner traces the popularisation of psychoanalysis and its early tendency to what he terms "hire-purchase stoicism", by which the patient "pays" over time in the hope of ultimately receiving a cure:

> The stoic theory of contentment or adjustment is that peace is to be had if you accept reality. If you are dissatisfied, *you* are at fault: reality is not accountable but in a strange way, you are.[45]

Though this certainty in collective normality was somewhat shaken by the Second World War, Friedan documents its continuing success in post-war America, where it was used to perpetuate a normative theory of psychology: "Thus", she wrote, "Freud's populizers embedded his core of unrecognized traditional prejudice against women ever deeper in pseudo-scientific cement".[46]

For women, the practice was potentially devastating. The emphasis on adjustment pre-empted any expression of dissatisfaction by unequivocally presuming that the problem rested with the individual,

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[43] Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, Basingstoke, 1996, 39.

[44] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 103.

[45] Ernst Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement or The Cunning of Unreason*, London, 1985, 87.

[46] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 102.

and that the solution must, therefore, be sought in the analyst's chair rather than in any social or political forum. It was this same assumption that Firestone was attempting to overturn in her "case for feminist revolution" when she wrote of her hope that "a therapy that has proven worse than useless may eventually be replaced with the only thing that can do any good: political organization".[47] Mitchell was left trying to disassociate the theory from the practice, insisting that "The empiricist's adaptations and refutations have been disastrous for the initial, and partial moves Freud made into an understanding of sexual differences".[48] Friedan's subjects, however, were left to the mercy of the empiricists, and the ideal of the perfect wife and mother had not changed much in the decades since de Beauvoir had written that "Woman is doomed to immorality, because for her to be moral would mean that she must incarnate a being of superhuman qualities".[49]

The association of psychoanalysis with the consumer culture is more than incidental. Consumerism and the concomitant advertising culture work to instigate, stimulate, and manipulate psychological needs and desires. Mike Featherstone describes the view that consumerism "increas[es] the capacity for ideological manipulation and 'seductive' containment of the population from some alternative set of 'better' social relations".[50] And in *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan charted the communion of psychology and consumerism in what she termed "the sexual sell", by which market researchers "shrewdly analyzed the needs, and even the secret frustrations of the American housewife; and each time, if these needs were properly manipulated, she could be induced to buy more 'things'".[51]

Ironically, Marian's occupation in *The Edible Woman* is market research, and her experience revising marketing questionnaires means that she understands the manipulations she is subject to. As she listens to the piped music in the supermarket, she thinks of "an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them". She recognises, however, that "just because she knew what they were up to didn't mean she was immune" (172).

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[47] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 80.

[48] Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, 168.

[49] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 492.

[50] Mike Featherstone, *The Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, 1991, 13.

[51] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 223.

Marian's company, Seymour Services, targets housewives, and on this topic, Friedan wrote: "the ads glorify her 'role' as an American housewife – knowing that her very lack of identity in that role will make her fall for whatever they are selling."[52] The "men upstairs" in Seymour Services – the advertiser, the psychologist, and the statistician – are an uncompromisingly masculine force, imposing their will on the female consumer. The capitalist notion of the free market is exposed to be a deceptive idea, giving a false impression of limitless choice, whereas in reality, capitalism is shown to have expanded into every area of modern life, leaving no room for movement outside of its parameters. The female role as consumer is to make decisions of varying unimportance between a limited number of consumer options, and subsequently, every purchase and every choice is endlessly analysed and manipulated so that her decision is virtually predestined, as Rachel Bowlby explains in her book, *Shopping with Freud*:

> The moment of choice, of the exercise of the will, is in fact a relinquishing of the will; the whole task is to get the prospect to the point of capitulation, when there is no longer any question. Action is then spontaneous, irresistible; the mind has become purely biological or mechanical (the automaton).[53]

In consumer culture, the mind can no longer be trusted because it is permeated and manipulated by mass psychological advertising intended to overcome the individuality of the self. Correspondingly, when Marian's self-identity is at its most fragile in the novel, she is at her most susceptible: "These days, if she wasn't careful, she found herself pushing the cart like a somnambulist, eyes fixed, swaying slightly, her hands twitching with the impulse to reach out and grab anything with a bright label." Shopping then becomes a parody of the marriage ceremony: "Marian was walking slowly down the aisle keeping pace with the gentle music" (172), and so commenting on her life choices in capitalist society. Her rational mind has made a sound rational choice – Peter is a healthy successful provider – but her body recognises the real limits to her choice and refuses to capitulate.

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[52] *Ibid*., 229.
[53] Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, London, 1993, 108.

Marian eventually comes to recognise that her place within the consumer society is that of the consumable. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that in the marketing of consumable products, it is women, who "wield seventy-five per cent of the purchasing power in America",[54] who are being consumed. What they are being sold is an image of themselves: an image of how they should be. When Marian capitulates to this image, she is left staring "into the egyptian-lidded and outlined and thickly-fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before" (222). However, the image, constructed by advertisers, creates a distance between the signifier and the signified – between what a product can do and what it promises to do – in Friedan's words: "a new stove or a softer toilet paper do not make a woman a better wife or mother."[55] This detachment of image and reality keeps recurring in Marian's mind, until she is no longer sure whether such a thing as her real self exists. The self she presents to Peter is intended for his consumption, and his reaction to it is, appropriately enough, "yum yum" (227). Only Duncan appreciates her artifice:

> "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade," he said at last. "Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (239)

Catherine McLay reads Duncan as an embodiment of Marian's subconscious, urging her to free herself, and emphasizing the ridiculousness of her entrapment. If this is so, then his reaction to her appearance at the party becomes evidence of her growing awareness of her own artificiality. At the same time, Marian does not want to reject Peter, despite her growing unease about the impending marriage. To the last, she is hoping for a rational resolution to the plot: "if Peter found her silly she would believe it", she decides, "she would accept his version of herself" (270). However, her hysterical symptoms persist and prove increasingly irrepressible, until "she was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer, beginning (that would be worst of all) to talk a lot, to tell everybody, to cry" (219). The carefully constructed veneer of rationalism begins to crumble. The novel becomes progressively littered with images of disintegration, which threaten to aggregate to

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[54] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 208.
[55] *Ibid.*, 229.

the point of annihilation, until: "[Marian] sensed her face as vastly spreading and papery and slightly dilapidated: a huge billboard smile, peeling away in flaps and patches, the metal surface beneath showing through" (244). As the wedding approaches, the conflict within Marian, between capitulating to her social role and escaping her consumption/absorption by Peter, approaches a crisis point. Marriage is the great threat within the novel, but, if the novel is to be a romance, marriage is also the only possible resolution.

Psychoanalysis and mock-romance

Following the conventions of romance laid out by fellow Canadian Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture*, in which the typical romance follows a "cyclical movement … down through the threatening complications and up again through the escape from them",[56] *The Edible Woman* can indeed be read as a typical, though inverted, romance. Appropriate to the romance structure, *The Edible Woman* begins peacefully, with a heroine, Marian, who must be married for the novel to achieve its comic ending; a suitor, Peter, who must pursue his bride; and an obstacle, Duncan, the alternative, unworthy suitor who must be overcome. According to convention, a period of chaos must ensue, involving "the individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity",[57] before stability and order can be restored. But *The Edible Woman* is, instead, a parody of a romance: working within the parameters of the genre whilst simultaneously subverting its conventions. Rather than return Marian to the social order, represented in the novel by Peter, Atwood unbalances the rational formula that would conclude the romance, because, as she says, "the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian".[58] As the narrative descends into the dream-like chaos of hysteria and irrationalism, the romance structure works to resist the disruption and to emerge in a rational triumph of social conformity, but Marian chooses instead to refuse the rational, comic ending of marriage, and so the romance remains un-concluded.

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[56] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Cambridge, 1976, 131.
[57] *Ibid*., 104.
[58] Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 12.

In its pattern of descent and ascent, the romance parallels psychoanalysis. The romantic hero must enter chaos and darkness, retrieve the goal, and resurface into order and light. The analysand, in similar fashion, must enter into his or her own subconscious to locate the cause of his or her distress, before re-entering consciousness with the problem resolved. In Firestone's words, "by a process of bringing to the surface the crippling repressions, of conscious recognition and open examination, the patient is supposed to be able to come to terms with, to consciously *reject*, rather than subconsciously *repress*, the troubling wishes of the *id*".[59] As *The Edible Woman* follows the pattern of the romance, although failing to attain the concluding marriage ceremony, so Marian enters a course of self-discovery that mimics a period of psychoanalysis, in which she comes to recognise the cause of her distress, but refuses in the end to consciously reject the logic of her unconscious drives.

However, before she comes to this final decision, Marian is drawn to the promises of the psychoanalytical resolution, which she discusses with Duncan:

> "Maybe I should see a psychiatrist," she said gloomily.
> "Oh no, don't do that. They'd only want to adjust you."
> "But I want to be adjusted, that's just it. I don't see any point in being unstable." (263)

In fact, in both cycles – the romantic and the psychoanalytic – Duncan functions as Marian's guide and analyst. This is a role that he attributes, with some irony, to himself:

> "Now, now," Duncan said, "we can't both be like that. One of us has to be the sympathetic listener and the other one gets to be tortured and confused. You were tortured and confused last time." (278)

McLay, who gives a comprehensive reading of *The Edible Woman* as a romance, describes Duncan as a mythical guide, "dehumanised, even grotesque, related to the grotto or underground caves".[60] This

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[59] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 50.
[60] Catherine McLay, "The Dark Voyage: *The Edible Woman* as Romance", in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, eds Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, Toronto, 1981, 131.

latter role culminates in the journey he and Marian take into the ravine, where Marian finally comes to understand what has been happening to her:

> What she really wanted, she realized, had been reduced to simple safety. She thought she had been heading towards it all these months but actually she hadn't been getting anywhere. (263)

In this scene Atwood unites the figures of the underworld guide and the psychoanalyst, but crucially, once Marian achieves her moment of insight, she also finds that she no longer needs either, and separates from Duncan: "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again, I found my own situation much more interesting than his" (278).

Duncan's departure apparently leaves Peter victorious, but Marian has finally recognised her repressed fear that Peter is trying to consume her, and instead of rationalising her fears and dispelling them, she accepts them and acts on them, confronting Peter with the question: "You've been trying to destroy me haven't you?" (271).[61] Atwood accepts the Freudian notion of a repressed unconscious, but refuses to locate the problem in the subject's inability to adjust. This mirrors Mitchell's understanding of Freudian theory when she writes: "Freud's case studies are models of analysis of the patient's environment."[62] Marian must overcome her hysterical symptoms without accepting the cure offered by her cultural environment.

Ultimately, the difficulties of *The Edible Woman* remain unresolved. By baking the cake, which Howells reads as "the central metaphor for Marian's perception of woman's condition and fate as decreed by the feminine mystique",[63] Marian refuses to be consumed any further, offering Peter instead, "a substitute, something you'll like much better" (271). But when Peter refuses the cake, Marian is left to eat it herself, creating an ambiguous conclusion to the novel. Her

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[61] Many interpretations of the cake symbol have been given: for example, see Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 43; Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*, Vancouver, 1984, 77; Catherine Rainwater, "The Sense of the Flesh in Four Novels by Margaret Atwood", in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, 22; and Kate Fullbrook, *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*, New York, 1990, 178.

[62] Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, 165.

[63] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 43.

symbolic consumption of the feminine body can be understood as a final acceptance of the bodily self; Marian no longer feels compelled to transcend the feminine, but is now able to internalize and assimilate the other within her self. However, Duncan reads her actions more aggressively, telling her: "You're back to so so-called reality, you're a consumer" (281). In refusing to capitulate with her own consumption, Marian unwittingly shifts into the role of the consumer. Consumption, it seems, is inevitable, and whilst she may have achieved a temporary escape from its manipulations, the return to reality necessitates a return to its limitations. Atwood says of the novel:

> The tone of *The Edible Woman* is light-hearted, but in the end it's more pessimistic than *Surfacing*. The difference between them is that *The Edible Woman* is a circle and *Surfacing* is a spiral …. the heroine of *Surfacing* does not end where she began.[64]

In *Surfacing*, the tension between guilt and innocence, between the consumer and the consumed, is examined more closely, and with more awareness of its wider social implications. The comic resolution, by which Marian can dismiss her actions with the words "it's only a cake" (273), is rejected in the second novel, in which Atwood's protofeminist writing moves to more consciously interact with some of the implications of 1970s feminism.

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[64] Davidson, *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, 124.

CHAPTER II

SURFACING: **ORIGINS AND IDENTITY**

Surfacing (1972) is celebrated as the work that most closely associates Atwood's novel writing to her poetry, with which it shares "a considerable thematic and stylistic territory",[1] containing echoes of *The Circle Game* (1966) and *Power Politics* (1971). From the light, detached irony of *The Edible Woman*, which owed much of its theme to Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, to the frequently elliptical *Surfacing* with its "terse, laconic style"[2] and consciously poetic imagery and metaphor, more subtly employed than the striking but slightly clumsy cake metaphor of *The Edible Woman*, there is a great distance. Concurrent with this stylistic shift is a significant expansion of thematic concern, and *Surfacing* provides a notable example of how Atwood's dialogue with feminism is mediated through a number of alternate and occasionally dissonant political concerns. *Surfacing* continues and develops *The Edible Woman*'s preoccupation with the female protagonist and her alienation from social expectations, but introduces issues of ecology, nationalism, spirituality and ancestry to Atwood's canon of political focus.

These issues were initially treated with disregard by feminists, but later became significant within feminist theory, almost to the point of commanding distinct genres, such as, for example, ecofeminism, and post-colonial feminism. In *Surfacing*, Atwood begins to articulate concerns that are later to be theorised by feminist academics. Specifically, feminism, ecology and nationalism begin to converge for Atwood, as she discovers in them a common theme of guilt and innocence. In the novel, she begins to examine the implications of identifying one's self as an innocent individual within a framework of collective guilt, and Atwood charges both feminists and Canadians with perpetuating their victim status, yet struggles to reconcile her instinctual liberalism with a simultaneous belief in communal guilt

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[1] Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, ed. Ken Norris, Montreal, 1980, 97.

[2] Stanley Fogel, *A Tale of Two Countries: Contemporary Fiction in English Canada and the United States*, Toronto, 1984, 110.

and mutual responsibility. As the novel progresses, she exposes an apparently impossible paradoxical triangle between her liberal politics, feminist leanings, and postmodern sympathies.

A peculiarly Canadian feminism

Early North American readings of *Surfacing* were distinctly culture-specific. Atwood has said that the American reviewers interpreted the novel "almost exclusively as a feminist or ecological treatise", whereas in Canada it was reviewed "almost exclusively as a nationalistic one".[3] It would seem that, at least initially, both countries viewed nationalism, feminism and ecology as unrelated issues. With the progression of feminist theory, however, came the development of a more comprehensive school of thought, and it was during this period, when *Surfacing* was being published, that Canadian nationalism and feminism first began to significantly interact around issues of autonomy and identity. For Atwood, the parallels between the movements were self-evident, as she explained in a 1981 lecture on Canadian-American relations:

> The cultural nationalism of the early '70s was not aggressive in nature. It was a simple statement: we exist. Such movements become militant only when the other side replies, in effect, No you don't. Witness feminism.[4]

Similar ideas had already been touched on in *The Edible Woman*, in which Marian had fought, largely subconsciously, for Peter's acknowledgement of her existence separate from his. In *Surfacing*, this fight for autonomy is extended beyond sexual politics as Atwood addresses Canada's struggle to escape cultural domination by America.

In the early 1970s, second-wave feminism, particularly Canadian second-wave feminism, was still in its infancy, and dominated by English, French and American thinking. *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Second Sex* were still two of the most influential critical texts, and consequently, de Beauvoir and Friedan were much referred to in a 1972 anthology of Canadian feminist writing, *Women Unite!* Many of the contributors contradicted the philosophies of the two theorists on

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[3] Atwood quoted in Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", 117.

[4] Atwood, *Second Words*, 385.

ideological grounds. For example, the radical feminist Bonny Kreps wrote:

> We, in this segment of the movement, do not believe that the oppression of women will be ended by giving them a bigger piece of the pie, as Betty Friedan would have it. We believe that the pie itself is rotten.[5]

Yet others believed that the problem lay, not in the content of such Americo-European writings, but in their cultural focus, and the original 1970 Introduction to the Canadian anthology demanded cultural specificity within the increasingly widespread feminist movement:

> Too often the left in Canada has been content to adopt the American left's analysis of and solution to social problems. The Canadian women's movement, along with the Canadian left, has been guilty of this tendency to accept the American viewpoint. It is in response to this tendency, and in assertion of the need to understand the unique experience of Canadian women, that we have undertaken the present anthology.[6]

The authors of the anthology were demanding recognition: that their unique experience be recognised as significant and of worth, and that it not be subsumed into the dominant experience of their American counterparts. Such concerns were evidently also on Atwood's mind as she was writing *Surfacing*, and in subsequent interviews about the novel she frequently referred to notions of ideological colonialism, arguing that "what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else".[7] The themes of authenticity and recognition permeate *Surfacing*, and they connect many of the political dialogues that influence the novel.

One of the concerns of the narrator of *Surfacing* is to discover the values that are real or indigenous to her as a female, as a Canadian,

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[5] *Women Unite! An Anthology of the Canadian Women's Movement*, Canadian Women's Educational Press, Toronto, 1972, 75.

[6] *Ibid*., 7.

[7] Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 19.

and as an individual – to become, in her words, a "natural woman".[8] This idea of authenticity draws Atwood's novel to communitarian theory, and to the politics of recognition, discussed by the Canadian political theorist, Charles Taylor, in his important 1994 essay of that title. The work of both Atwood and Taylor has proven hugely influential, and not just within their immediate spheres, but as part of a more general cultural discourse. Atwood's early interaction with the ideas that Taylor later discusses has shaped her response to feminist arguments, and has led her to locate feminism, at a very early stage in the second wave, within much broader themes of cultural identity. Although Taylor's essay appeared some twenty-two years after *Surfacing*, the coincidence of theme in the two works demonstrates that, in the early Seventies, Atwood was articulating ideas that would continue to have resonance in Canada for decades to come.

Authenticity and the wilderness quest

Central to the politics of recognition is a dilemma that Taylor identifies as crucial to contemporary, increasingly multicultural, liberal societies of the West: how to satisfy the demand for recognition by individual social groups, without entirely abandoning liberal ideas of blind justice and becoming trapped in what he terms "subjectivist, half-baked neo-Nietzschean theories".[9] The problem goes back to a fundamental ideological split between the liberal belief in individual freedom, and the communitarian defence of collective goals. A liberal government guarantees certain rights to each citizen but does not prescribe any concept of the good life, whereas a communitarian government, whilst defending what Taylor calls "fundamental and crucial" liberties, is prepared to sacrifice certain "privileges and immunities" to the collective goals of the community.[10] Communitarians argue that the liberal principle of blind justice not only fails the minority group, but actively discriminates against them. Identity, argues Taylor, is shaped by the recognition or misrecognition that a person receives from others, and misrecognition, or non-recognition, can be a form of oppression:

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[8] Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972), London, 1979, 184. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

[9] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton, 1994, 70.

[10] *Ibid*., 59.

> Thus some feminists have argued that women in patriarchal societies have been induced to adopt a deprecatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities. And beyond this, they are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem.[11]

Liberals respond with the argument that any state recognition of a collective definition of the good life inevitably impinges on the rights of those who do not share that definition. Taylor, whilst maintaining a critical distance from the postmodern implications of the culturally constructed self, bases his thesis on the belief that "people do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own".[12] This counteracts the liberal idea of the monological and autonomous self who works out his or her beliefs in isolation and then brings them to bear on his or her society. The tension between liberalism and communitarianism runs through Taylor's essay, and ultimately remains unresolved. In *Surfacing*, it is possible to see that Atwood is also struggling with some of the same difficulties, and the conclusion of the novel eventually hinges on the opposition between the dialogical and the monological self.

Surfacing opens with its narrator travelling up into northern Quebec, returning to the remote island of her childhood in search of her missing father: "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (1). Immediately, a well-used literary device is set in place, by which the hero leaves the city to travel into the wilderness on a journey of self-discovery. (Here Atwood re-uses many of the romance motifs that first appeared in *The Edible Woman*.) Many critics, including Atwood, have discussed the wilderness quest. In *Survival*, Atwood's critical analysis of Canadian literature published in the same year as *Surfacing*, she identified it as common to American literature, which typically "suggests a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded". She further argued that "every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core",[13] which she

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[11] *Ibid.*, 25-26.

[12] *Ibid.*, 32.

[13] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto, 1972, 31.

identified as The British Island (a "sense of security"), The American Frontier (a "sense of adventure or danger"), and for Canada, "Survival":

> Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back .... The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.[14]

This passage recollects Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and *Surfacing* contains an albatross of its own: "I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick .… They must have got it before it had time to rise" (110). The needlessly murdered heron comes to symbolise the victimisation of the innocent, which is a theme that recurs throughout the text.

In *Survival*, Atwood describes what she considers to be the common Canadian literary notion that "Nature was 'good' and cities were 'evil'"[15] and in *Surfacing*, nature and the city are located as Canadian and American, respectively. The American frontier motif is read as an aggressive and colonising compulsion, associated with the quest and contrasting with the Canadian survival motif, which is suggestive of passivity and victimisation. In a 1986 essay, Nina Baym described the quest narrative as a typically masculine quest for identity, and, like Atwood, also considered it characteristic of American literature, which she saw to be founded in the belief that "in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition".[16] In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye read the wilderness as a pastoral space of renewal and redemption, of "escape from society".[17] Frank Davey was obviously following the same pastoral pattern traced by Frye when he described *Surfacing* as a comedy "which begins in social disruption, sends its characters into a healing 'green world', and returns them to society capable of restoring it to wholeness".[18] The quest reading of

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[14] *Ibid*., 33.

[15] *Ibid.*, 50.

[16] Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors", in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter, London, 1986, 71.

[17] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, 1973, 43.

[18] Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, 17.

the novel remains the most popular, although different critics use it to different ends. Carol P. Christ, for example, emphasises the spiritual aspects of the journey, and argues that in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment, the narrator "must choose the isolation of the visionary quest".[19] The quest genre is grounded in the belief that the hero can escape society and find definition in solitude, and as such, the traditional quest narrative is entrenched in a liberal concept of the self.[20] By beginning *Surfacing* with a journey into the wilderness, Atwood appears to be taking her place within this tradition.

To a significant extent, *Surfacing* does follow the traditional quest structure, and in this it echoes the pattern of descent and return already seen in *The Edible Woman*. This descent is both literal and metaphorical, as the narrator dives into the lake and receives knowledge. Ostensibly, the grail the narrator is questing for is her missing father, but gradually, this becomes a search for her missing memories, which will prove the key to her past and to her true self. However, as she journeys into the wilderness, it becomes apparent that the narrator's quest was never intended as an active quest for self-definition, but was instead an attempt to escape into isolation and innocence. Suffering the trauma of a coerced abortion, society has come to signify for her a dangerous place, filled with aggression and violence, where "there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them" (122), and the narrator does not perceive herself as an agent of action – as a quester – but as a survivor and a victim.

The narrator's flight into the wilderness is an attempt to escape her entrapment within social guilt and recover her authentic, innocent self. The notion of an authentic self recalls Taylor's essay, which begins with a deconstruction of the modern ideal of authenticity. Tracing the concept back to the eighteenth century and Rousseau, Taylor describes a shift in belief from an external and divine morality to an interior moral truth that must be defended against malign social influences.

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[19] Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, London, 1992, 47.

[20] The liberal ideal of circumstance-blind justice is inimical to the postmodern belief that there can be no position on the outside because everything is necessarily culturally situated. Consequently, there can be no external truths by which to judge and oppose the present culture. The belief that the individual is created through his or her society draws communitarianism to postmodernism, and both refuse the central tenet of the traditional quest narrative: that the hero can find truth outside of culture. Therefore, the traditional quest is associated with liberal beliefs.

Authenticity "comes to be something we have to attain if we are to be true and full human beings".[21] By definition, authenticity "cannot be socially derived, but must be inwardly generated",[22] and this belief underpins the liberal refusal to accept the pursuit of a socially defined good. This is the position from which the narrator of *Surfacing* begins her retreat into the forest. When she comes to believe that the friends she has brought with her to the island are perpetuating the corruption she fears, she hides from them until they eventually return to the mainland: "I am by myself; this is what I wanted: to stay here alone" (163). For Christ, this is pivotal to the novel: "The choice of solitude is not so much a rejection of community as a recognition that certain experiences and truths are so alien to ordinary consciousness that the individual must withdraw in order to experience them."[23] As she retreats from society, the narrator believes that, alone, she can overcome the alienation from her true self, symbolised by her lost memories, and recover her authenticity.

Ecofeminism and "the great Canadian victim complex"
Many of the above themes draw *Surfacing* to ecofeminism; in particular, the belief in an innocent, authentic, natural self, regainable by escaping corrupting civilisation, has definite sympathies with certain feminists who believed that a rational, masculine culture had compromised an earlier, more sensual and intuitive feminine society. Ecofeminism, "turning up spontaneously across several continents during the 1970s",[24] was born of the peace movements of the 1960s. Women involved in anti-war and anti-nuclear protests soon made connections between the various manifestations of patriarchal violence; as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva put it in their book, *Ecofeminism:* "aggression against the environment was perceived almost physically as an aggression against our female body."[25] The informing philosophy was one of connection between man's reckless plundering of nature's resources, his identification of nature as female – implicit in what Carolyn Merchant describes as "the ancient identity

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[21] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 28.

[22] *Ibid.*, 32.

[23] Christ, *Diving Deep*, 47.

[24] Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, London, 1997, 17.

[25] Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, Halifax: Nova Scotia, 1993, 498.

of nature as a nurturing mother"[26] – and thus his general attitude towards the feminine.

The developing ecofeminism articulated spiralling connections between variously theorised conflicts: between culture and nature; between destruction and creation; and between mind and body. Hélène Cixous discusses the significance of binary opposition in her 1975 essay, "Sorties". Like de Beauvoir, Cixous locates the origin of opposition in the original couple, male and female, and also like de Beauvoir, who spoke of "an original aspiration to dominate the Other",[27] Cixous identifies the rational compulsion to oppose each concept within a binary system as a destructive process. She argues: "Thought has always worked by opposition .… By dual, *hierarchized* oppositions", and she then warns:

> the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work.[28]

Cixous's concern is that binary oppositions are never equal, but become hierarchical, organised around a central male-female opposition, and that the hierarchy always favours the aggressive male half of the equation over the passive female half. Correspondingly, ecofeminists believe that there is a destructive opposition between masculine culture and feminine nature. This view is given considerable authority in *Surfacing*, in which nature is fragile and threatened. The novel opens with the pronouncement of disease: "the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (1). South, of course, is where America and the city lies. As the novel progresses, the prognosis worsens: "the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees" (107). In accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature, and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimised. The system of interconnected, hierarchical oppositions results in a situation in which nature, women and Canada are all innocent victims of an aggressive, patriarchal, Americanised culture.

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[26] Carolyn Merchant, "Women and Ecology", in *Feminisms*, 472.

[27] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 89.

[28] Hélène Cixous, "Sorties", trans. Ann Liddle, in *New French Feminisms*, eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Hemel Hempstead, 1981, 91.

One of the criticisms levelled at *Surfacing* was that it affirmed "a dangerous, patriarchal conflation of woman with nature".[29] This was not an original attack – it formed the basis of the main opposition to ecofeminist theory, as Ariel Salleh explains:

> Equality feminists from liberal and socialist traditions are wary of discussing women in connection with nature, because it is precisely this loaded truism that men have used over the centuries to keep women in their place as "closer to nature".[30]

In *Surfacing*, Atwood employs a blunt and perhaps unappetising metaphor for patriarchal rationalism and matriarchal intuition in the characters of the narrator's parents. Her father is practical, "he believed that with the proper guide books you could do everything yourself", and logical, "he admired what he called the eighteenth century rationalists" (32). In contrast, her mother is a recondite figure: "on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest" (46). In her mysterious powers, the mother is aligned with nature; after her death, the narrator envisions her as a bird: "I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is" (176). She is innocent, and consequently, like the slaughtered heron, a victim. "The innocents get slaughtered because they exist" (121-22), concludes the narrator.[31]

Ecofeminism supports the female claim of victimisation by defining masculine society as innately aggressive. Mies and Shiva, for example, argue that "science's whole paradigm is characteristically patriarchal, anti-nature and colonial and aims to dispossess women of their generative capacity as it does the productive capacities of nature".[32] The novel's narrator also accepts the implicit link between the destruction wreaked upon her own body by way of a coerced abortion, and the brutalising of the natural environment around her, which has encroached as far as the island: "trash was strewn around it,

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[29] Grace, *Violent Duality*, 39.

[30] Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, 13.

[31] Linda Hutcheon argues that the qualities ascribed to the narrator's parents are not intended to distinguish between masculine and feminine values, but to more positively symbolise a "marriage, a union that brought together" rational and intuitive experience (Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Toronto, 1988, 144).

[32] Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 498.

orange peelings and tin cans and a rancid bulge of greasy paper, the tracks of humans" (104). But to be discomfited by Atwood's portrayal of illogical and victimised Mother Nature at the hands of masculine rational society would be to underestimate the scepticism of the text.

Surfacing abounds with victims, but their depiction is filtered through the eyes of the emotionally-traumatised narrator, for whom potential aggressors are everywhere. The seemingly objective first person narrative belies a consistently unreliable narrator, and it is her repressed trauma that lends echoes of gothic to the text. Childhood memories of her brother torturing animals in his "laboratory" – "He kept them in jars and tin cans" (125) – are confused with her lover's attitude to her unborn child: "He said it wasn't a person, only an animal" (138), and an oppressive implied threat hangs over the contemporary scenes of the text. This climaxes when David forces Anna to strip for the invasive camera in a virtual rape, telling her, "Now just take it off like a good girl or I'll have to take it off for you" (129). When the narrator frees Anna's captured image by destroying the film, Anna can only warn "They'll get you .… You shouldn't have done it" (160). Their unfeeling cruelty is exposed in the delight they take in telling the narrator of her father's death: "[David] squinted his face, as if to show sympathy .… His eyes gloating" (151), but when it becomes apparent that she does not even believe their report of the discovered body – "they'd planned on hurting me … their trap had failed" (152) – the unreliability of her judgement becomes evident, and also her increasing irrationalism.

Object relations theory: the omnipotent mother

As the novel progresses, the narrator is increasingly persuaded by the belief that the rational society represented by her father is an aggressive and destructive force. She comes to believe that masculine culture has subsumed an earlier, more innocent and nurturing feminine nature. Frye documented a similar belief when he wrote about the narrative patterns of early myths, stating: "It is often assumed that the sexual and maternal myths are older, being more appropriate for an agricultural society, as their rivals were for the patriarchal, tool-using urban society that came later."[33] According to Frye, once the site of divine power was transplanted from the boundary-transgressing,

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[33] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 112.

feminine earth to the masculine sky with its unified sun, the earth became demonised as the location of Satanic hell: something to be conquered and resisted. In view of this religious reading, the exclusively female relationship of a woman with nature, promoted by ecofeminism, has distinctly witch-like connotations, and Mies argues that "science and technology was developed only after these women (the witches) had been murdered and, concomitantly, their knowledge, wisdom and close relationship with nature had been destroyed".[34] In *Surfacing*, the narrator seeks to regain her connection with archaic feminine wisdom, symbolised in the text by her mysterious mother. The female relationship with nature comes to represent in the novel a communion with a repressed matriarchal heritage disregarded by masculine society. Conversely, the male encounter with nature, as it is depicted in the traditional quest narrative, becomes a confrontation with the feminine. In Baym's words, "the fantasies are infantile, concerned with power, mastery, and total gratification".[35] In seeking to reject the aggression of the masculine formula, the narrator consequently falls into an alternative quest pattern, where the object of the quest is to connect with feminine nature rather than to dominate it.

Sherril Grace describes *Surfacing* as "a 'double-voiced discourse' incorporating a 'muted' story of Persephone's successful search for Demeter within a 'dominant' story of an equally successful wilderness quest for a father".[36] Frye explains that "most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a nightworld and a return to the idyllic world".[37] This cycle usually requires that the hero leaves the masculine city and descends into the chaos of the malleable feminine wilderness, where "he may inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature"[38] before returning to the order of the city. In *Surfacing*, however, the narrator discovers an alternative, feminine and more natural pattern, in which the site of initiation and termination is the feminine body – what Frye describes as "the earth mother, womb and tomb of all living things".[39] This revolution of the traditional quest, describing instead the feminine origins of the

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[34] Mies, *Ecofeminism*, 500.
[35] Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood", 75.
[36] Grace, *Violent Duality*, 36.
[37] Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 54.
[38] Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood", 7.
[39] Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 112.

narrative, draws parallels with a similar revolution that occurred in post-Freudian psychoanalysis.

Discomfited by Freud's patriarchal narrative of infant psychosexual development, in which the Oedipal phase required that the child reject the mother and accept the law of the father, feminists turned instead to examine the nature of the pre-Oedipal period. This study was called "object relations" because it examined the pre-verbal relationship of the child and the unnamed mother, and it discovered the omnipotent mother, who preceded the interjection of the omnipotent father. This was a powerful idea for many different women: spiritual feminists found evidence of an earlier, more natural state of connection and identification with a mother/goddess figure; lesbian feminists took from it the idea that the primary love object of both men and women was female and that heterosexuality was an unstable state; and anti-essentialists pointed to the fact that pre-Oedipal identity was unformed and sexless.

Beginning from the influential work of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, object relations "took as its themes plenitude rather than lack, connection rather than castration, celebrating what it saw as pre-Oedipal closeness between mother and infant rather than Oedipal loss".[40] The theory assumes that the child has to work to develop a sense of self in order to eventually emerge as an individual from the mother-child unit. In the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic phase of development, the child does not distinguish between itself and its environment, and experiences itself and the mother as an indistinct whole. The mother performs the function of the child's "external ego", providing for all its needs and wants. As the child does not distinguish between itself and its mother, this seemingly spontaneous capacity to be satisfied creates an artificial sense of confidence. When the child's wants are not immediately satisfied – for example, if it is allowed to go hungry – this confidence is shaken and it develops "an all-pervasive sense, sustained by enormous anxiety, that something is not right, is lacking in her or him".[41] The omnipotent mother/ego becomes something which can satisfy or frustrate, and is therefore both loved and hated. Unable to comprehend such complexity within a single object, and consumed with guilt (fantasised and actual aggression are

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[40] Elizabeth Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism*, Cambridge, 2000, 15.
[41] Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, 1978, 58-59.

indistinguishable: "the loved object [is] felt to have been destroyed by the aggressive instincts"[42]) the child undergoes a process which Klein termed splitting, in which it imagines that there are two distinct objects: "At the earliest stage, the mother is not an integrated person but a 'good' and 'bad' breast."[43]

With the distinction between good/pleasure and bad/pain comes a vague awareness of the mother as the orchestrator of these sensations, and according to Chodorow, the infant undergoes a period in which it oscillates between comprehending the mother as separate and not separate: "For the most part, in spite of cognitive perception of separateness, it experiences itself as within a common boundary and fused, physically and psychologically, with its mother."[44] As the child develops, "it has to go through a phase of individuation-separation from the unit of which it was once part",[45] which results in the realisation that the mother will leave and return, that she is independent of the child: "This beginning perception of its mother as separate, in conjunction with the infant's inner experience of continuity in the midst of changing instances and events, forms the basis for its experience of a self."[46] With this realisation of selfhood comes the further realisation that the mother's love is not exclusively directed at the child, and the ensuing frustrated desire for "primary love" results in retaliatory anger and increased recognition that the mother is not within the child's control:

> This change in its situation is not wholly to the infant's disadvantage. From the point of view of adult life, and from the point of view of that side of the infant that wants independence, total merging and dependence are not so desirable. Merging brings the threat of loss of self or of being devoured as well as the benefit of omnipotence.[47]

As the child is further able to distinguish and separate its self from the mother it is rewarded by social integration, but the memory of the early bond remains and the desire to return to that period of unique

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[42] Patricia Waugh*, Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, London, 1989, 67.
[43] *Ibid*., 65.
[44] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 62.
[45] Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity*, London, 1992, 67.
[46] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 67.
[47] *Ibid*., 69.

intimacy remains, though repressed. Separation from the mother results in a "profound sense of loss and desire to return to the imaginary whole security of the pre-Oedipal state, but also a profound *fear* of the loss of identity which such regression would entail".[48] The child must decisively break from the mother in order to create and maintain its strong sense of self, as Dorothy Dinnerstein explains: "[the mother] embodies the original non-self, a part of the infant's world which is both 'it' and 'you', and which feels both vitally necessary and vitally threatening to the formation of the 'I'." As a result of these early experiences of the mother as "global, inchoate, all-embracing",[49] the adult perception of femininity is coloured. The adult male is partially able to resolve his frustrated desire for the security of the mother's body by entering into a heterosexual relationship. (The resolution of the adult female's desire is somewhat more complicated because it involves both desire for and identification with the maternal body.) However, the male remains suspicious of the female body. As with the infant, his desire to metaphorically consume the female body, and thereby achieve total possession of it, is projected outwards, and manifests itself as a fear of consumption and annihilation by the female.

Nature and the female body

The inherent ambivalence towards the female body that results from the pre-Oedipal phase has implications for the masculine attitude towards nature, with which the female body is persistently associated, as Patricia Waugh explains:

> while mother *appears* (as in Freud and Lacan) to be part of the "natural" order, father is conceived in terms of the "cultural". "Mother" will thus carry our ambivalence not only about dependency but about the "natural", and she will continue to be experienced in part as tied to regression to a pre-social, primitive state whose emotional uncertainties undermine our "sophisticated" secondary socialization.[50]

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[48] Waugh, *Feminine Fictions*, 69.

[49] Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise*, New York, 1976, 93-95.

[50] Waugh, *Feminine Fictions*, 76.

In describing the formation of the "post-Oedipal gender personality", Chodorow identifies a tendency for the mother to view the daughter as similar and continuous to herself, and the son as a male opposite. The result of this is that boys are more quickly pushed to identify with the father, and consequently undergo a more "emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries", whereas girls experience themselves as "less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world".[51] The adult male, once having established the boundaries of the self which distinguish him from the mother and safeguard against the threat of future contamination by inchoate femininity, is careful to maintain them. The investment he holds in this secure definition of masculinity necessitates the opposing definition of femininity as other.

The adult female, never fully separating from the mother due to the inevitable identification of the female body, has less need for such strict definitions, although she is also influenced by ambivalent attitudes towards femininity within society: "For both sexes, the father is idealized as the figure who provides the possibility of separation, the release from ambivalence, and the access to a reality outside the confines of the family."[52] The masculine father is set up in opposition to, and as an escape from, the feminine mother. He represents culture and society, and in turn, she comes to represent nature and the wild. The promise of nurture and the subconscious fear of aggression, the excitement and terror prompted by the unbounded darkness of the wild are projections of the masculine attitude to the female body. Both are subject to man's desire to colonise, chart and claim, to what Dinnerstein describes as "the original, monolithic infant wish for ownership of a woman".[53] Through possession of the female/the wilderness, the male achieves access to pre-Oedipal security, whilst maintaining the control that will prevent it from engulfing him. This desire, as recognised by object relations theorists, was equally identified by ecofeminists who drew parallels between aggressive colonisation and exploitation of the wilderness and masculine attitudes to the female body.

In *Surfacing*, the narrator must come to accept her relationship with the maternal that she has wilfully repressed; she must relinquish

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[51] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 167.

[52] Waugh, *Feminine Fictions*, 76.

[53] Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid*, 49.

her socialised fear of the feminine and the natural, and learn to embrace them instead. Part of this process requires the resurfacing of her memories of her mother, which results in a re-examination of her mother's power. Early childhood memories recall a witch-like potency, as the narrator remembers her mother's ability to bring her son back to life: "She leaned over and reached down and grabbed him by the hair, hauled him up and poured the water out of him" (68), and to frighten wild animals with "arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified" (73). These images are a continuance of the omnipotent mother carried through from infancy. Her brother was able to escape the mother's shadow by immersing himself in a masculine world, envisioned in his childhood drawings of "explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks" (84).

For the narrator, however, the mother image is inescapable and insurmountable, reproaching her own perceived powerlessness, which she is only able to overcome when she realises that she possesses the same maternal power within herself. This realisation comes in the form of what she considers to be a posthumous gift from her mother: a discovered picture, drawn by the young narrator, of "a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out" (152). The unborn child is herself, but it is also her aborted child, and it is also the child that she is about to conceive; life and death merge and flow in a manner more comprehensible to the narrator than the division and rationalisation that epitomise the culture from which she is escaping.

The narrator simultaneously completes the traditional quest for the father, which will enable her to return to the city, and the alternative, feminine quest for her mother, symbolised by a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Barbara Hill Rigney speaks of Atwood's novels as attempted resolutions, "where opposites are resolved into wholes",[54] and correspondingly, the narrator of *Surfacing* attempts to combine the opposing halves of the quest when she prays, "Our father, Our mother" (183). When she speaks of "the mothers of gods" (175), she acknowledges the root of all life, both natural and divine, within the female body, and although her voyage into the wilderness must conclude with a return to the rational city, there is a recognition that even the city must eventually return to the wilderness.

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[54] Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, Houndmills, 1996, 93.

Guilt and innocence

One consequence of accepting the lesson taught by object relations theory – that the maternal body is a site of nurture and power, but is also, inevitably, a site of ambivalence – is the need to accept that simple dichotomies of guilt and innocence are rather more complicated in reality. This belief moves Atwood away from ecofeminism, despite her instinctual sympathy with its arguments. In the narrator's ready acceptance of her innate innocence, Atwood exposes the narrator's unconscious investment in her own persecution.

In its examination of masculine attitudes towards women and nature, ecofeminism contributed to a broader discourse about the destructive capacities of the male-orientated values of the industrial west. This was an important theme of the seventies, and Atwood acknowledged her cultural influences when she wrote: "I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me."[55]

Surfacing develops many of the themes of *The Edible Woman*, and it also anticipates many future developments in feminist theory, but it is also most definitely a text of its time, steeped in the ideas and the language of early 1970s Canada. Conscious of the new technologies, a consequent atmosphere of fear and impotence pervades the text of *Surfacing*. David's paranoid prediction of exhausted resources and ensuing war – "They're running out of water, clean water, they're dirtying up all of theirs, right?" (90) – is offset by the reality of unidentified developers felling trees on the remote lake. These are contemporary concerns about an increasingly threatening and diseased society, concerns that were articulated by Theodore Roszak in a 1970 sociological text:

> The prime symptom of that disease is the shadow of thermonuclear annihilation under which we cower. The counter culture takes its stand against the background of this absolute evil … in which our politics, our public morality, our economic life, our intellectual endeavour are now embedded with a wealth of ingenious rationalization.[56]

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[55] Atwood, *Second Words*, 15.

[56] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter-Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, London, 1970, 47.

Each of these fears – about war, about environmental disaster, about economic domination, and sexual inequality – all begin to form part of the same dialogue, and seemingly sets up a whole system of victims and aggressors.

What Atwood identifies, however, is a peculiar attraction and freedom in accepting the passive role of victim, and she charges both women and Canadians with the tendency to do so:

> If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault – it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. It will always be somebody else's fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life. And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one …[57]

In this she echoes de Beauvoir who spoke of "the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing" faced by women in male chauvinist societies.[58] Passivity is tempting because it seems to confer innocence; the innocents are acted upon, but are not expected to act, and are thus able to distance themselves from guilt. This is particularly attractive to the narrator of *Surfacing*, who wishes to negate her part in the abortion, and insists: "he arranged it for me, fixed me up so I was good as new" (139). Repulsed by the aggression she sees around her, the narrator prefers to be a victim.

The most influential analyses of *Surfacing* have presumed the ecofeminist sympathies of the novel. Davey wrote that "the elusive ideal in [*Surfacing*] is not only a female world prior to literary pattern but one prior to language itself",[59] and Christ spoke of "the emergence of a powerful vision of women's connection to nature".[60] Atwood, however, is not uncritical of ecofeminist positions such as that offered by Mary Daly who urged women to follow "the call of the wild", defined as "living in a state of nature … not tamed or domesticated … not living near or associated with man".[61] When the narrator does

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[57] Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 13.
[58] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 21.
[59] Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, 76.
[60] Christ, *Diving Deep*, 52.
[61] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 343.

succumb to the wilderness, it is not in triumphant identification with nature, but as a reprehensible abdication of her social responsibility.

Grace sees the novel broadly as a quest for harmony between the rational and sensual parts of the unhealthily cerebral narrator,[62] and whilst this coincides with the ecofeminist belief that a purely rational, technocratic society is a diseased society, Atwood maintains a critical distance from theorists who identify with a too-comfortable ethic of female-victim/male-aggressor. In *Surfacing*, the terms "American" and "Canadian" equate to aggressor and victim, not a specific nationality. When the Canadians commit a needless act of violence they become the aggressors: "It doesn't matter what country they're from", says the narrator, "they're still Americans" (123). This is equally applicable to a male-female analogy: masculine aggression is not a trait exclusive to men. David, with his cold viciousness is the Canadian aggressor: "Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches" (146), but his victim Anna is also his conspirator, joining in his attack on the narrator: "A ring of eyes, tribunal; in a minute they would join hands and dance around me." At this moment, all distinctions collapse for the narrator: "it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both" (148). Her now unequivocal association of human society with aggression traps the narrator within a kind of inescapable original sin. Suddenly, she can no longer repress her own guilt: "The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human" (124).

In relinquishing her victimhood, the system of irreconcilable opposites that the narrator has set up offers aggression as the only alternative. This concords with Linda Hutcheon's argument that the refusal to relinquish victim status can perpetuate aggression: "the binary opposition's very structure means that the one side needs the other for its very definition and can therefore never escape complicity."[63] Realising this, the narrator recoils from humanity: "I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands" (124). Her instinctual response is impossibly childish: "I didn't want there to be wars and death …. I wanted everyone to be happy" (125), but finally she accepts that "I could have said no but I didn't; that made

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[62] Grace, *Violent Dualiity*, 103.
[63] Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, 139.

me one of them too, a killer" (139), and is faced with the uncomfortable fact of her own capacity for human destruction.

Liberalism and the essential self

By locating the oppression of nature and the female in the rise of masculine rationalism, ecofeminism implies the existence of a pre-scientific, primordial state of innocence, which the narrator ascribes to her parents – "They didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand it" – who also function metaphorically as her ancestors: "they were from another age, prehistoric" (138). The recovery of her repressed memory prompts a crisis within the narrator. Shorn of her protective victim status and consumed with guilt, she fantasises a return to "a natural woman, state of nature" (184). This fantasy necessitates a belief in the liberal self.

Atwood acknowledged the liberal impulse behind the narrator's retreat from society when she termed *Surfacing* a ghost story, of "the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self".[64] The James story to which she makes specific reference, "The Jolly Corner", is particularly a fantasy of what might have been, and more importantly, a fantasy based on a belief in the essential self. The protagonist, Brydon, is tormented by the notion that "his *alter ego* 'walked'" and determines to discover "how he might have led his life and 'turned out'"[65] had circumstances been different. Atwood's narrator is similarly tormented, initially in a localised manner, as she regrets her lost innocence, but later in a much wider sense as she laments the destruction of her country at the hands of the happy killers.

Surfacing, like James' text, proposes the possibility that, given different life circumstances – another time, another place – the essential "I" would remain, an idea which is refuted by postmodernist thought, which proposes that the self is a product of time and place, and exists only as layers of experience. The fantasy behind *Surfacing* is a fantasy of the selfhood of a nation: the fantasy of pre-colonial innocence and its reliance upon essentialist notions of the self. The narrator desires a return to the primitive self, a primitive land unpolluted by experience, specifically colonial and economic

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[64] Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 18.
[65] Henry James, *Selected Short Stories*, ed. Quentin Anderson, New York, 1950, 296.

experience. Liberal ideas of the autonomy of the self influence the narrator's exhortation to throw off the degrading influences of encroaching Americanisation and recover the true Canada: the innocent self. Rejecting civilisation in a symbolic burning of clothes and books, she pronounces: "I abolish them, I have to clear a space" (171). The nostalgia for an ancestral past lends *Surfacing* to a post-colonial reading, but the belief in a stable pre-colonial national identity is misleading, as Frantz Fanon warns when he says: "the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities."[66] In this view, there is no innocent Canada (or innocent narrator) to be rediscovered, as each only exists in their current, morally ambiguous form.

Surfacing appropriates the quest narrative, but ultimately, the novel's increasingly anti-liberal direction exposes an irreparable flaw within the tradition; the self-knowledge gained by the narrator in the wilderness is paradoxically the belief that self-knowledge can only be achieved in society. Grace identifies a conclusion that she considers to be typical of Canadian novels: "In order to be truly free, the narrator cannot stay on her island shut off from mankind."[67] The noble ideal of the free and autonomous self, associated with the American frontier novel, becomes, in this example of the Canadian novel, a more humble struggle to balance social responsibility with personal integrity.

This is not the compromise that it might first appear. In "The Politics of Recognition", Taylor argues that authenticity and recognition are closely related. Identity is formed in the context of needs and desires; if a person's needs and desires are bound up with a significant other, then that significant other forms part of the person's identity. "Thus", says Taylor, "my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others".[68] By this conceptual step, Taylor overcomes the liberal idea of autonomous authenticity. Initially, the dialogic understanding of the self may seem

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[66] Franz Fanon, "On National Culture", in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Hemel Hempstead, 1993, 42.

[67] Grace, *Violent Duality*, 108.

[68] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 34.

to curtail the freedom of the individual, not least by undermining the blind liberalism that offers the narrator a stable position of equality from which to begin to reject her self-identified victim role. However, communitarians repudiate the value of liberalism. For them, "liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges".[69] From this position, liberalism is not a neutral project, but rather sustains the individualism that promotes the aggressive capitalism against which the narrator is struggling in *Surfacing*.

In the end, the discourse of guilt and innocence that informs Atwood's novel is complex and frequently contradictory. The ecofeminist claim that "women and animals are often fellow sufferers"[70] is undermined when the narrator finally asserts: "I am not an animal or a tree" (175) and takes the decision "to refuse to be a victim" (185). Similarly, Atwood rejects a certain form of victim-based Canadian nationalism, articulated in the novel by David: "If we could only kick out the fascist pig Yanks and the capitalists this would be a neat country" (33). In an interview she expresses the opinion that Canadians like David say "those bastards are coming in and taking away our country", when in fact, "Canadians are selling it".[71] In *Surfacing*, individuals are exhorted to stop blaming others and take responsibility for their own lives, whilst simultaneously understanding that moral choices are valueless unless proven in a social context.

These contradictions appear irreconcilable, and consequently, the novel ends less on an affirmation of choice than on the acceptance that something must change. The narrator recognises that her return to society will require entering into dialogue with her significant others: "If I go with him we will have to talk … we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other." However, learning to live together again will be difficult and require compromise, and so the novel ends on a pause of momentary indecision, and the final line is one of nostalgic regret for the freedom from mutual responsibility she is about to relinquish: "The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (186).

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[69] *Ibid*., 62.
[70] Lynda Birke, *Feminism, Animals and Science: The Naming of the Shrew*, Buckingham, Philadelphia, 1994, 135.
[71] Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 13.

Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition are finally about seeking a compromise between the hegemonic culture and the minority group. Considering a narrator who seeks a way of re-entering her society without abandoning the values that are crucial to her sense of identity, Atwood speaks of a possible "third thing". She says: "The ideal would be someone who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world."[72] Atwood proposes that compromise may provide the elusive "third way" which would allow the narrator to escape the restrictive binary value system of the text. Taylor's version of new communitarian theory also seeks a "third way", and he suggests that "the challenge is to deal with their sense of marginalization without compromising our basic political principles". Taylor and Atwood are addressing the problem of how to write individual identities into a universal liberal discourse. *Surfacing* concludes that the individual is complicit in the acts of his or her society, but it also points to the society's responsibility to create a space for the individual, and the minority cause. Only in this way, the novel suggests, will issues such as feminism, environmentalism and multiculturalism be integrated into the dominant ethos of the society, and these "others" will cease to consider themselves innocent victims of a social culture from which they are increasingly alienated.

Surfacing represents a significant development for Atwood, as she expands on the issues of *The Edible Woman* and exposes an intricate inter-connection of themes and theories, both localised and universal. Liberal ideas of the essential self are disrupted by the beginnings of a postmodern speculation, and this conflict, which problematises the resolution of the text, is to become even more pressing in *Lady Oracle*. *Surfacing* remains a morally optimistic novel, suggesting the possibility of resolution and final definition, and it is this characteristic which disposes it to ecofeminism. But it is also a transitional text for Atwood, "only half-formed", and it closes on a pause: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (186). From this moment of indecision, Atwood moves forward into a more ironic, more highly stylised postmodernism, which is at once a rejection of the early essentialist feminisms, and an anticipation of the very beginnings of a new, more self-consciously theorised feminism.

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[72] *Ibid*., 16.

CHAPTER III

LADY ORACLE: POSTMODERNISM AND THE BODY

Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle* (1976), marks a return to the earlier, comic tone of *The Edible Woman*, but the theoretical and thematic explorations that occurred in *Surfacing*, the intervening novel, influence the direction and the resolution of the text. Just as *Surfacing* examined the irreconcilable conflict between the narrator's essentialist belief in guilt and innocence, and her growing realisation of the mutability of such truths, so *Lady Oracle* exposes a tension between Joan the narrator's love of resolved plot-lines – "I longed for happy endings",[1] she says – and a growing postmodernist mistrust of metanarratives. Altogether, *Lady Oracle* is a more postmodern text than the previous novel. In *Surfacing*, Atwood had anticipated the encroaching crisis of the essentialist idea of the self that contributed to the development of postmodernist theory. However, the narrator's reluctance to accept the inescapable nature of cultural influence meant that the novel lacked real resolution, ending on a pause: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet",[2] and a sense of anxiety permeated the novel. *Surfacing* acts as a transitional text in Atwood's canon, preparing the way for *Lady Oracle* with its self-creating narrator, in which Atwood appears to shrug off earlier anxieties and embrace postmodernism.

The postmodern aesthetic
Postmodernism has proven notoriously difficult to define. In his seminal 1979 text, *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard argued that "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976), London, 1982, 320. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
[2] Atwood, *Surfacing*, 186.

the postmodern age",[3] and he stated: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."[4] In a later, 1984 essay, "Periodizing the Sixties", Frederic Jameson offered the view that "Postmodernism emerges as a way of making creative space for artists now oppressed by those henceforth hegemonic modernist categories of irony, complexity, ambiguity, dense temporality, and particularly, aesthetic and utopian monumentality". In opposition to these modernist properties, he suggests, postmodernism grew out of a number of concurrent or sequential aesthetic shifts, namely: the death of the author; what Jameson calls a *culture of the simulacrum*; media culture; the aesthetic of textuality; the diminishment of depth; and the appearance of pastiche and "nostalgia art".[5]

With *Lady Oracle*, Atwood explores all of these ideas, and does so within a comic framework that is in itself particularly suited to the vaunted lack of depth of the postmodern text. Yet despite her seeming compliance with the postmodern aesthetic, *Lady Oracle* betrays Atwood's underlying suspicion of, in particular, postmodernism's acceptance of the death of the subject, which abandons the belief in an essential self. Whilst Joan rejoices in the freedoms of postmodern anti-essentialism – "I had visions of myself … carefree at last, the past discarded" (7) – she simultaneously desires the ontological security that postmodernism necessarily sacrifices. She finds this security in the conclusive stability of her fiction writing, and admits: "I needed the feeling of release when everything turned out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my characters and dismiss them into bliss" (320). This conflict of ideologies permeates the text, and highlights a debate that continues throughout Atwood's work, and was also to have mounting significance for feminist theory.

One of the most important texts for postmodernism was Roland Barthes' 1968 essay, "The Death of the Author", in which he argued that "as soon as a fact is *narrated* … the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins". Barthes believed that writing had what he called a "prerequisite impersonality", that "it

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[3] Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1984, 3.

[4] *Ibid*., xxiv.

[5] Frederic Jameson, "Periodizing the Sixties", in *Modern Literary Theory*, 308-309.

is language which speaks, not the author".[6] By this understanding, the key to the text is no longer biographically or intentionally the author's, but neither is it the critic's. Subsequently, if there is no approachable authority, preceding or succeeding the text, then no single interpretation can be confirmed or denied. The text, in effect, is liberated from binding analyses, and consequently, the reader is liberated to explore and recreate the text according to his or her own desires and without inhibition.

Appropriately, *Lady Oracle* begins with the death of the author. Joan, author of numerous gothic romances and one cult epic poem, has faked her own suicide in order to escape the increasingly sinister complications of the many fictional narratives she has interwoven into her life. Throughout the novel, Joan frequently articulates postmodern ideals, for example, in her unquestioning acceptance of the inherent instability of the text. "Every myth is a version of the truth" (92), she says, concurring with the postmodern view that no single metanarrative can possibly encapsulate all aspects of human experience. Ironically, however, it is because Joan has so persistently negated her authorial control that she is now forced to inhabit an uncomfortable limbo, filled with curiosity about how her narrative is progressing without her.

As the figure of the deceased author, Joan succeeds in relinquishing her responsibility for the text, but is left comically piqued by the lack of interest in her now displayed: "I was the one who was supposed to be dead; they should have been mourning but instead they seemed quite cheerful" (9). Then, adding further insult, Joan's Fellini-esque fantasy of her readers mourning her on a beach degenerates into a Walt Disney animation, "The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met" (9). This, again, is a consequence of the transgressive nature of the postmodern aesthetic.

According to Jameson, both postmodernism and high modernism were initially oppositional and marginal movements that eventually became hegemonic. However, where high modernism developed in opposition to the mass culture, postmodernism subsumed the two movements by diminishing their comparative value. "It is precisely the waning of their opposition, and some new conflation of the forms

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[6] Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath, London, 1977, 142-43.

of high and mass culture, that characterizes postmodernism itself",[7] suggests Jameson. For Joan, the consequence of her postmodern incarnation is a constant and unregulated shifting between high and low culture. Powerless to police her text from the contamination of parody and pastiche, Joan is unable to sustain her tragedy and becomes trapped within the comic mode. Whilst the postmodern removal of barriers is liberating, it also has its limitations, as Joan is discovering to her cost.

Parody is self-referential; it self-consciously points to its textuality and to its intertextuality, to its influences, and to its transgressions. Linda Hutcheon observes that "the modern world seems fascinated by the ability of our human systems to refer to themselves in an unending mirroring process".[8] And whilst parody has a long history, it holds a peculiar resonance for the postmodern aesthetic. Hutcheon suggests that parody "is one of the ways in which modern artists have managed to come to terms with the weight of the past",[9] and this accords with Jameson's view that "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks".[10]

This endless repetition is a feature of what John Barth described in 1967 as "the literature of exhaustion", which appears at the moment at which "intellectual and literary history has … pretty well exhausted the possibilities of novelty",[11] and in "The Death of the Author" Barthes came to a similar conclusion when he stated that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture".[12] Waugh, however, argues that parody can function positively and creatively, and suggests that "In fact, new developments in fiction have always tended to evolve through the parody of older or outworn

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[7] Jameson, "Periodizing the Sixties", 309.

[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*, New York, 1985, 1-2.

[9] *Ibid*., 29.

[10] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *Postmodern Culture*, 115.

[11] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, Manchester, 1977, 81.

[12] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 146.

conventions".[13] Parody, by this understanding, points to a creative impulse in the postmodern aesthetic.

Where parody has always involved a rereading and a re-inscribing of earlier texts, in postmodernism, the prior text is no longer privileged as the originator or the source. By a postmodernist understanding, each text, whether overtly parodic or not, is a construction of quotations and references to earlier works, and to yet earlier works; the text is trapped in what Hawthorn described as "a prison house of texts".[14] Parody in postmodernism becomes a self-conscious and overt reference to what is an unavoidable consequence of the exhaustion of literature.

In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood employs parody as an expression of Joan's entrapment within the text. The novel is filled with repetition and a consequent atmosphere of *déjà vu*. Joan compulsively revises her narrative, recycling characters and events in a frustrated attempt to arrive at the perfect happy ending. Susan McKinstry observes how "she uses nothing new, but recycles names (Joan Foster, Louisa Delacourt) and incidents (her mother at the triple mirror) in several different genre until she is satisfied as an artist with the effect".[15] Joan's texts – her autobiography as she presents it in *Lady Oracle*; her epic poem, "Lady Oracle"; and her final novel, *Stalked by Love* – are essentially the same story retold with the characters cast in different roles. As Atwood's text moves toward its conclusion, the claustrophobia of this arrangement heightens until one narrative begins to stumble against another and the characters become confused. Finally, Joan can no longer keep her fictional and non-fictional characters from invading each other's texts: "*Redmond drew back, puzzled. 'Who is Arthur?' he asked*" (323).

As a result of these unstable characters, shifting easily from hero to villain, the novel cultivates a gothic atmosphere of paranoia and pursuit, which climaxes with Joan attacking an investigating reporter. This action marks a temporary halt in the frenzied narrative, and gives Joan pause before attempting her explanation. But this climactic

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[13] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London, 1988, 69.

[14] Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, 5.

[15] Susan Jaret McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen: The Self-Conceived and Self-Deceiving Heroine-Author in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*", in *Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality*, 67.

moment is actually both the beginning and the end of the text, for "*Lady Oracle*" as we read it is Joan's retrospective narrative. The order and control on which it concludes is actually the pause before the narrative begins: "I guess it will make a pretty weird story, once he's written it" (344), muses Joan. She has become trapped in a nightmarish cycle of narrative and the only escape she can imagine is into yet another genre – "maybe I'll try some science fiction" (345) – which is no escape at all. The conclusion of one text prompts the initiation of another, and the concept of the real world, existing exterior to the text, is entirely lost.

The democratisation of the author
In its assertion of what Hutcheon describes as the "ex-centric", postmodernism undermines the hierarchy of worth and destabilises boundaries. Consequently, according to Hutcheon, "female, gay, and various ethnic voices can now be heard".[16] Thus postmodernism initially appears to be a democratic theory, although certainly not a liberal democracy. In refusing to privilege one discourse over another, postmodernism promotes equality. However, despite the fact that postmodernism is frequently associated with the counter-culture, the postmodern aesthetic is also undeniably integral to the hegemony of the consumer society. The ever-expanding boundaries of the conventional and the acceptable result in a perpetual normalising of the alternative, as the marginal is quickly assimilated to become the centre. To use Elaine Showalter's words, "Today's avant-garde is tomorrow's advertising".[17] Initially radically democratic because of its acceptance of marginalised discourses, as each is normalised, postmodernism's democracy comes to lie simply in its articulation of the cultural dominant.

By exploring the full potential of the postmodern principle of democratic artistry, Atwood indirectly betrays her scepticism about the principle. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan writes formulaic romances, sold to publishers as "material" – "as if it came by the yard" (156). The frequent references to the monetary value of the work suggest an inherent superficiality that disposes postmodernism to a consumer culture. Terry Eagleton is particularly forceful on this point:

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[16] Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, 11.
[17] Elaine Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, London, 1986, xx.

[Postmodernism] has brought low the intimidating austerity of high modernism with its playful, parodic, populist spirit, and in thus aping the commodity form has succeeded in reinforcing the rather more crippling austerities generated by the marketplace .… It believes in style and pleasure, and commonly churns out texts which might have been composed by, rather than on, a computer.[18]

When Joan substitutes drugstore romances with epic poetry, she does so with a comic lack of the creative energy traditionally ascribed to the author's task, which Barthes describes: "The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child."[19] Abandoning this principle, Atwood's narrator composes novels with her "eyes closed" (131), and writes poetry in a self-induced trance. Here the novel recalls Barthes' view of Surrealism as "entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing)", which he credits with "the desacrilization of the image of the Author".[20] Indeed, postmodernism is founded on desacrilisation, but Eagleton is again suspicious of its radicalism. "For all its vaunted openness to the Other", he argues, "postmodernism can be quite as exclusive and censorious as the orthodoxies it opposes".[21] A system that embraces all embraces none, but Eagleton argues that postmodernism does not embrace all, because by proclaiming so many orthodoxies to be unequivocally false and reductive, it paradoxically delivers an absolute pronouncement of the type condemned by postmodernists.

Lady Oracle was published eight years after Barthes' work on the author, and it displays a similar preoccupation. Joan's magpie-ish assimilation of styles and influences, creating what one fictional critic terms "a cross between Kahlil Gibran and Rod McKuen" (224), responds positively to Barthes' warning that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text".[22] Joan's authority over her poem "Lady Oracle" is wilfully undermined when she admits "I wasn't at all sure what [the poem] meant" (222), and Barthes' prophesy of "the

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[18] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford, 1996, 28-29.

[19] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 145.

[20] *Ibid*., 144.

[21] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 26.

[22] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 147.

birth of the reader"[23] is seemingly confirmed as she meekly submits to one reader's interpretation of her text as a feminist polemic on "modern love and the sexual battle" (233) – an analysis that she herself had never considered.

Joan also suffers biographical critical analysis, and is horrified to find herself its subject when her poetry is falsely read as a comment on her marriage: "It seemed a very angry book", says the critic, "If I were your husband, I'm not sure I'd like it" (237). Joan's experience of this intrusive analysis is not untypical, and women writers in particular, such as, for example, Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters, and Virginia Woolf, have always received an enormous amount of biographical speculation. Atwood has been subject to this form of textual analysis herself, and her disapproval of its techniques is evident. In an interview she once described the motivation behind biographical textual analysis in particularly graphic terms, saying: "what people really want is to peek into the person's bathroom, and their dirty underwear, and what have you; it's gossip magazine stuff."[24]

Yet the problem of authorial motivation is not resolved by postmodernist dismissal, and Atwood problematises her own argument, for there is an autobiographical key by which to unlock "Lady Oracle" – not Joan's marriage, but her relationship with her mother, as she finally recognises: "she had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower" (330). All of Joan's life, she has been haunted by the spectre of her mother, and presumably, if the critics had access to the "autobiography" which makes up the body of Atwood's novel, they would have understood this.

Whether the reader has a right to explore and speculate on the author's motivation is a philosophical and ethical dilemma, and one that Atwood herself has admitted to struggling with. When reviewing a posthumous collection of unpublished work by the poet Sylvia Plath, she wrote: "this kind of publication makes me uneasy almost by definition, hinting as it does of rummagings in bureau drawers that the author, had she lived, would doubtless have kept firmly locked." Yet

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[23] *Ibid*., 130.

[24] Atwood quoted in Robert Potts, "Light in the Wilderness", *The Guardian Review*, 26 April 2003, 20-23.

Atwood also admits to being "absorbed" and "fascinated" by this text.[25]

Atwood engages with the theories of authorship and readership articulated by Barthes, but she seems to sense some flaw in their execution. Joan abandons "Lady Oracle" to critical interpretation, but simultaneously maintains tight control of its encompassing text, Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, of which she is narrator and fictionally the author. The tension between the desires to abandon and to maintain control of the text is one that Joan cannot resolve, and it reflects something of the dilemma faced by feminists when contemplating postmodernism.

Postmodernism and feminism

Early feminist literary criticism sought to rediscover and re-read the female author. Showalter's "gynocriticism" was extremely influential, and in her 1977 text, *A Literature of Their Own*, she argued that, rather than being "'sociological chameleons', taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives",[26] women contributed to a specifically female literary tradition, connected by recurrent themes and motifs. According to Showalter, a shared experience of patriarchal repression "led to a [female] fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic and profound".[27] This early investigation into the female tradition and the female aesthetic quickly became the cornerstone of feminist literary criticism. However, gynocriticism was reliant, by its very nature, on a privileging of the author's gender in the reading of the text. Gender was believed to be the key to understanding a subtext of repression and fantasy running through the female narrative. Gynocriticism, like early second-wave feminism, centred on a metanarrative of sexual division and repression, and in the opposing postmodern refutation of the existence of metanarratives, postmodernism encountered its greatest irreconcilable difference with feminism.

This fundamental contradiction between feminism and postmodernism hindered what initially appeared to be a mutual sympathy between the two discourses. Owens, who asserts that the

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[25] Atwood, *Second Words*, 316-17.

[26] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brönte to Doris Lessing*, rev. edn, London, 1999, 11.

[27] *Ibid*., 28.

imperialist modern period ended in the mid-1950s with the recognition of the coexistence of other cultures, associates modernism, and particularly modernist art, with "its claim to represent some authentic vision of the world". In contrast, he argues, "not only does the postmodernist work claim no such authority, it also actively seeks to undermine all such claims; hence, its generally deconstructive thrust". Following this argument, the authoritative modernist vision is unequivocally centred, unitary, and masculine, and postmodernism works to destabilise that unified position. Thus it would appear that feminism would naturally align itself with the postmodernist project. And further to this, feminism not only benefits from, but actively partakes in the deconstruction of the Western vision or representation. In Owens' words: "[woman's] exteriority to Western representation exposes its limits."[28] At this point, the feminist project and the postmodernist project overlap.

However, where the "ex-centricity", to use Hutcheon's term, of postmodernism seemingly drew the two ideologies together, some feminists began to locate a particular danger for feminism in the democracy, perhaps better understood as the pluralism, of postmodernism. Writing in the late 1980s, Hutcheon states that "the postmodern 'different' … is starting to replace the humanist 'universal' as a prime cultural value",[29] and continues that this is good news for ethnic minority Canadians. Presumably, it is also good news for women, for homosexuals, for non-Westerners – for all groups who have traditionally been excluded from the humanist universal or, in Owens' words, from the subjectivity of the representational systems of the West.

However, there is a danger that, in celebrating difference, the specificity of each particular group becomes subsumed in a general discourse of pluralistic difference: that difference is, in effect, undermined by pluralism. It can of course be argued that the levelling of difference is precisely the project undertaken by the feminist movement, and whilst this has certainly been the proclaimed aim of liberal humanist feminism, another, large school of feminist thought (characterised, for example, by Showalter's gynocriticism) has asserted the need to rediscover, relocate and redefine history and

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[28] Owens, "The Discourse of Others", 58-59.
[29] Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, ix.

anthropology in specifically feminist terms, in order that women can, for the first time, know themselves. Hutcheon is aware of the power and influence of this desire for ontological security – which is felt, she believes, by Canadians as well as by women – and she identifies it in Atwood's work, particularly in its obsession with character formation. Hutcheon argues:

> If women have not yet been allowed access to (male) subjectivity, then it is very difficult for them to contest it, as the (male) poststructuralist philosophers have been doing lately … women must define their subjectivity before they can question it; they must first assert the selfhood they have been denied by the dominant culture.[30]

This corresponds with Nancy Miller's view that: "because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not … (collectively) felt burdened by *too much* self, ego, cogito, etc."[31]

According to Hutcheon, because women writers feel compelled to assert their subjectivity, despite any postmodernist sympathies they may hold, their work may often appear more realistic, and consequently more conservative than that of their male counterparts, who embrace deconstruction with fewer reservations. The female postmodernist writer (as Hutcheon ascribes Atwood) finds herself paradoxically attempting to simultaneously inscribe and challenge subjectivity. The postmodern rejection of universalism was antithetical to the principles of early feminist literary criticism, but later feminist writers had to seek some way of negotiating postmodernism without relinquishing the hard-won gains of gynocriticism. In *Lady Oracle*, the pressures of this paradoxical position are felt in the perpetual vacillation of Joan between the constructive and the deconstructive.

Postmodernism's connection with Barthes' "Death of the Author" would seem to suggest that feminism would come into a similar conflict with Barthes' theory as it had with postmodernism in general, and indeed, much early feminist literary criticism was preoccupied with recovering the silenced female author. This project was not just a

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[30] *Ibid*., 5-6.
[31] Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader", in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Sean Burke, Edinburgh, 1995, 197.

feature of Showalter's work, but also influenced, for example, the launch of Virago Press in 1973. However, Miller proposes that "feminist criticism's insistence on the importance of the reader – on positing the hypothesis of her existence",[32] has an affinity with Barthes' concomitant theory of the "birth of the reader".[33] The reader, by this understanding, has the power to inscribe her own experience onto the text that may have previously worked to exclude her.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan writes for a female readership, remarking: "I knew my readers well, I went to school with them" (35), and leaves her texts open to their readings: "The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty" (34-35). Conversely, the author is negligible, a ghost-figure constructed from textual production and a dead woman's passport:

> They'd never seen me, they knew me only by my other name. They thought I was a middle-aged ex-librarian, overweight and shy. (33)

Joan negates her authorship and, according to McKinstry, "denies her unromantic past to turn herself into a text".[34] Her dynamic relationship with her work is closer to that of the reader; her motivation is theirs: "the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well." Her production is equally a consumption, and once it is "neatly packaged like the other painkillers" (34) she swallows it along with her readers. When her life comes to resemble a gothic plot of its own, her desire to consume is temporarily satiated: "I'd completely lost interest in Costume Gothics. What did I need them for now?" (257). Joan is character, text and reader. In Barthes' terms, she is "the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed",[35] leaving no room for authorship.

Despite this seemingly egalitarian act of relinquishing control to the reader, Joan receives a warning from the spiritualist, Leda Sprott, who tells her, "you may think it's harmless, but it isn't" (216).

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[32] *Ibid.*, 195.

[33] "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 148).

[34] McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen", 66.

[35] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 148.

McKinstry argues that the author cannot be removed from the text, but retains a responsibility to the reader because the "stories that please readers and writers can trap and maim them".[36] Atwood demonstrates this truth through Joan who, in becoming the reader of her own texts, also becomes trapped within their gothic fantasies.

Whilst Miller's connection of the feminist promotion of the female reader with Barthes' "birth of the reader" is valid, it positions feminist criticism at a very early stage of the second wave, with the phallocentric criticism of Kate Millett's 1969 text, *Sexual Politics*. In Millett's analysis of Norman Mailer and D.H. Lawrence, the reader may have been female, but the author remained male. Miller concedes that the removal of the author has not been as revolutionary as may have been hoped. Instead of revising the concept of authorship, it has simply "repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity in favour of the (new) monolith of anonymous textuality".[37]

This loss of specificity is a condition of postmodernism, as Owens suggests: "Pluralism … reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction to difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability."[38] In Barthes' postmodernism, the text stands alone, and the female author is swept back into anonymity just at the moment at which she was beginning to be named. However, Andreas Huyssen points to an even greater obstacle for feminism when he asks: "Doesn't poststructuralism, where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison the chance of challenging the *ideology of the subject* (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity?"[39] If no author is indicated, the reader assumes the universal masculine subject. So, not only does the female author resume her anonymity, but that anonymity is gendered male. Therefore, if the female is ever to exist, she must insist on the acknowledgement of her gendered specificity.

Joan continues to struggle with these contradictory impulses. Her instinctual literary aesthetic is primarily postmodern, as each new fiction becomes another version of reality: "I began to feel that even though I hadn't committed suicide, perhaps I should have. They made

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[36] McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen", 66.
[37] Miller, "Changing the Subject", 195.
[38] Owens, "The Discourse of Others", 58.
[39] Miller, "Changing the Subject", 197.

it sound so plausible" (313). But she is also drawn by a desire for the resolution offered by metanarrative in her longing for "happy endings". Through the layering of the many narratives of the text she attempts to create and recreate herself in a perpetual generation of the "I" in its various fictions. As Joan reinvents her life yet again – "in the fictitious past I'd constructed for his benefit I'd included a few items of truth" (172) – she justifies her lies and fantasies with a postmodernist scepticism of objective reality, explaining that "This was the reason I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing" (150). This accords with the postmodernist's anti-essentialism. Even the first person voice that narrates the novel, a seeming indicator of a subjective presence, is a foil to disguise another unstable narrator spinning another fictional self.

Textuality and the inescapable prison

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard points to one of the most troubling aspects of postmodernism when he asks: "where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?"[40] This, in the end, is the question facing Joan as she authors her postmodern text: how to legitimate not only the choices she has made, but also her own continuing presence in a text that is increasingly working towards the deconstruction of the self. With the loss of metanarratives comes the loss of the great legitimising systems, such as Christianity for example, by which the self has been known and by which ethical decisions have traditionally been made.

Postmodernism is anti-theological, as Barthes recognised when he stated that "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law".[41] As a consequence of this liberation of meaning, postmodernism, in Lyotard's words, "has no relevance for judging what is true or just", and whilst Lyotard sees this situation in its most positive light, arguing that postmodernism "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the commensurable",[42] moral or ethical positions are left unanchored to a system that might legitimate their relevance. Equally, the individual is left trapped within a structure that denies him or her the possibility of stepping outside of the structure – of the text – to

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[40] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv-xxv.

[41] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 129.

[42] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxv.

take up a position of truth. *Lady Oracle* reflects something of this theme of entrapment through its use of the gothic genre, which is propelled by the fear of the inescapable prison.

For many feminist critics of gothic, the conventional motifs of locked doors and enclosed spaces and the nameless terror that typically permeates the gothic novel are rooted in the female experience of patriarchy. Sybil Korff Vincent reads female gothic as manifesting "the threat of ravishment or penetration, the discomfort and innate repugnance of bearing within one's own body an alien being, and the pain and danger of childbirth". This threat is reflected in the ambiguous relationship of the heroine to the hero, as Vincent explains: "the male is often both persecutor and rescuer, reflecting the ambivalent position which males occupy in relation to females." [43] By this reading, the hero and the villain are dual aspects of the same character, and in *Lady Oracle*, Joan learns this duplicity from an early age when a man exposes himself to her and later – perhaps – comes to her aid: "Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?" (64). Joan later reflects her ambivalence to masculinity in her novels, which describe how "the hero, a handsome, well-bred, slightly balding man, dressed in an immaculately tailored tweed coat, like Sherlock Holmes', pursued the heroine …. the villain, equally well bred and similarly clad, did just about the same thing" (156).

This ontological instability is typical of both the gothic narrative and the postmodern condition. In *Lady Oracle*, each character is depicted as multiple: from Joan herself; to Joan's monstrous mother: "instead of three reflections she had three actual heads" (67); to her ambiguous father: "Was he a bad man or a nice man?" (69). In this way, the existence of the essential self is challenged throughout the novel in much the same way that it is challenged by postmodernism. Hutcheon, however, associates this instability with a particularly feminist view of female subjectivity. Unlike Western men, who have typically experienced a more coherent, rational identity, Hutcheon argues that "Atwood's women seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are more fragmented

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[43] Sybil Korff Vincent, "The Mirror and the Cameo: Margaret Atwood's Comic/Gothic Novel, *Lady Oracle*", in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann E. Fleenor, Montreal, 1983, 156.

and even multiple".[44] Following Hutcheon's argument, although women seem to be drawn to more conservative, realist narratives that assert and reinforce their unstable subjectivities, they are simultaneously less troubled than men by nostalgia for a unified self, because fragmentation is a situation with which women are quite familiar. Thus Joan's ever-shifting character is both a parody of, and an articulation of, the inherent instability of the otherness (to recall de Beauvoir) of the feminine self.

The gothic is, in itself, a contradictory genre; it is both empowering and imprisoning to the female character. It allows the heroine to show courage, resourcefulness and independence – McKinstry suggests that "female Gothics covertly celebrate protective female cunning"[45] – but ultimately, the heroine remains trapped within the narrative, and her final goal must always be rescue by, and marriage to, the hero. As the gothic plot becomes increasingly embedded in Joan's life, she begins to feel the frustration of this enclosed narrative, which she displays in her growing and inappropriate pity for the evil wife – "Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely" (319) – and irritation with the insipidly virtuous heroine. The gothic narratives that Joan had begun as an escape, thinking that "escape literature … should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader" (155), begin to suffocate and trap her. In contrast, the essential self, which appears to be binding because it leaves no room for alternative selves, actually offers a more freeing possibility, because it allows that the self can step outside of the narrative and still exist. In contrast:

> Postmodernists … see knowledge of the world as indissociable from being-in-the-world: knowledge and experience are inextricably bound to each other and always culturally situated. There can be no transcendental "view from nowhere," no position from outside culture from which to offer a criticism of it.[46]

The inescapable aspect of culture forms a prison that equates with the inescapable prison of the gothic text. This situation is inevitable in a

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[44] Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, 145.
[45] McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen", 60.
[46] *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, 3rd edn, London, 1996, 290.

postmodern concept of the world, and the only possibility of release comes with the acceptance of the essential self.

Because she has rejected the idea of the essential self, Joan is afraid that if she abandons the fictions by which she has created herself, if she peels back each of her superficial reincarnations, she will simply disappear. This fear manifests itself in the recurring image of the fat lady, who functions as an emblem of the insubstantial postmodern self: "her secret was that although she was so large, she was very light, she was hollow, like a helium balloon" (273). Joan desires the ontological security of the essential self, but does not believe that it is possible. Consequently, she is cursed, like the Lady of Shallot, who is a recurring motif in the novel, to continue weaving yet another fictional self: "you could stay in the tower for years, weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom" (313).

This pressure to maintain the façade of the self is somewhat similar to a postmodern feature that Jameson describes when he states that "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions".[47] In a similar fashion, Joan has thrown off her past and is now forced to sustain a perpetual present that requires constant and unrelenting change. This instability is eventually exhausting and Joan comes to recognise that her earlier obesity had been an unconscious attempt to make herself more substantial and stable, "to become solid, solid as a stone" (78). Joan's carefree postmodernism begins to appear less like a liberation from definition, and more like an imprisonment in superficiality.

Matrophobia
Whilst exploring and interrogating the postmodern promises that seem to tempt Joan towards anti-essentialism, Atwood also uses the novel to examine possible psychological motivations for Joan's rejection of her essential self. Part of Joan's compulsion to create and recreate her self is in rebellion against her mother's claims of authorship: "She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product" (67). In defiance, Joan rejects her authoritative mother to become a self-

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[47] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", 125.

creating character. In this aspect of the novel, Atwood's focus moves from the death of the author to the construction of the feminine. As in her previous two novels, Atwood points to an instinctual ambiguity towards femininity experienced by many women. By this understanding, Joan's escapism takes on a quite different meaning in the text, and *Lady Oracle* can be seen to continue some of the psychoanalytical readings of feminism begun in *Surfacing*.

In *Surfacing*, the narrator's physical search for her father evolved into an emotional quest for her mother, and in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood recycles this scenario, once again frustrating the Freudian narrative that would have the phallus as the goal of all desire. The revision of the traditional quest narrative in *Surfacing* paralleled the revision of Freud's narrative of psychosexual development by object relations theorists. However, in the naïve male-female dichotomies set up by the narrator of *Surfacing*, Atwood exposed something of the oversimplification of early second-wave readings of object relations theory. Ecofeminists and spiritual feminists in particular were quick to appropriate object relations in support of their essentialist projects. Atwood, however, has always proven suspicious of simple ideologies which encapsulate difference and seek to make it uniform, as she explains: "[I have] a fear of the development of a one-dimensional Feminist Criticism … that would award points according to conformity or non-conformity to an ideological position."[48] With *Lady Oracle*, Atwood moves away from simplified images of female potency and begins to explore the complexity and diversity of female relationships. In this she articulates a growing dissatisfaction with the universalism of early second-wave feminism.

The women who first began to voice their discomfit at being defined by a group which largely consisted of white, middle class, heterosexual, Anglo-American feminists were those who explicitly did not fall into the above categories. Black, Asian, Third World, mixed race, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and working class women all felt themselves to be *other* to popular feminism. This had not been considered or anticipated by many of the leading figures of the second wave. De Beauvoir had accredited women's political impotence to their inability to unite as a collective. "Women do not say 'We'",[49] she

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[48] Atwood, *Second Words*, 192.
[49] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 19.

complained in *The Second Sex*, and in 1970, Germaine Greer also argued for female co-operation:

> She must know her friends, her sisters, and seek in their lineaments her own. With them she can discover co-operation, sympathy and love.[50]

However, working in opposition to, and frequently in response to, this search for cohesion were a variety of theorists who valued differentiation over identification. French feminism, for example, focused on the idea of positive difference, typified in the titles of Julia Kristeva's essay, "Woman Can Never be Defined" and Luce Irigaray's, "This Sex Which Is Not One". By the 1980s, and certainly by the 1990s, it had become apparent that, not only could the differences between women not be contained, but that to attempt to do so was a reductive and potentially prejudicial task.

Whilst many groups struggled against a universal feminism in order to assert their right to specificity and recognition within the feminist movement, other women displayed, simply, a seemingly instinctual distaste for femininity. Seeking an explanation for this led back to object relations, which had first seemed to propose the possibility for a united womanhood under the banner of matriarchal connection. In their eagerness to overturn the chauvinism of the Freudian school, many feminists had wilfully ignored the prominent message it contained about ambivalence towards the feminine.

The desire of the male for mastery and control of the female body was discussed in relation to masculine attitudes to feminine nature in the last chapter. However, for the female child, the process of individuation is much more complex. She, like her male counterpart, experiences conflicting attraction and repulsion towards the maternal, but is simultaneously enthralled by her physical connection, which is evidenced in her female body: "the girl struggles with her likeness and unlikeness to her mother", explains Helena Michie.[51] As a consequence of this weaker individuation from the mother, Shirley

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[50] Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), rev. edn, London, 1999, 23.
[51] Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*, New York, 1992, 8.

Nelson Garner argues, women have "more flexible, fluid ego boundaries" and "perceive reality in relational terms".[52]

Correspondingly, Joan in *Lady Oracle* experiences a relational reality, saying, "I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time" (259). However, the omnipotent mother remains a threat to the self, and the girl's simultaneous identification with the mother and desire for individuation only serves to complicate her responses to her mother. Coppelia Kahn describes this in terms of "matrophobia" – the fear of "becoming like one's mother as in the original identification of the child with its mother".[53] For the female child, this fear is great, although difficult to articulate. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's ambivalence towards her mother manifests itself in her body and is achieved through years of deliberate gluttony, during which she "rose like dough" (70), followed by a relatively short period of intense self-starvation.

In 1978, just two years after *Lady Oracle* was published, Susie Orbach wrote her "self-help guide for compulsive eaters", *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, in which she combined her experience as a psychoanalyst with a feminist sociological reading of the female relationship to food. In many ways her study overlapped with Nancy Chodorow's text of that same year, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, although Orbach examined the psychodynamics of the mother-daughter relationship specifically to demonstrate how women internalise their attitudes towards the female body and towards food – which is linked to mothering as a symbol of nurturing – during the preoedipal phase. Chodorow's main hypothesis, on the other hand, was that boys have an earlier and more definite individuation from the mother, whereas "a girl retains a long preoedipal attachment to the mother".[54] However, she did digress to examine "the way a certain sort of psychotic mother inflicts her pathology predominantly on daughters".

Taking her information from a 1961 study, Chodorow outlined a scenario in which the mother is initially "asymbiotic", that is, she refuses to nurture and mother the child during the crucial preoedipal

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[52] *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, New York, 1985, 20.

[53] Coppelia Khan, "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle: Recent Gender Theories and their Implications", in *The (M)other Tongue*, 79.

[54] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 96.

phase, but then responds to the daughter's subsequent physical and mental independence by becoming "hypersymbiotic": "having denied their daughters the stability and security of a confident early symbiosis, they turned around and refused to allow them any leeway for separateness and individuation."[55] Although Chodorow was referring to a "psychopathological extreme", Orbach identified this same tendency to insufficiently nurture a female child as common within mother-daughter relationships, arguing that "Both female and male babies experience their first love relationships with the mother, but early on the mother must withhold a certain degree of support and sustenance from her daughter, in order to teach her the ways of womanhood".[56]

Atwood's novel follows Chodorow's model, with Joan's mother becoming increasingly neurotic, and Joan recalling the lack of physical closeness in their relationship: "she seldom touched me ... I could always recall what my mother looked like but not what she felt like" (89). About such examples of ambivalent maternity, Orbach comments that "while unconsciously the mother may not be nurturing her daughter well, she gives up feeding her daughter only reluctantly".[57] Later, after her mother's death, Joan comes to suspect that her obesity was perpetuated by her mother: "I kept expecting her to materialize in the doorway with that disgusted, secretly pleased look I remember so well – she liked to catch me in the act" (178). Joan's gluttony comes to represent a weakness that justifies the myth of her dependency and incompetence created by her mother.

In Orbach's group therapy sessions the ability of obesity to function as a silent pact between mother and daughter emerged. Some participants came to the realisation that:

> My fat says to my mother: 'Look at me. I'm a mess; I don't know how to take care of myself. You can still be my mother.'[58]

Alternatively, obesity can be a means by which to defy or escape maternal domination, as it is for Joan, who realises "The war between

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[55] *Ibid*., 99-100.
[56] Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue ... How to Lose Weight Permanently – Without Dieting* (1978), rev. edn, London, 1986, 40.
[57] *Ibid*., 41.
[58] *Ibid*., 43.

myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body" (69). For Orbach, this was a common scenario. "The mother", she suggests, "may see her child as a possession or extension of herself".[59] Joan voices her refusal to be her mother's possession through her body: "I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful" (88).

The maternal desire to retard individuation and retain control, suggested Orbach, is a consequence of the shrinking of the female role to the domestic sphere. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan recognises her mother's need for purposeful action: "now that she'd achieved and furnished her ultimate house, [she] was concentrating more and more of her energy on forcing me to reduce" (83). Though frustrated by her role as wife and mother, when her daughter attempts independence, Joan's mother sees her limited purpose reduced yet further, to which she responds by clinging to her daughter as a symbol of her necessity. Joan, in turn, maintains her de-sexualising obesity and so refuses her mother an over-identifying closeness which Chodorow recorded as a common compulsion in women:

> These mothers had maintained the primitive narcissistic mother-infant fusion with their children. This enabled them vicariously to gratify their own frustrated instinctual needs by virtue of projecting themselves onto the child.[60]

Joan's mother is similarly driven to recreate her former self, "young and pretty" (179), through her child, and thus orchestrate a more fulfilling resolution. Joan is aware that this ambition is narcissistic and essentially selfish: "She wanted me to do well, but she wanted to be responsible for it" (67).

According to Orbach, because of her identification with the mother and the socialisation process she has undergone, in which she is taught that "her own needs for emotional support and growth will be satisfied if she can convert them into giving to others",[61] the daughter feels as though she has betrayed her mother by no longer needing her. Joan's belated experience of this comes after her mother's death: "I was overcome by a wave of guilt, for many reasons. I had left her, even

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[59] *Ibid.*, 41.

[60] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 102.

[61] Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, 37.

though I was aware that she was unhappy" (177). Her obesity performed equally as rebellion and as reproach for inadequate love. By shedding her fat she symbolically frees herself of these emotional weights – "hanging from my neck like an iron locket" (67-68) – and asserts her independence from her mother. (Asserts it literally, as Aunt Lou's inheritance which will allow her to escape to England is dependent on her losing weight.) When her mother's death brings a realisation of the loneliness and disappointment of her mother's life, Joan responds by gorging herself with food. She attempts to regress to the state of battle which was actually a mutual need, offering up her failure in the hope it will appease her bitter mother. This battle over the body is a complication of the socialising process, but it is also magnified by the same disgusted identification with the other that had plagued Marian in *The Edible Woman*.

When object relations theorists began to consider the child's relationship with the maternal body, their discussions escalated into a broader examination of the cultural response toward the body, and various theories interconnected at this point. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of the "grotesque body": "the human body with its food, defecation and sexual life",[62] which is the socially taboo reality behind the culturally imposed "classical body", which is clean and sexless and without physical needs. Julia Kristeva developed this idea, exposing the level at which social disgust at bodily functions is internalised until they become more than disgusting: they become threatening. The body, according to Kristeva's theory, is related to the fears and fantasies repressed by civilised society; to unleash the body is to undermine the whole of rational society: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty."[63] Because of the anti-feminine philosophy documented by de Beauvoir, and also because of woman's association with birth, and therefore death, the female body comes under the strictest measures of control.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist writers such as Greer and Rosalind Coward identified a compulsion to artificially construct the female body, to clothe it and paint it to perfection, and began to suspect that this apparent obsession and worship of "the body

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[62] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: TX, 1981, 18.
[63] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, 1980, 3.

beautiful" belied an underlying repulsion towards the female body and female sexuality. Coward suggested that "it is almost as if women had to punish themselves for existing at all, as if any manifestation of this too, too-solid flesh had to be subjected to arcane tortures and expressions of self-loathing".[64] Accordingly, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan's body is an object of repulsion:

> There, staring me in the face, was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives; it spread on forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish-white, with veins meandering across it like rivers. It was the size of three ordinary thighs. (121)

The size of Joan's thigh suggests greed, consumption and desires, and her bulk demands space; it cannot be squeezed into insignificance. It is also a refusal to capitulate to sexual stereotypes of desirability. Her body is offensive because it is a rejection of femininity. When she eventually does become the figure of the sexually attractive woman, she does not receive appreciation for her capitulation but only harassment from men who watch her "like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant" (123). She is caught in a paradox that she is only just beginning to realise: femininity is demanded of her, but she is to be loathed for possessing it, for no matter how tightly bound and controlled, it remains grotesque.

Kristeva's text, *Powers of Horror*, describes the opposing states of the semiotic and the symbolic, which roughly correlate to Bakhtin's grotesque and classical bodies, and to Freud's unconscious and conscious states. The semiotic phase occurs within the pre-linguistic and preoedipal state of maternal closeness. It is the "'beginning' preceding the word" in which the child knows no boundaries and does not distinguish self from mother. Kristeva describes how, in this phase, "the non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnameable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain".[65] As the child matures it undergoes a socialising process, variously theorised as Freud's Oedipal Complex (when the incest taboo demands a decisive split from the mother), Jacques Lacan's Mirror Phase (when the child first recognises itself as a distinct being)

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[64] Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, London, 1989, 44.

[65] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 61.

and Kristeva's entry into the symbolic realm. The symbolic is the social state, in which bodily desires are controlled and repressed and the authority of the father is recognised. The semiotic may be repressed but is never eliminated, and when it surfaces (through unconscious desires, or irrational revulsion to food) it produces an "abject" response, that is, disgust: "The abject is that pseudo-object that is made up *before* but appears only *within* the gaps of secondary repression."[66] The symbolic is a state of perpetual repression of the semiotic. Abjection is the reaction to anything that recalls the corporeality of the body or which blurs the boundary between "I" and "other". Kristeva asks: "how can I be without border?"[67] and concludes, only in death. A return to the original semiotic state is impossible, although unconsciously desired, "because of maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic".[68] According to Kristeva, loathing, disgust, fear, and repressed desire all lead back to the mother and the female body.

In *Lady Oracle*, the tools of flesh and food that Joan uses to confront her rigidly bound mother are purposely semiotic and boundary transgressing. Joan's mother appears in the text much as Marian in *The Edible Woman* feels herself to be at Peter's party when "Her body had frozen, gone rigid" (232). This rigidity contrasts with Aunt Lou who is "soft, billowy, woolly, befurred" (89), eating, drinking, weeping and laughing copiously and without restraint – something that Joan's mother perceives as a personal affront. Joan's victory occurs when she finally manages to make her mother weep: "She cried hopelessly, passively … her whole body slack as if she had no bones" (88), breaking down some of her firmly constructed barriers and forcing her to experience the uncontrolled blurring of inside and outside.

Although object relations theorists recast the mother as an active, rather than a passive figure, demonstrating the formative influence the mother exerts on infant psycho-sexual development, the evident need to escape her dominance perpetuates the notion of her monstrosity. Consequently, Joan's mother is a nightmarish creature, with "three actual heads" (66), "The dark lady … she who must be obeyed" (226). In many ways, she is not a person at all but merely the object onto

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[66] *Ibid*., 12.

[67] *Ibid*., 4.

[68] *Ibid*., 12.

which Joan projects her fears and insecurities. At this point in the 1970s, feminism was a discourse of daughters, examining and apportioning blame to the voiceless mother, and psychoanalytic theories reflected this bias. Garner pointed out that:

> Psychoanalysis, whether it posits in the beginning maternal presence or absence, has yet to develop a story of the mother as other than the object of the infant's desire or the matrix from which he or she develops an infant subjectivity. The mother herself as speaking subject, as author, is missing from these dramas.[69]

Even though object relations developed awareness of the motivation and influence of the mother, she remained an agent acting upon the infant. Their symbiotic relationship, which precedes and facilitates the infant's subjectivity, is necessarily regressive for the mother, for she is already an autonomous subject. If the woman's purpose is to mother, the successful completion of her task – a confidently individuated child – signals the loss of her purpose, and her metaphorical death, unless she chooses to become a mother again.

In the early second wave, the maternal figure retained negative connotations for many feminists. Firestone termed the mother-child bond "a shared repression"[70] and advocated the destruction of the nuclear family. Slightly less radically, Khan cites Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller, Adrienne Rich, and Dorothy Dinnerstein as proponents of the belief that "motherhood is the root cause of the oppression of women".[71] Their theories questioned the presupposition that mothering is instinctual, and examined the cultural and socio-historical reasons for why it should be considered so. For Joan in *Lady Oracle*, the maternal relationship is so traumatic that remaining childless is her only defence against perpetuating misery: "What if I had a child who would turn out to be like me? Even worse, what if I turned out to be like my mother?" (213), she asks.

In fact, all of Atwood's early protagonists were childless: *The Edible Woman*'s Marian chose to remain so, and in *Surfacing*, the narrator aborted a child she felt ill-equipped to carry. In this third novel, motherhood is once again an ambivalent state, signifying

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[69] Garner, *The (M)other Tongue*, 25.
[70] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 73.
[71] Khan, "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle", 73.

misspent ambition and unfulfilled potential. Joan, however, does move to liberate the mother figure from her objectivity by exploring her own mother's past. "What had been done to her", she begins to wonder, "to make her treat me the way she did?" (179). As with the narrator of *Surfacing*, Joan's mother is unnamed, suggesting a damaged and incomplete person. By piecing together a narrative of her mother's rejection by one man – "Had he thrown her over because her father had been a stationmaster for the CPR?" (179) – and unplanned pregnancy by another, Joan begins to construct her mother's subjectivity, and so releases them both from an unhealthily dependent relationship.

Gender and masquerade

The predominant theme running through *Lady Oracle* is the construction of the self, whether by parody and pastiche, or by individuation from an oppressive maternal bond, and once again, Joan is drawn towards the postmodern. With its emphasis on costume, metamorphosis and the art of masquerade, *Lady Oracle* is predisposed to many of the anti-essentialist theories of the self that developed in the late 1970s and 1980s, when a significant shift within feminism towards linguistics and psychoanalysis occurred. Central to this development was the work of French theorist, Jacques Lacan.

Like Freud, from whom he took his preliminary ideas of the subconscious and sexuality, Lacan is accused by some feminists of chauvinism and biological essentialism, but conversely, argues Garner: "what they find liberating in Lacan's father-dominated narrative, is his uncovering of sexual identity as a fiction, an unnatural division into man and woman constructed in language."[72] Where Freud attributed sexual difference to the significance placed on the presence or lack of the penis, Lacan coined "the phallus" as a gender-neutral symbol of power (although the inevitable association of the phallus with the penis does undeniably undermine this distinction). For Lacan, sexual difference is founded in language. Only when the child comes to recognise itself as "I" and enters into the symbolic, does it come to know sexual difference.

In his theory of how sexual difference is founded within the field of language, Lacan distinguishes gender – *masculine* and *feminine* –

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[72] Garner, *The (M)other Tongue*, 22.

from biology. His theory was later to become central to the development of a postfeminist discourse, in which the significance of gender itself began to take precedence over the examination of femininity. *Lady Oracle*, with its emphasis on the artificial and the illusory, can be situated at the elemental beginnings of discussions that evolved from Lacanianism. Some of these, such as queer theory, were not necessarily founded in feminism, but still exerted an influence on feminist theory by their consideration of, for example, the transgressive power of transvestism and transsexuality in a binary-structured society.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's fascination with costume and masquerade reflects something of the preoccupation of later gender theorists such as Judith Butler. Joan believes in the power of costume to transform and create, and explains how "I thought if I could only get the clothes right, everything else would fall into line. And it did" (156). Her romantic fantasies are fuelled by clothing: "I would close the bedroom door, drape myself in silk and velvet, and get out all the dangly gold earrings and chains and bracelets I could find" (23), her attraction to Arthur is constructed from his appearance: "he was wearing a black crew-neck sweater, which I found quite dashing. A melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes" (165), and her affair with the Royal Porcupine ends when he abandons his dramatic masquerade for "normality": "no cape, no cane, no gloves; just a pair of jeans and a T-shirt" (270). Costumes in this novel create the person, and Joan is constantly seeking the perfect costume: "For a while I wanted to be an opera singer. Even though they were fat they could wear extravagant costumes" (78). Like the many narratives that Joan creates, her costumes signal another layer in the culturally constructed self.

The concept of "masquerade" was crucial to the developing discourse about the performative nature of gender. For second-wave feminism, the question of gender construction has its roots in de Beauvoir's phrase, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman",[73] but Joan Riviere's seminal 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", has subsequently proved to be one of the most significant early examinations of the subject. In describing the pathology of an intelligent, articulate woman who sought male

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[73] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 295.

approval by "flirting and coquetting",[74] Riviere came to the understanding that her analysand was unconsciously concealing her threatening, "masculine" successes by masquerading as a guileless female. Riviere concluded that "womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it".[75] By allowing that femininity could be appropriated at will to a greater or lesser degree, Riviere entered into a sceptical discussion about the essentialist nature of gender, which later prompted Butler to ask: "is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?"[76]

Butler's 1990 text, *Gender Trouble*, shares a common postmodernist instinct with Atwood's 1976 novel. When Chuck Brewer abandons the outward expressions of his alter ego, the Royal Porcupine, that part of him no longer exists: "'I killed him,' Chuck said, 'He's over with, he's finished'" (270). This postmodern vision of identities that can be appropriated or cast-off at will eventually proves troublesome for Atwood, and even Joan berates herself for being "irredeemably shallow" (271). Recalling herself as a child, Joan acknowledges that she "was hoping for magic transformations, even then" (46). Her tone seemingly admits her mistake, for her numerous consequent transformations leave her as nothing more than "an artist, an escape artist" (334). But Joan insists on her postmodernist strategy, and although she keeps thinking she "should learn some lesson from all of this" (345), she continues to refuse the ontological stability of essentialism. For Atwood, postmodernist fluidity provides an escape and a means of autonomy for her narrator, but equally, it leaves an unresolved and displaced character who remains trapped in a perpetual and inescapable wheel of postmodern textuality.

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[74] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, London, 1986, 36.

[75] *Ibid*., 38.

[76] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, 1990, viii.

CHAPTER IV

LIFE BEFORE MAN: FEMINISM AND SCIENCE

Following the comic melodrama of *Lady Oracle*, the engaging verbosity of its narrator, and the playful postmodernism of the text, Atwood's fourth novel, *Life Before Man*, appears austere, impersonal and mundane. Published in 1979, it seemingly shares little sympathy with influential feminist texts of the same period. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) were preoccupied with re-reading and re-discovering the female literary voice, whilst Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Firestone's earlier work, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), were radical texts that looked to the family unit as the site of female repression.

The postmodernism that Atwood had begun to explore in *Lady Oracle* was to gain momentum throughout the 1980s, but in *Life Before Man*, written on the brink of the decade, she seems to abandon it in favour of the most ordinary of tales, written in a meticulously kept chronology in which dates and characters are catalogued in a manner to absolutely prevent the possibility of fluidity and disruption. For a radical age, the novel appears conventionally realistic and conservative: recording the breakdown of the family unit only to envision its recreation. Incapable of revolution, the characters inhabit a pattern of substitution and repetition.

As a feminist work, *Life Before Man* is troublesome, and frequently regarded as an anomaly in Atwood's canon. Carol Beran records the mixed critical reception it received in the Canadian press, and comments that "Many Atwood scholars have found *Life Before Man* as problematic as the early reviewers".[1] This can be seen in the comparatively few early critical essays dealing with *Life Before Man* (Beran points to Grace as a notable exception to this observation), and

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[1] Carol Beran, *Living Over the Abyss: Margaret Atwood's* Life Before Man, Toronto, 1993, 19.

the surprising incidence of comparative essays which ignore its existence and choose to confer on *Bodily Harm* the honorary distinction of being the fourth novel.[2]

Regardless of their initial reception, as theories of the body, mothering, and identity became increasingly popular within a feminist theory that was embracing psychoanalysis and beginning to contemplate linguistics and postmodernism, Atwood's earlier novels became particularly interesting to theorists. Specifically, images of the female body were to dominate feminism, and from this perspective, *Bodily Harm* really was the rightful successor to Marian's abjection, the anonymous narrator's quest for maternal power, and Joan's reinvention of herself through her body. As feminists sought to release women from the biological trap and move towards a postmodern creation of the self, a novel that seemed to promote biological determinism and drew parallels between the extinction of the dinosaurs and the inevitable fate of the human animal, was to prove out of fashion. It was only many years later, when certain feminist theorists began to re-evaluate Darwinian theory and rescue it from the racist and sexist overtones attached to the misleading phrase "survival of the fittest", that texts such as *Life Before Man* could really begin to be appreciated.

The Sociobiology of the 1970s

Whilst Atwood's turn to biological determinism in 1979 may appear anomalous when considered from a feminist perspective, it can be better understood as an instance of her involvement with a highly topical cultural debate, one that mainstream feminism seemed determined to ignore.[3] The publication of E.O.Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975 and Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 signalled a growing cultural preoccupation with biology and genetics as determinants of social behaviour. In many ways, sociobiology was just another reincarnation of a recurring popular discourse first initiated by the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859.

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[2] For example, see Davey, "Four Female Comedies", in Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, and Rainwater, "The Sense of the Flesh in Four Novels by Margaret Atwood".

[3] Rose and Rose note that the struggles surrounding sociobiology "were primarily waged between biologists … the attacks came from left, liberal and feminist biologists together with a handful of non-biologists" (*Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology*, eds Hilary Rose and Steven Rose, London, 2000, 7).

Darwin's work, like that of Freud, underwent countless conservative revisions of varying faithfulness to the original text. The earliest and most influential of his revisionists was Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest", and whom the philosopher Daniel Dennett describes as "the father of Social Darwinism, an odious misapplication of Darwinian thinking in defence of political doctrines that range from callous to heinous".[4]

Spencer read Darwin's work as a justification for the primacy of Western society, and also considered it as scientific support for the perpetuation of conservative patriarchy, colonialism and slavery. G.E. Moore attacked Spencer's reasoning in his philosophical text, *Principia Ethica*. Moore argued against what he called Spencer's "naturalistic fallacy", pointing out that "the survival of the fittest does *not* mean, as one might suppose, the survival of what is fittest to fulfil a good purpose".[5] Spencer's version of Darwinism, however, maintained its influence, and was re-envisioned for the early twentieth century in the form of various eugenics programmes in America and across Fascist Europe. The new science received wide and varying support from many social and political groups. Hilary and Steven Rose record "the widespread support during the 1930s for eugenics by left and liberal intellectuals, feminists, geneticists and welfare reformers".[6] After the war, however, eugenics suffered a severe blow as Europe recoiled from the actualisation of the holocaust, and scientists and social reformers alike worked to distance genetics from its racist overtones.

The genetic sciences, of course, continued, and books of popular science on the subject also continued to appear, such as Desmond Morris' *The Naked Ape* (1968), but it was the final chapter of Wilson's book, *Sociobiology*, in which he applied his evolutionary theories of animal behaviour to human beings, that came to be recognised as one of the most influential instigators of 1970s sociobiology – the newest strain of neo-Darwinism. Wilson argued that "the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized".

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[4] Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*, New York, 1996, 393.

[5] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903), Cambridge, 1966, 48.

[6] Rose, *Alas, Poor Darwin*, 5-6.

Wilson's argument was curiously close to that of postmodernism; his view of humanity was anti-liberal and culturally situated. He denied the validity of Rousseau's Social Contract, and he similarly refuted the belief in a "view from nowhere" that underlay the theory of justice put forward by John Rawls. However, for Wilson, in contrast to the postmodernist belief, cultural determinants were, in their turn, founded in biological determinants. Wilson argued:

> While few will disagree that justice as fairness is an ideal state for disembodied spirits, the conception is in no way explanatory or predictive with reference to human beings. Consequently, it does not consider the ultimate ecological or genetic consequences of the rigorous prosecution of its conclusions.[7]

For Wilson, all cultural factors eventually returned to the logic of evolutionary biology. Sociobiology rejected the essential liberal self that could develop and retain an authentic individual position, free of external influence, because the influence of biology was, for sociobiologists, compulsive and inescapable. Equally, however, it rejected the liberation of postmodern anti-essentialism on this same evidence.

The arguments begun in *Sociobiology* were taken up and furthered by Richard Dawkins a year later. Where Wilson had argued that society was driven by the forces of evolution, Dawkins stated: "we are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes."[8] Here, at its most reductive, neo-Darwinism became, not a matter of the survival of a species, or even of an individual, but merely the survival of the gene: a molecule programmed to replicate at all costs. For Dawkins, morality, ethics, and altruism were unnatural attributes, taught in opposition to basic human nature. If you want a good society, he argued, "you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish" (italics in the original).[9] Whilst Dawkins and Wilson both hastened to stress that they were describing things as they were and not as they should be, their arguments opened doors for evolutionary psychologists, such as Randy Thornhill and

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[7] Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Cambridge, MA, 1975, 562.

[8] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), new edn, Oxford, 1989, v.

[9] *Ibid*., 3.

Craig Palmer, authors of the 2000 book, *A Natural History of Rape*, which supports an evolutionary concept of rape with animal evidence.

Evolutionary psychology is the most recent reincarnation of Darwinian theory. Rose and Rose explain its belief that "what its proponents describe as the 'architecture of the human mind' which evolved during the Pleistocene is fixed, and insufficient time has elapsed for any significant subsequent change".[10] Certainly for liberal feminism, reliant on the belief that social liberation can overcome artificially constructed hierarchies, the implications of such conservative theories of culture are significant and threatening, but in the 1970s, the feminist shift to postmodernism and acculturated concepts of the self resulted in a feminist silence in the discourse of science. The authors of *A Natural History of Rape* tried to pre-empt feminist responses to the book by quoting the zoologist Patricia Gowarty's complaint that there exists a "troublesome antipathy of modern society, including many feminists, to science and scientific discourse".[11] In accordance with this view, the feminist move towards postmodernism can in many ways be read as a retreat from science.

Donna Haraway, whose influential book, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, was one of the earliest texts to explicitly examine the position of women in the biosciences, views it in this manner. She says of feminists: "We have challenged our traditional assignment to the status of natural objects by becoming anti-natural in our ideology in a way which leaves the life sciences untouched by feminist needs."[12] Indeed, it was only in the 1980s that feminism and science really began to interact, and writers such as Evelyn Fox Keller and Lynn Margulis began to argue that women were not simply evading the issue, but were, at the most fundamental levels of science, being written out of scientific discourse. Published in 1979, when feminism was still resisting the compulsion of biology, Atwood's preliminary investigation into evolutionary psychology later proved to be an early articulation of a difficult but persistent feminist issue.

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[10] Rose, *Alas, Poor Darwin*, 1.

[11] Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, Cambridge: MA, 2000, xi.

[12] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London, 1991, 8.

Atwood's Darwin

The most striking and much discussed stylistic feature of *Life Before Man* is the separation of the narrative into three distinct voices, that of Elizabeth, her husband Nate, and his lover Lesje. Most critical readings of the novel make the same connection between this system of narrative division, and the cataloguing undertaken at the museum where both Elizabeth and Lesje work. This is intimated by the epigraph which draws unspoken parallels between its subject and Atwood's characters:

> These fossils give us our only chance to see the extinct animals in action and to study their behaviour, though definite identification is only possible where the animal has dropped dead in its tracks and become fossilized on the spot. (Björn Kurtén, *The Age of the Dinosaurs*)[13]

From the very first, the characters are exhibits, dated and classified. This works to both distinguish and depersonalise them, as noted by Beran, who suggests that "the unchanging objectivity of the narrative voice diminishes the sense of the characters' distinctive individuality, implying they are all part of the human race and share the same problem of individual and group survival".[14] This bleak forecast continues throughout the novel, and its Nietzschean aspect will be explored further below. Beran's reading points to the unifying consequence of the disparate narrative voices of the text, and this causes much of its claustrophobia. The past reverberates through the novel, and the impossibility of escaping its repetitions is overwhelming, as "ghosts" return in the form of repeated actions and familial traits. No act is unique, and no motive is original. Even the desperate act of suicide committed by Elizabeth's lover Chris is mocked by the countless other suicides, actual or attempted, that litter the text.

The novel's tone is frequently distanced and impersonal, and by this it reflects something of the detached view of humanity prompted by Darwin's evolutionary theory. Indeed, the phrase "life before man" recalls Darwin's heretical assertion that the Earth evolved for millions

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[13] Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man* (1979), London, 1996. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
[14] Beran, *Living Over the Abyss*, 13.

of years before the appearance of human beings and that "the more complex organs and instincts should have been perfected, not by means superior to, though analogous with, human reason, but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor".[15] The resultant ontological anxiety that these revelations caused is reflected in the instability of the novel's focus, as grand cosmic themes juxtapose the incessant minutiae of life.

In her job at the museum, Lesje tries to breathe life into the long-dead dinosaurs: "*Live again!*" (80), and at the same time, the epigraph reduces the living to fossils. The physical and moral concerns of human survival give way to the individual questioning of selfhood. Lesje listens to her boyfriend William's prophecies of environmental collapse: "If ten times more control is not implemented at once (at once!) the Great Lakes will die" (142), but her true concern lies in her own potential collapse and loss of identity as the domineering characteristics of first her dead grandmothers and then Elizabeth threaten to penetrate and overwhelm her. She envisions Elizabeth and herself replicating her grandmothers, becoming "old women, wearing black and not speaking" (309). Human behaviour appears repetitive and destructive rather than evolving and adapting.

Lesje both recognises and questions her place within the evolutionary chain. Questions of role and purpose are considered from her female perspective. Aware of herself as an anomaly – "A pregnant palaeontologist is surely a contradiction in terms. Her business is the naming of bones, not the creation of flesh" (308) – she comes to appreciate the contradiction inherent in the notion of the objective scientist. Through Lesje in particular, *Life Before Man* touches upon issues that feminism was beginning to encounter, but would only take up much later. Its recognition of the masculine rationalism implicit in science connects this novel to many of the issues raised in Atwood's earlier works, and suggests that they are not as far removed as might be first thought.

Although connected to Darwin's description of pre-history, the punning title also points to the future life that lies ahead of man. In a similarly illusory manner, the novel seems to shift between optimistic and pessimistic forecasts. For Cathy and Arnold Davidson, the novel

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[15] Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), ed. J.W. Burrow, London, 1968, 435.

"provides no hint of better or different things to come",[16] whereas Paul Goetsch writes, "on the other hand, they have not given in to despair and resignation and so may perhaps leave some traces in the life of the next generation".[17] Small hopes combat generally bleak predictions in a reflection of the characters' own fears. The fate of the dinosaurs looms as an ever-constant threat to humanity: "It could happen here. Who can tell when a star may explode?" (142). Threats of annihilation counteract faint promise of genetic continuity, and neither fulfil the very human desire for individual fulfilment and distinction.

As the predictions for the future of humanity become increasingly dark, and scientific proof of imminent destruction seems ever more inevitable, the characters in *Life Before Man* respond in a non-scientific manner. The continuance of life becomes so unlikely that it retreats to a marginalised discourse, becoming an act of faith. One critic writes that "what Atwood exposes to view in this novel, is the utter and indifferent emptiness of the heavens".[18] But God, in the form of spirituality, does exist in the novel. Science and spirituality inform each other in a very unorthodox manner, particularly for Lesje, for whom they are almost interchangeable. Her recreation of pre-history in the museum displays is to her a biblical resurrection: "*Live again!* She'd wanted to cry, like some Old Testament prophet, like God, throwing up her arms, willing thunderbolts; and the strange flesh would grow again, cover the bones, the badlands would moisten and flower" (80-81). Equally, her preoccupation with palaeontology is envisioned as a spiritual vocation or calling, and her first visits to the museum as a child were a direct substitute for spiritual worship:

> Instead of synagogue Lesje attended the Museum, which at first did look to her a little like a church or a shrine, as if you were supposed to kneel. It was quiet and smelled mysterious, and was full of sacred objects: quartz, amethyst, basalt. (95)

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[16] Davidson, *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, 220.

[17] Paul Goetsch, "Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man* as a Novel of Manners", in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, eds Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, Alberta, 1985, 148.

[18] Janice Kulyk Keefer, "Hope Against Hopelessness: Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*", in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*, ed. Colin Nicholson, New York, 1994, 166.

Lesje retains this confusion of ideas, and consequently cannot always maintain the role of "clear-eyed, objective, and doctrinaire" (18) scientist. In her imagination she "mixes eras, adds colors" (19) and as a result, the "pregnant palaeontologist" eventually realises her fantasy of creating life, for the human is just another species, indistinguishable in many ways from the dinosaurs she lives among.

In her article, "Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs", Ildiko de Papp Carrington gives a reading of the spiritual element of *Life Before Man* founded in a scientific text. She points to Atwood's choice of contrasting epigraphs as demonstrative of the duelling forces of rational and mystical discourses within the novel, arguing that "Atwood's use of 'The Icicle' epigraph is her announcement that under the novel's realistic surface lies a non-realistic structure".[19] "The Icicle", a short story collected in Abram Tertz's *Fantastic Stories*, deliberately contrasts with the scientific explanations of Björn Kurtén's *The Age of the Dinosaurs*, yet the lines chosen from the former make a deliberate comment upon the latter: "How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?" The line between the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate is blurred by these epigraphs and their relationship with the characters of the novel, and through these blurred boundaries, ghosts appear.

Using Julian Jaynes' work, *The Origin of Consciousness* as her main reference, Carrington draws on his theory of the bicameral mind[20] to demonstrate the motivating force of Atwood's characters:

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[19] Ildiko de Papp Carrington, "Demons, Doubles and Dinosaurs: *Life Before Man*, *The Origin of Consciousness*, and 'The Icicle'", in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, ed. Judith McCombs, Boston, 1988, 229.

[20] According to Jaynes, ancient man possessed a bicameral mind: "human nature was split in two, an executive part called a god, and a follower part called a man. Neither part was conscious" (Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Harmondsworth, 1982, 84). Everyday actions were instinctual and controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain, which today controls the language function, whilst decisions calling for extra-instinctual responses were experienced as auditory hallucinations, originating in the right hemisphere. "The language of men was involved with only one hemisphere in order to leave the other free for the language of gods" (*ibid.*, 103-104). These "gods" were actually "amalgams of admonitory experience" (*ibid.*, 106) emanating from the mind, but experienced as external instructions. The voices were induced by decision-making stress. Jaynes relates his ideas to early literary accounts of heavenly hallucinations, from *The Iliad* to the Bible.

"conscious man's persistent longing for the departed deities."[21] The various forms of madness within the text, better described by Carrington as the symptoms of a person under severe emotional stress – to "hear voices … feel split in two … fall through space or time, and even lose consciousness"[22] – are, for Jaynes, the last vestiges of pre-conscious man's bicameral mind; they are in effect ancestral voices, or "the singing dead". Elizabeth knows of these theories. When told that the ancients believed the souls of the dead became stars, she thinks to herself: "the ancients had other beliefs as well. Ominous music" (76). As the novel progresses, she also experiences these auditory hallucinations: "in the room someone is singing …. Elizabeth realises she's been hearing it for sometime" (88). She associates these "Angel voices" (61) with madness and struggles to repress them. When she faints at Muriel's funeral, a line from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" comes to her: "Ancestral voices prophesying war" (300). The complexity of Jaynes' argument is less significant than its attempt to merge cognitive science with mythical belief, the logical with the illogical.

This idea that pre-conscious man internalised the voices of his gods, or of his ancestors, is one touched on by Freud in "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts", in which he examines primitive man's practice of attributing souls to animals, plants and inanimate objects. Freud's work has an entirely different focus to Jaynes'. In it he is less concerned with developing consciousness than with the development of religious beliefs as a rationalisation of the inexplicable. "Animism" – "the doctrine of souls"[23] – attributed natural phenomena to the work of malevolent or benevolent spirits who could be appeased or intimidated (the notion of power is significant here), anticipating the rituals of religions to come. According to Freud, animism is a system of thought which "allows us to grasp the whole universe as a single unity from a single point of view". Over the course of time, humans have developed "three such systems of thought – three great pictures of the universe: animistic (or

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[21] Carrington, "Demons, Doubles and Dinosaurs", 229.

[22] *Ibid*., 232.

[23] Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, London, 1990, XIII, 132.

mythological), religious and scientific".[24] The important idea is the concept of science as simply an available means of understanding and controlling the world, preceded by myth and religion. This in itself is accepted with little difficulty as another example of man's evolution towards rational perfection, but that is to ignore Freud's association of science with not only the desire for knowledge, but the will to power, and also its ignominious roots in myth: an ancestry that echoes.

Feminism and science *or* the pregnant palaeontologist

The significance of introducing elements of spirituality to the understanding of scientific phenomena is the acceptance of the inexplicable. Such events need not be mystical, but in falling outside of the accepted bounds of scientific understanding are dismissed as such, and therefore ridiculed, as Lesje muses: "When the aborigines sighted Captain Cook's ships, they ignored them because they knew such things could not exist" (18). Knowledge can become blindness. It is on this premise that various thinkers began to address the epistemology of science, to question the role of science and consider its fallibilities.

Initially, this was not a feminist enquiry; liberal feminists addressing the scientific community had largely looked to the lack of female scientists, and concluded, in accord with Keller, that "most culturally validated intellectual and creative endeavours have, after all, historically been the domain of men".[25] From this position, the science question became part of a larger cultural debate about equality of opportunity. Lesje experiences all the typical problems to be expected by a female scientist in the 1970s. On the only archaeological dig "she had been privileged to attend", she met Professor Morgan:

> He thought Lesje was one of the biggest jokes he'd heard. *So you want to be a palaeontologist. Better off learning to cook. Worst coffee I ever tasted.* (79)

However, Lesje, and to an extent the novel as a whole, dismisses such issues. She recalls of the women's group she was coerced into attending at college: "It would be no good to say that she was just a scientist, she wasn't political. According to them, everything was

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[24] *Ibid*., 134.
[25] Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven, 1985, 76.

political" (63). As frequently occurs within Atwood's novels, feminists are "them" to the narrator's isolated "I". Further, *Life Before Man* suggests a post-feminist world, existing after the consciousness raising of the 1960s and early 1970s. In this new political climate, Nate does housework whilst Elizabeth supports his fledgling carpentry business; their marriage is an open partnership. Yet things remain strangely the same. Goetsch comments:

> the characters, as members of the pill generation, make use of new possibilities of conducting their sexual affairs and set up rules of their own … [however] they turn to the new rules not so much in relief as in a perfunctory spirit, wishing simply to exchange old habits for new.[26]

The social freedoms they experience are frequently no more than a further set of entanglements. Nate recalls the earlier, more traditional days of their marriage with nostalgia, "he thinks of it as the olden days, like a bygone romantic era, like some Disneyland movie about knighthood" (15), and Lesje's boss may not treat her as Professor Morgan once did, but she remains aware of her difference in the masculine world of the museum. She is uncomfortable with the technicians, thinking "perhaps they want to Scotch-tape pictures of naked women up in here, too" (221). This is Atwood at her bleakest concerning the feminist movement: the 1960s are over, the revolution is won, but the small, insidious facts of inequality persist.

The enquiry into the epistemology of science did not initially interact with such liberal feminist concerns. It was a theoretical enquiry, radical but gender-neutral. However, what quickly emerged was that gender was at the heart of science in a way previously unconsidered – in the language, in the perspective, and in the understanding. Lesje was to be proved wrong: science is political, as Keller demonstrates: "For the founding fathers of modern science, the reliance on the language of gender was explicit: they sought a philosophy that deserved to be called 'masculine', that could be distinguished from its ineffective predecessors by its 'virile' power, its capacity to bind Nature to man's service and make her his slave."[27] Keller wrote her essay "Gender and Science" in 1978, four years after

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[26] Goetsch, "Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*", 138.

[27] Keller, *Reflections*, 7.

the scientist Steven Weinberg stated: "The laws of nature are as impersonal as the rules of arithmetic."[28] In the essay she contradicts his view, arguing that: "The scientist is not purely the dispassionate observer he idealizes, but a sentient being for whom the very ambition for objectivity carries with it a wealth of subjective meanings."[29] The laws of nature may prove incontrovertible, but the assumptions they pose about the nature of the universe are constructed within a preconceived framework of conventions that necessarily colour the scientist's view of what nature is, and what our relationship to it might be. To recall Freud at this point, science is a system of thought that enables us to understand and control our environment.

The other scientist within *Life Before Man*, William the environmental engineer, has complete faith in his view of the world, and his centrality within it: "they're all in danger of drowning in their own shit. William will save them. You can see it just by looking at him, his confidence, his enthusiasm" (27). "William Wasp's" confidence is vindicated within a scientific community traditionally made up of white middle class males. From his vantage point, he can observe and manipulate in a manner once attributed to God.

In her 1998 book, *The Symbiotic Planet*, Lynn Margulis proposes a world view founded on interaction and symbiosis that undermines the orthodox object-subject relationship between scientist and science. By placing human beings within a symbiotic view of evolution, not just as the pinnacle of a great chain of being leading from ape to man, but as one species amongst countless others, in the midst of evolution rather than its inevitable consequence, she produces a disturbingly ex-centric concept of humanity:

> To me, the human move to take responsibility for the living Earth is laughable – the rhetoric of the powerless. The planet takes care of us, not we of it. Our self-inflated moral imperative to guide a wayward Earth or heal our sick planet is evidence of our immense capacity for self-delusion. Rather, we need to protect us from ourselves.[30]

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[28] Weinberg quoted in Keller, *Reflections*, 6.

[29] Keller, *Reflections*, 96.

[30] Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, London, 1998, 115.

According to Margulis, man's belief in his own importance, "despite, or perhaps because of Darwin",[31] informs his every inquiry, into evolution and into science in general. It is a belief that multi-racial Lesje, ever on the margins, cannot accept, and almost twenty years before *The Symbiotic Planet*, she prefigures Margulis' observation:

> The real question is: Does she care whether the human race survives or not? She doesn't know. The dinosaurs didn't survive and it wasn't the end of the world. In her bleaker moments, of which, she realizes, this is one, she feels the human race has it coming. Nature will think up something else. (27)

The development of postmodernist thought did much to disturb centric notions of objectivity. Paul Ricoeur speaks of the unsettling sensation of insignificance this can prompt: "Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others."[32] Waugh argues that postmodernism has resulted in a devaluing of scientific rationalism and a creeping cynicism about its motives. Where the Enlightenment engendered a belief "in the capacity of human beings to improve continuously their conditions of existence", postmodernism betrays a mistrust of capitalist motives:

> Reason is seen to clarify a world which it has set up in its own terms, in a disguised manifestation of a will to power which secures itself through an insidious exclusion of all that it identifies as non-rational: desire, feeling, sexuality, femininity, art, madness, criminality, non-Caucasian races, particular ethnicities.[33]

By a postmodernist understanding, science and industry, the tools of rationalism, are used for very specific purposes, and the efficiency and affluence they create are gained at the cost of all "others"; seemingly universal logics are highly subjective.

Scientists excuse themselves from this postmodern debate because they quite evidently deal with facts. As Keller willingly concedes, "Boyle's law is not wrong".[34] The shift closer towards subjectivity arises, however, in the choice of facts, and in the choice of world-view

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[31] *Ibid*., 4.
[32] Owens, "The Discourse of Others", 57.
[33] Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*, London, 1992, 74.
[34] Keller, *Reflections*, 11.

these facts are anticipated to demonstrate. Lesje's proposals intend to destabilise William's confident perspective, when she asks "which came first, man or venereal disease? .… Maybe man was invented by viruses, to give them a convenient place to live" (30). Again, she anticipates Margulis, who later writes:

> Our culture ignores the hard-won fact that these disease "agents", these "germs", also germinated all life. Our ancestors, the germs, were bacteria.[35]

Back in *Life Before Man*, "William decides she's joking" (30).

Having always inhabited the "non-rational" elements of the Enlightenment world-view, Lesje holds no illusions about rationalism or logic; she "knows scientific objectivity is a fraud .… She knows that a passion for science is like any other passion." Still, she wishes it did exist, "then she would be able to apply it to her own life" (265). Lesje has her own motives for entering into science, and she acknowledges them. The danger lies elsewhere. Waugh gives the postmodernist view that, as it becomes more evident that "technology is now seen to threaten the planet with annihilation", scientists such as William propose to "solve" problems of their own creation. "For postmodernists", Waugh explains, "it is this 'iron cage' of rationalisation without reason which produced Auschwitz".[36] Certain feminists, like postmodernists, were also beginning to argue that the monological view of western science was not just exclusive, but was also a danger to the world, its inhabitants, and its ecology.

Science and nature: the will to power
Further than pointing out the gender bias behind the construction of scientific discourse, feminist theorists taking up the science debate started to recognise a familiar opposition at work: that of the Self and the Other, Subject and Object, Mind and Body. This split was ingrained into science by Baconian philosophy, as Lloyd explains: "Bacon construed the mind's task in knowledge not as mere contemplation, but as control of Nature."[37] This view differed from the previous understanding of nature, inherited from Plato, as analogous

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[35] Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet*, 75.

[36] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, 74.

[37] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 10.

with a living, intelligible organism. In contrast, Bacon perceived nature to be "devoid of mind …. It conforms to laws that can be understood; but it does not, as the Greeks thought, contain mind within it." Applying a strict sexual metaphor to the relationship between science and nature, Bacon lectured that "nature betrays her secrets more fully when in the grip and under the pressure of art than when in enjoyment of her natural liberty".[38] The scientist's role, by this understanding, is to learn nature's secrets, control her capricious ways, and bend her to his will, so that male rationalism may triumph over female bodily chaos; the parallel philosophy of sexual relations is self-evident.

This mind-body divide recurs throughout Atwood's work. In *The Edible Woman* she relocated the site of intelligence to the female body, unbalancing the strict hierarchy of masculine reason and feminine sensation. In *Surfacing*, the narrator accepted the existence of two opposing elements of humanity, but sought a new balance between them, an alternative third way, as Atwood began to envision "some kind of harmony with the world".[39] In *Life Before Man* the existence of a split between mind and body is again evident, and again perceived to be unhealthy and destructive.

The novel opens with Elizabeth contemplating the suicide of her lover Chris, who shot himself in the head, and she thinks: "what you smashed was your own head, your own body" (11). Nate, recalling this same episode, speaks of identifying "the body": "No head left at all, to speak of. The headless horseman." Chris is literally all body in this novel, signified by passion, anger, desire, and contrasting massively with the multitude of words and the intricate social games of the other characters. Unable to reconcile those violent emotions with the social codes that entangle him, Chris aimed his gun at the site of social reason, "the head [that] had been a troublemaker". Gazing at the defiantly headless body, Nate describes it as "Nate's other body, joined to him by that tenuous connection, that hole in space controlled by Elizabeth". He envisions this split within himself, where Chris' rage and protest, his "body", enacts Nate's own repressed irrational emotions: "Nate wants to do something, perform something, smash his hand through the kitchen window" (16-17). He fantasises about fully

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[38] *Ibid*, 10-12.
[39] Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 16.

experiencing his body, and such a fantasy is one of escape: "He sees his feet for an instant, browned and running, on sand, on sun-warmed rock. Far from here." Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, his body becomes increasingly controlling of his mind. As he begins to trim his beard, he finds himself shaving it off entirely: "His hands have decided it's time for him to be someone else" (43). Nate achieves his partial triumph in the book when he begins to relinquish some of his mind's authority to his body, accepting the possibility of a non-rational intelligence. Unable to rationalise any more misery and pain, he begins to run madly through people's gardens:

> He knows he will land soon; already his heart is pounding. But he aims again for it, that non-existent spot where he longs to be. Mid-air. (288)

Nate does not relinquish his rationality here, but instead accepts that he can no longer sustain an absolute divide between mind and body.

Of the three characters, Elizabeth experiences the most wilful division between mind and body. When soaking in the bathtub she muses on a childhood riddle:

> Two bodies have I
> Though both joined in one,
> The stiller I stand
> The quicker I run. (89)

These "two bodies", the rational mind and the irrational body, are personified for her by Auntie Muriel with her "strong personality and a good mind" (120) and her mother with "the porcelain face" (149). Although as a child she mythologised the two, "Auntie Muriel was the Witch, of course. Elizabeth's mother was Glinda the Good" (139), she equally despises her mother, whom she recalls in terms of sexuality, weakness, and madness.

Despite loathing her cold malignancy, Elizabeth develops Muriel's characteristics as a defence against her mother's inheritance: "Auntie Muriel admired backbone, and Elizabeth feels that, underneath everything, she herself now has the backbone of a rhinoceros" (137). The battle within Elizabeth is between these two fates. As her sister Caroline follows her mother, abandoning rationality to retreat into her "sealed body" (88) and drowning in a hospital bathtub, Elizabeth

becomes more and more like Muriel, startling herself with opinions "straight out of the doctrine according to Auntie Muriel" (262).

This split within Elizabeth is immediately evident. Her first person narrative is quickly abandoned, and as Carrington points out, "this switch makes Elizabeth's 'ego' or 'I' disappear, both metaphorically and syntactically".[40] She undergoes an out-of-body experience as she lies on her bed meditating on a crack in the ceiling that "runs across her field of vision" and becomes aware that "she can't move her fingers" (12). This crack is symbolic of the reopening split within her that was temporarily healed by her relationship with Chris. Having been taught all her life to suppress the irrationalism of the body, she is furious with herself and with Chris – "I'm so angry I could kill you. If you hadn't already done that for yourself" (11) – for forgetting her lesson. Consequently, she has been hurt so deeply that she responds by suppressing her bodily self so completely that it literally becomes numb.

The theme of division and separation continues, with the result that each character is a half-person. Their voices are muted through the third-person narration, and the cold rationalism they bring to their relationships prevents the possibility of any life-giving spontaneity and warmth. Recalling the theme of evolution, the danger of such division is that it is inherited by the next generation. Already, the warring sides of Elizabeth have been transmitted to her daughters. They in turn will conceive of still more widely differing paths, as envisioned by the Halloween pumpkins they carve: "Janet's is more sedate … Nancy's has a demonic glee." In creating their opposing visions of social harmony, "serenity if you look at it from a certain angle, idiocy from another", and grotesque chaos, Elizabeth imagines them as "little mad scientists" (36), their creations so out of balance and harmony that it is impossible to imagine they came from one source.

These opposing elements of Elizabeth's own character can only interact when she allows her mind and body to interact, when she resumes contact with her environment. Unable to allow this, Elizabeth, like the self-deluding scientist, clings to her isolation and objectivity: "She does not have to depend, she is not a dependent. She is self-supporting" (140). Only when Muriel is buried can Elizabeth

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[40] Carrington, "Demons, Doubles and Dinosaurs", 232.

begin to relinquish this protective isolation: "The children are attached to her hands, Janet on the right, Nancy on the left" (299). This contact marks the tentative beginnings of her re-socialisation, but more significantly, it demonstrates the newly achieved balance within Elizabeth.

Again, as in *Surfacing*, harmony is the key. In that second novel, Atwood's narrator initially turned to an ecofeminist vision, communing with nature and proclaiming the life-giving potency of Mother Earth in the face of the destructive capacity of masculine industry. Atwood proved sceptical of such a view, as did certain feminists who balked at Daly's call to "wild-ize our Selves, to free and unfreeze ourselves [in] a wild and fantastic calling to transfer our energy to our Selves and to Sister Selves".[41] Atwood's narrator had to progress through her fantasies of innocence and accept her part in society's faults.

In *Life Before Man*, Lesje is also drawn towards playing the victim. Everything that happens in the novel happens to her, from Nate's attentions and Elizabeth's consequent interest in her, to William's anger and attempted rape. She is confounded by any response she provokes, "She sees herself as a timorous person, a herbivore" (19). When she smiles she instinctively covers her mouth, "She thinks of her teeth as too large for her face: they make her look skeletal, hungry" (20). Just as *The Edible Woman* concludes with Marian accepting her role as a consumer, so Lesje must finally admit her own needs and hungers: "she must hold on to her own importance. She's threatened, she's greedy" (308).

Atwood's instinctual unease with the notion of Mother Earth promoted by ecofeminist thought later prompts agreement from Margulis, who speaks of the Gaia theory in *The Symbiotic Planet*. From an ancient Greek word for Mother Earth, Margulis argues that *Gaia* "does not mean nature conservation and a return to the Goddess", as ecofeminists would have it, rather it is a scientific term for "the regulated surface of the planet incessantly creating new environments and new organisms".[42] The significance of Gaia to this discussion lies in the idea of a self-regulating nature, not a "vague, quaint notion of a mother Earth who nurtures us",[43] but an ever-

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[41] Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 343.

[42] Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet*, 120.

[43] *Ibid*., 123.

shifting ecosystem that balances, controls and recycles. It denies the feminist idea of nature as victim and nurturer, and the scientific view of nature as malleable slave. It is intelligence without consciousness, for "Gaia requires no consciousness to adjust to the planetary environment".[44] Consequently, it undermines the mind-body hierarchy, and also man's impression of himself as the orchestrator of his own environment.

Lesje enjoys this connected view of life:

> All the molecular materials now present in the earth and its atmosphere were present at the creation of the earth itself .… These molecular materials have merely combined, disintegrated, recombined .… Lesje contemplates this fact, which she finds soothing. She is only a pattern. She is not an immutable object. There are no immutable objects. Some day she will dissolve. (169)

In contrast to the dividing hierarchy of "mind over matter", this vision of cosmic unity appears egalitarian and unifying. However, it quickly becomes apparent that it forms yet another of the escapist fantasies that abound in this novel. The sense of her own insignificance frees Lesje from taking responsibility for her actions, and again she echoes the narrator of *Surfacing*, who says "No one can expect anything else from me .… I'm absolved from knowing" (45). Although Lesje's theory is scientific and rational, her subjective fears and needs are projected onto the abstract idea, distorting and manipulating it.

The same abstract vision of the universe is taken up in Nietzsche's philosophy, to illustrate his vision of life. Similarly to Lesje, he describes the world as "a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; an immovable, brazen enormity of energy, which does not grow bigger or smaller; which does not expend itself but only transforms itself".[45] However, Nietzsche's philosophy, unlike Lesje's, does not allow the individual to relinquish responsibility for their part within the system. Anticipating postmodernist thought, he contends that human knowledge is impossibly flawed, for no ultimate truths exist.

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[44] *Ibid*., 126.
[45] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.S. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York, 1968, 550.

Cynical and seemingly nihilistic, certain that there can be no heavenly intervention or conclusion, Nietzsche nevertheless realises a purpose for humanity in his theory of the "Eternal Return". Freed from false gods, whether religious or rationalist, humans must create themselves and take responsibility for their lives, so that meaning is found within life itself. Consequently, the actions of each generation reflect upon the next. Richard Schacht gives his summation of this positive message within Nietzsche's philosophy:

> If one has the ability to live joyfully and affirmatively without any hope that life and the world will ever have a significantly different character – or even a different character at all – than they already do, one will have the qualities characteristic of that higher, postnihilistic humanity of which the "overman" stands as Nietzsche's symbol.[46]

Caught in a seemingly meaningless and repetitive cycle, the characters of *Life Before Man* must come to their own understanding of the purpose of their lives.

The Feminist response to Darwin

Life Before Man documents various struggles through nihilistic despair, and opens with an existential appeal: "I don't know how I should live." In a singular demonstration of the Nietzschean belief that there are no greater revelations to be made, that everything that exists is present and discoverable, Elizabeth immediately provides her own solution:

> I want a shell like a sequined dress, made of silver nickels and dimes and dollars overlapping like the scales of an armadillo. Armoured dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat. (11)

Janice Kulyk Keefer uses this sequence to demonstrate her assertion that "overt wordplay in *Life Before Man* is fairly leaden",[47] but by including this distracted game of word-association, Atwood ensures that the novel opens with a vision of a Darwinian metamorphosis.

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[46] Richard Schacht, "Nietzsche", in *The Blackwell Guide to the Modern Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, Oxford, 2001, 403.

[47] Keefer, "Hope Against Hopelessness", 160.

Elizabeth may initially reject this proffered solution as a poor substitute for the grand passion just lost to her, but she will later come to cling to the smallest hopes of survival. At the novel's end she anticipates making a sandwich for her children and "It suddenly amazes her that she is able to do this, something this simple" (301). In doing so, she will have adapted herself to Chris' absence. The slightness of this triumph disappointed some critics, who argued that "life continues to be intolerable, the characters remain incapable of either ending or changing their lives",[48] although others saw an alternative reading: "Through adaptation, each [character] is a little more able to survive than she or he was at the outset of the book, and a little more connected with the people around her or him."[49] Although the rewards are slim, the consequence of failure is devastating, and like the dinosaurs, William faces extinction: "Lesje is his environment and his environment has changed" (142). Repeatedly in this novel, the search for meaning is reduced to a more urgent quest to survive.

Survival is a persistent theme in Atwood's work, and like *Surfacing* before, it is central to *Life Before Man*. In speaking of the nature of Canadian literature in her theoretical text, *Survival*, Atwood refers to two books that are to provide a running motif in her fourth novel: "In comic books and things like *Alice in Wonderland* or Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, you got rescued or you returned from the world of dangers to a cozy safe domestic one; in Seton and Roberts, because the world of dangers was *the same* as the real world, you didn't."[50] In *Life Before Man*, both of the mentioned texts are associated with Lesje and with fantasy. *The Lost World* was her childhood companion and comforter: "She can't remember which came first, her passion for fossils or this book; she thinks it was the book" (45). It, like *Alice in Wonderland*, recounts the discovery of a hidden world in which fantastic creatures live. Lesje, connected to Carroll's book by the admission that her name is a Ukrainian form of Alice, fantasises of such a land: "If she were to discover a country which had never been discovered before (and she fully intended to do this sometime), she would of course name it after herself" (91-92).

For Atwood, the "cozy safe domestic" realm does not exist in Canadian literature, and it does not exist in *Life Before Man*. Lesje

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[48] *Ibid*., 165.

[49] Beran, *Living Over the Abyss*, 90.

[50] Atwood, *Survival*, 30.

desperately tries to create it, albeit eccentrically, but the novel's comment is clear – and analogous to Nietzsche's thoughts on religion[51] – her fantasies are an escape that allows her to relinquish her responsibility to take control of her own life. Atwood says of typically Canadian literature:

> In this world, no Superman would come swooping out of the sky at the last minute to rescue you from the catastrophe …. The main thing was to avoid dying, and only by a mixture of cunning, experience and narrow escapes could the animal – or the human relying on his own resources – manage that.[52]

This is the situation found in *Life Before Man*. It is a post-Darwinian world in which survival is paramount and fantasies of alternative worlds must be relinquished.

Darwin proved a difficult ancestor for feminist theorists. His hypothesis of an impersonal process of natural selection at once removed the notion of innate social hierarchy, whilst fuelling the impulse to entrench those same artificial hierarchies even further into social politics. Confronting humanity with its animal heritage, Darwin's theses, like Freud's, underwent conservative revisions.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy documents something of Spencer's adaptation of Darwin's work to his own conservative theory of social hierarchy, in particular his flawed understanding of Darwin's principle of natural selection. Choosing to ignore the definition of evolution occurring against an environment of "continual change in an ongoing system"[53] which favours differing characteristics in differing conditions, Spencer assumed a vision of a static environment "against which 'superior', optimally adapted individuals rise to the top and stay there in

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[51] Nietzsche described religion as an escape from responsibility for one's own actions: "When man experiences the conditions of power, the imputation is that he is not their cause, that he is not responsible for them … in so far as anything great and strong in man has been conceived as superhuman and external, man has belittled himself – he has separated the two sides of himself, one very paltry and weak, one very strong and astonishing, into two spheres, and called the former 'man,' the latter 'God'" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 86-87).

[52] Atwood, *Survival*, 30.

[53] Howard E. Gruber, *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity*, London, 1974, 151.

perpetuity".[54] He then extended his evolutionary thinking to his theory of sexual difference. Pointing to the female attributes of ovulation, gestation and lactation, and the amount of energy consumed in these processes, he presumed "an earlier arrest of individual evolution in women than in men".[55] Consequently, and using Darwin as supporting evidence, Spencer constructed a scientific rationale for female intellectual inferiority, instinctual maternity and the inevitable division of labour. According to Hrdy:

> Spencer's popularity was due to the simple take-home message delivered to his privileged audience in Victorian England and America: the advantages you enjoy are well deserved. For him, evolution meant *progress*.[56]

Despite his use of biological data, Spencer still presumed a sort of higher intelligence moving towards an eventual end goal.

Atwood neatly demonstrates the conservative impulse fuelling such Social Darwinism, with Auntie Muriel creating her own Great Chain of Being, combining a traditional Christian hierarchy with a highly detailed system of classification:

> First comes God. Then comes Auntie Muriel and the Queen, with Auntie Muriel having a slight edge. Then come about five members of the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, which Auntie Muriel attends. After this there is a large gap. Then white, non-Jewish Canadians, Englishmen, and white, non-Jewish Americans, in that order .… Then there's another large gap, followed by all other human beings on a descending scale, graded according to skin color and religion. (137)

The distance between Muriel and the lower strands of society, emphasised by the sheer length of her list, assures her of her status and position.

Muriel's hierarchical vision, however, defies Darwin's evidence. Howard Gruber explains that, whereas the "upward-ascending unbroken chain or *Scala Naturae* was a widespread image in pre-

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[54] Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: Natural Selection and the Female of the Species*, London, 1999, 14.
[55] Spencer quoted in Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, 14.
[56] Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, 14.

Darwinian thought",[57] Darwin replaced this image with that of an irregularly branching tree, in which the evolution of species was uncoordinated and simultaneous. This message was so successfully ignored that Margulis felt it necessary to return to it some 130 years later, emphasising the absolute irregularity of the process:

> … the tree of life often grows in on itself. Species come together, fuse, and make new beings, who start again.[58]

The Great Chain of Being comes to depict one of the metanarratives that postmodernist and feminist thought was impelled to overcome; its strict hierarchy and sense of purpose being both a falsely imposed interpretation of evolution, and a political tool for repression. Feminists found in postmodernism an alternative narrative to the apparent biological essentialism inherent in Darwinism, whereas Atwood's ongoing engagement with the ideological difficulties that this union throws up continues in *Life Before Man*.

Some radical feminists envisioned a scientifically enhanced society, free of biological restraints on the female. Firestone, for example, argued that "pregnancy, now freely acknowledged as clumsy, inefficient, and painful, would be indulged in, if at all, only as a tongue-in-cheek archaism".[59] Once the imposition of motherhood was removed, she suggested, women would be free to pursue intellectual creativity. Evaluating Firestone's thesis, Carol McMillan took exception to her absolute denial of an instinctual emotional connection between mother and child: "Firestone, along with most feminists … thinks of reproduction as analogous to the production and manufacturing of goods."[60] Despite the disconcertingly sweeping nature of this remark, McMillan made a well-timed protest against the purely rationalist view of gender and sexuality. This anti-essentialist branch of feminist thought was a reaction against the biological determinism of neo-Darwinist and neo-Freudian conservatives, who founded their philosophies on the message that "anatomy is destiny". The ensuing theoretical struggle was between a liberal school, believing the human being to be an instinctual animal subject to

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[57] Gruber, *Darwin on Man*, 196.

[58] Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet*, 52.

[59] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 224.

[60] McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature*, 77.

involuntary drives that are in opposition to society, and a postmodernist school, claiming that the person is created through their society, and therefore no such opposition exists.

Atwood's scepticism of the postmodern idea of the self has been demonstrated in previous chapters. Here, she addresses more specifically the extent to which we are biological beings. Hypothesising herself into a psychiatrist's chair, Elizabeth argues the lesson that was previously learnt by *Surfacing*'s narrator:

> I am an adult and I do not think I am merely the sum of my past. I can make choices and I suffer the consequences, though they aren't always the ones I foresaw. (99)

For Elizabeth, life is controlled and highly socialised:

> It's the rule that when Elizabeth cooks, Nate does the dishes. One of the many rules, subrules, codicils, addenda, errata. Living with Elizabeth involves a maze of such legalities …. (163)

When Nate and Chris compete for Elizabeth, they do not fight, but play chess: "Nate knows Chris will win, but out of pride he wants this victory to take a decent amount of time" (173). When Nate leaves her for Lesje, Elizabeth thinks "It's like being beaten at an intricate and subtle game of chess by the world tiddlywinks champion" (204).

These competitions are echoed by another, played at Elizabeth's dinner party, in which the guests must argue for their preservation in an over-populated life-boat. As before, it provides a substitute for physical confrontation, as Lesje realises: "She knows this is not just a game, it's a challenge of some sort" (156). Each of these games involve a form of mating ritual, and contrast massively with Lesje's attempt to visualise dinosaur copulation: "Did the male dinosaur hold the female dinosaur by the scruff of the neck, like a rooster? …. did male dinosaurs fight each other at mating season?" (144). The characters' civilised manners separate them definitively from the animal kingdom, but when "William Wasp, from a good family in London, Ontario" (186) attempts to rape Lesje, motivated by jealousy and anger, the fragility of the social veneer is suddenly exposed. For Lesje, "it's the sight of William turning into someone else that has shocked her" (186); the idea of evolution results in an ontological instability that is threatening to the characters' sense of self.

Each of the characters is involved in a struggle for survival, but as victims fall away – Martha, William, Chris – the focus is increasingly upon Elizabeth and Lesje. Despite her greater confidence and experience, Elizabeth loses to Lesje – inevitably, so the novel suggests:

> Lesje is a clown. But is, despite her gawkiness and lack of poise, a younger woman, quite a lot younger than Elizabeth. (161)

This youth, Carrington suggests, is a biological incentive for Nate, and she describes Lesje's deliberate pregnancy as "a very bitchy act of survival .… Lesje needs to be pregnant to stay alive and to secure her primary significance in Nate's life."[61] One of the participants in the lifeboat game had already predicted this outcome:

> I propose that I should be saved instead of Elizabeth. She's almost past child-bearing age and if we want to establish a colony, we'll need babies. (156)

Nate and Lesje move in together, and Elizabeth is reduced to haunting the street where they live, another of the text's ghosts: "They've locked her out. They're ignoring her …" (251). In turn, when she is faced with the prospect of motherhood, Lesje's focus shifts – "Nate has been displaced" (309) – and in her new-found maternity, she begins to reconsider Elizabeth: "It occurs to her, a new idea, that this tension between the two of them is a difficulty for the children" (309). The physical fact of her pregnancy alters the way Lesje thinks, and *Life Before Man* seems to assert a basic instinctual sympathy between the survival instinct of the dinosaurs, and that of the characters.

At the same time, Atwood does not embrace the idea of biological compulsion without qualifying it somewhat. Beran points to two narrative techniques employed by the novel that suggest another reading of Atwood's intentions. Firstly, there is Nate's recollection of an earlier meeting with Chris, which disturbs the chronology of the narrative: "Atwood signals art, not science, when she inserts this flashback; she is free to select rather than merely record."[62] Secondly:

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[61] Carrington, *Demons, Doubles, and Dinosaurs*, 237.
[62] Beran, "Living Over the Abyss", 61.

"Atwood foregrounds Elizabeth's point of view slightly over the other two points of view – perhaps necessary if we are to hear her at all, since convention tells us to focus on the young lovers and the new society they can create as we read a love story, not on the wife who gets left behind."[63] Free will, artistic discretion, and even sympathy for a defeated opponent: all stand in opposition to the "survival of the fittest" ethic, and signal another of Atwood's third ways – a proffered compromise between deterministic biology and postmodern self-creation.

This tension between postmodernism and sociobiology has continued to recur in feminist thinking. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, published in 1991, Haraway rejects a third way compromise and effectively uses the breakdown of biological boundaries prompted by evolutionary thinking in order to step even further into a postmodernist future in which the barrier between organism and mechanism is dissolved. She describes simians, cyborgs and women as "odd boundary creatures", "all of which have had a destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives".[64] Haraway overturns Wilson's belief that culture is the result of biological determinants. She concludes, instead:

> From this field of differences, replete with the promises and terrors of cyborg embodiments and situated knowledges, there is no exit. Anthropologists of possible selves, we are technicians of realizable futures. Science *is* culture.[65]

However, Haraway's work, whilst distinctly postmodernist in its emphasis on cultural influence, also rejects what she describes as "the basically capitalist ideology of culture against nature", which, she argues, only works to further entrench the mind-body divide.

Haraway berates feminists for writing themselves out of the discourses of evolutionary biology, but her interest in the subject is not for what it reveals about the natural development of human nature, but rather for what it reveals about the construction of human nature by the biosciences. She argues that:

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[63] *Ibid*., 73.

[64] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 2.

[65] *Ibid*., 230.

> the biosocial sciences have not simply been sexist mirrors of our own social world. They have also been tools in the reproduction of that world … supplying legitimating ideologies.[66]

This view is in absolute opposition to Steven Pinker's argument in his 1997 book, *How the Mind Works*. Pinker propounds the strictly mechanistic, or computational, model of the human mind favoured by evolutionary psychologists. Deconstructing his argument, Barbara Herrnstein Smith reads his adaptionist view of the human brain as an attempt to naturalise the Cartesian divide: "Pinker evidently believes, and believes that he has just proved, that human beings have an innate, naturally selected resistance to the social construction of gender roles." Smith argues that Pinker's belief is based on the mistaken belief that speculations about prehistoric man provide factual and transferable scientific evidence for the behaviours of contemporary human society. "Evolutionary psychology", she writes, "mistakes its own simplifications for the discovery of simplicity".[67] In contrast to both Pinker and Haraway, Smith proposes that, by overcoming the Two Cultures mentality of evolutionary psychology by supplementing its findings with the teachings of cultural anthropology, the practice might provide a valuable tool for both the biological and the social sciences.

In *Life Before Man*, Atwood works, not only to overcome the nature-nurture question, but also to resolve the related tension between the scientific and the fantastic set up by the chosen epigraphs, which also represents the mind-body divide in the novel. In fact, Darwinian theory does not distinguish mind from body as it later came to be understood. According to Darwin, the human mind – man's capacity for reason and problem solving – evolved along with, and originated in, the developing physical body. Although Freud's later theories were still distant, Darwin touched on the composition of thought, acknowledging that "humans act in ways not fully guided by conscious, rational thought", and he fully believed that "psychological problems might be attacked in a manner harmonious with evolutionary theory".[68]

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[66] *Ibid*., 10-11.
[67] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Sewing Up the Mind: The Claims of Evolutionary Psychology", in *Alas, Poor Darwin*, 138-39.
[68] Gruber, *Darwin on Man*, 233-34.

With the Enlightenment and the celebration of rationalist thought came the imposition of a strict hierarchical dichotomy that privileged the masculine mind over the feminine body. This belief would formulate scientific thought for centuries to come, but in returning to Darwin, we see that this opposition never really existed for him, though his work was later taken up in support of its continuance. By re-evaluating Darwinism and evolutionary theory in *Life Before Man*, Atwood finds within this discourse a position on selfhood that is not inimical to feminist theory, as was once thought: a position that was only to be seriously considered by feminism some years later.

CHAPTER V

BODILY HARM: THE IMPRISONING GAZE

The publication of *Bodily Harm* in 1981 signalled a return to what had already come to be recognised as Atwood's more typical style. A single female protagonist indicated this return, whilst the novel's title seemingly returned Atwood's focus to the body after the temporary theoretical disruption of *Life Before Man*. Indeed, there is a comfortable familiarity about *Bodily Harm*, and it is knowingly created. Like *Lady Oracle* before it, it contains a pastiche of genres and styles, and in a manner similar to Joan, Rennie the protagonist finds herself self-consciously drawn to the appropriation and parody of various generic traditions. Attracted by the surgeon who performs her mastectomy, she chides herself: "Falling in love with your doctor is something that middle-aged women did, women in the soaps, women in nurse novels and sex-and-scalpel epics with titles like *Surgery* and nurses with big tits and doctors who looked like Dr. Kildare on the covers."[1] From this gentle, if self-admittedly clichéd romance, Rennie escapes to a Caribbean island under the pretext of writing a travel piece, and is unwittingly entangled in a political thriller of imprisonment and rescue. One by one, the constructedness of these narratives is exposed as the mythic and gothic patterns behind them become increasingly evident to Rennie:

> The truth about knights comes suddenly clear: the maidens were only an excuse. The dragon was the real business. So much for vacation romances, she thinks. (258)

Bodily Harm sets up a number of familiar narrative conventions, and by doing so, seemingly highlights the same postmodern textuality that Atwood had explored in *Lady Oracle*. One of these conventions being explored is the consciousness-raising feminist novel of the

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (1981), London, 1996, 33. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

1970s such as, for example, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*. In an interview, Atwood recalls that "female fiction of the early '70s was very 'head of the brigade' … there was a certain kind of plot that I remember … and the happy ending, which used to be marrying Prince Charming, is leaving your husband and getting a job". Following the patterns of this early second-wave plot, *Bodily Harm* is, in many ways, about female victimisation and masculine aggression – which are familiar themes from *Surfacing* – and Rennie's understanding of this sexual dichotomy is as simple as that of the narrator of the earlier novel, leading her to conclude: "She's afraid of men because men are frightening" (290).

Atwood seemingly supports Rennie's view; connections are quickly made between Jake's sado-sexual games – "Pretend I just came through the window. Pretend you're being raped" (117) – and the resonant threat of "a length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt" (13) left by an unknown intruder. When Jake protests at Rennie's questions, prompted by her recent viewing of a police display of pornography, saying "Come on, don't confuse me with that sick stuff. You think I'm some kind of a pervert? You think most men are like that?" (212), both she and the reader are understood to make their own conclusions. Policemen, lovers, politicians and doctors: all embody male agents of violence upon the female body. Like Rennie's cancerous tumour, they insinuate themselves into her life and threaten her security. They are "her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teethmarks on her" (284). Rennie's task, it seems, will be to escape the various physical and psychological threats to her safety and find security.

Atwood, however, distances herself from the tradition of the feminist novel, arguing: "I never wrote those, and I haven't written them since",[2] but it remains an influential, if ambivalent, background to her work. This ambivalence is evident in interviews; asked if her writing is feminist, she responds: "I'm a fiction writer, you know, I'm not a propagandist."[3] But through Rennie, Atwood also articulates a nostalgia for the idealism of the early feminist movement and the accompanying political atmosphere, when Rennie "believed there was a real story, not several and not almost real. But that was 1970 and she

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[2] Beatrice Mendez-Egle, "Witness Is What You Must Bear", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 162.

[3] Kaminski, "Preserving Mythologies", 27.

was in college. It was easy to believe such things then." Later, "she graduated and it was no longer 1970", and that era of political naivety was lost. Rennie's subsequent career is coloured by her knowledge that she has "sold-out". Her ambition to "specialize in abuses" degenerates into a portfolio of "radical chic": "The *in* wardrobe for the picket line, the importance of the denim overall, what the feminists eat for breakfast" (64). But again, her guilt is ambivalent because she locates its motivation in the small town moralising of her Ontario childhood, and thinks:

> Maybe it's Griswold squeezing her head: *If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.* Not that its own maxims ever stopped Griswold. (66)

Bodily Harm betrays a desire for an old-fashioned articulation of right and wrong by which the narrator can live. She recognises these qualities in Daniel, in whom she sees "ordinary human decency", but she also considers him to be "a mutation, a freak" (284). This tension between cynicism and idealism manifests itself in the title of a series of Atwood's poems, *True Stories*, which was published concurrently with *Bodily Harm* and strongly echoed its themes. Rennie progresses towards the true story behind *Bodily Harm* when she moves from being "a quick expert on surfaces" (26) to "a reporter" (301). Despite their evident similarities, it is this question about the existence of a true story that most critically distances *Bodily Harm* from *Lady Oracle*.

The power of the gaze
Bodily Harm may be reminiscent of the early second-wave feminist novel, although accompanied by Atwood's usual critical eye, but there is a great distance between it and *The Edible Woman*, for example. *Bodily Harm* sets up a temporal distance in which Atwood returns to the issues of 1970s women's writing and re-examines them in the light of ten years experience. She also advances into areas still in their infancy, examining the politics of the gaze, which would later become more highly theorised and be extended into discussions about the colonial gaze. With her fifth novel, Atwood's well-established interest in power politics is further expanded as she forces her protagonist to accept a shifting position of power and dominance on the one hand,

and impotence and fear on the other; Rennie is made to acknowledge that these states are not mutually exclusive, but can be possessed simultaneously. Atwood's epigraph for *Bodily Harm*, always a heavily-loaded signal to the essence of her novels, directs and supports this initial reading:

> A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you. By contrast, a woman's presence … defines what can and cannot be done to her. (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

Berger's quote is about power, but also, as his title makes evident, about modes of perception. These themes were significant within 1970s feminist theory, but became gradually more sophisticated throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

By the time of writing *Bodily Harm*, some notable work had been published on the power of the gaze. Luce Irigaray's essay "Speculum of the Other Woman" was published in 1974, although its English translation did not appear until 1985, and was written in response to Freud's essay "On Femininity" (1932). In it, she challenges Freud's conjunction of the infantile recognition of sexual difference and what he calls "envy for the penis".[4] Following his argument, as Irigaray understood it, "*Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth*".[5] Consequently, the girl's evident lack of penis prompts castration fear in the boy. Irigaray asks "why does having nothing that can be seen threaten *his* libidinal economy?" (italics in the original).[6]

Further deconstruction reveals Freud's reliance upon a "has/has not" reading of gender, supporting the fragile narcissism of the male sexual identity, as Irigaray explains: "If woman had desires other than 'penis envy', this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man's image back to him – albeit inverted."[7] According to Freud, the initial male gaze on

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[4] Sigmund Freud, "Femininity", *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works* (1933), in *The Standard Edition of the Compete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, London, 1964, XXII, 125.

[5] Luce Irigaray, "Another 'Cause' – Castration" (1974), in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Basingstoke, 1997, 431.

[6] *Ibid.*, 432.

[7] *Ibid.*, 434.

the female body, prompted by curiosity and resulting in horror, is reconstituted into a confirmation of her lack and his subsequent validation as possessor of the "master signifier", the phallus. Freud wrote:

> The castration complex of girls is also started by the sight of the genitals of the other sex. They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance.[8]

Its significance, for Freud, is the girl's lesser nature. Irigaray, however, re-reads this scenario by focusing the discourse of power and difference, not on the possession of the phallus, but on the power of the gaze. Thus, penis envy is better understood as "envy and jealousy of the eye-penis, of the phallic gaze".[9] Power rests with the viewer and the viewed becomes the passive object of his gaze.

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* was written in 1972, and examined the relationship between the artist, the image and the viewer. In 1975, Laura Mulvey extended his analysis to encompass the "patterns of fascination"[10] at play in film. Both theorists consider the implications of the gendered gaze. According to Mulvey:

> The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.[11]

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie experiences a persistent claustrophobic sense of being watched. The immigration clerk "glares at her, his eyes enlarged by lenses" (37), and her doctor tells her "we'll have to keep an eye on you, we always will" (59). After an intruder is chased from her home, "she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched" (40). This intrusion provokes a crisis in Rennie's identity, revealing a split between body and self:

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[8] Freud, "Femininity", 125.
[9] Irigaray, "Another 'Cause' – Castration", 431.
[10] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in *Feminisms*, 438.
[11] *Ibid*., 442.

> She began to see herself from the outside, as if she was a moving target in someone else's binoculars. She could even hear the silent commentary: Now she's opening the bean sprouts, now she's cooking an omelette, now she's eating it, now she's washing off the plate. Now she's sitting down in the livingroom, nothing much going on. Now she's getting up, she's going in to the bedroom, she's taking off her shoes, she's turning out the light. Next comes the good part. (40)

She is particularly afraid of windows, conscious of their framing quality: "She closes the Venetian blind on the narrow window, turns off the overhead light and undresses" (48). In her brightly lit bedroom, Rennie becomes a self-conscious actress aware of her audience, the "faceless stranger" (41).

Mulvey explicitly connects the voyeuristic compulsion of the Peeping Tom with the scopophilia of the cinema audience. She argues that "the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium … and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation".[12] For Rennie, the realisation of the voyeur's presence strikes at a more fundamental recognition: "She had been seen, too intimately, her face blurred and distorted, damaged, owned in some way she couldn't define" (40). Rennie begins to understand that her image, and by extension her body, does not belong to her, but to the one who chooses to gaze upon it.

Mulvey applies a Lacanian deconstruction of the power conferred by the gaze.[13] Where Lacan's Mirror Phase was a crucial moment of "recognition/misrecognition" in infantile development, when the child knows its own image but believes it to be more powerful, "more perfect", than its bodily self, so the cinema viewer identifies with the potent image of the male protagonist, as Mulvey explains: "[he] projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the

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[12] *Ibid.*, 440.

[13] Lacan wrote of the moment of identification experienced when the child first recognises his or her image in the mirror: "This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, 2001, 2).

power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."[14] Therefore, the male remains the bearer of the gaze, even when projected on screen alongside the female recipient.

Without mention of Lacan, Berger's analysis of European oil paintings of the nude coincides with Mulvey. He argues that the principle protagonist never appears:

> He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him .… But he, by definition, is a stranger.[15]

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie senses the presence of this stranger: "The face keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible, she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't really there, he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own" (287). Different men at different times in her life take on the mask of this stranger, the unknown observer. Early in the novel, it is Jake, with his collection of vaguely disturbing photographs of stylised women. Rennie is instinctually discomfited by these pictures, "especially when she was lying on their bed with no clothes on" (106). It is the objectification of these women, and by extension, her own objectification, that Rennie is unconsciously troubled by.

After her mastectomy, when encroachments on her body are no longer something that she can ignore, Rennie tries to avoid creating images of herself that could be possessed by this disembodied observer. She dresses in the dark "so she isn't reflected anywhere" (48), aiming for "neutrality … invisibility" (15). Berger points to the tradition of the mirror motif as emblem of female vanity, but says that "the real function of the mirror … was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight".[16] This compulsion proves inescapable. Despite Rennie's avoidance of mirrors, her self-analysis continues as an internalised force. This gets to the crux of Berger's argument:

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[14] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 443.

[15] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972, 54.

[16] *Ibid*., 51.

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking or weeping.

Rennie's incessant internal observer is the ironically redirected voice of her own magazine writings. Even her cancer diagnosis is narrated inside her head: "*This is a fact, it's happened to you, and right now you can't believe it*, she would begin" (27). Like *The Edible Woman*'s Marian, Rennie is both the recipient and the disseminator of popular images of women, and like Marian, and like Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, this split that forms as, in Berger's words, "she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman",[17] is represented by a shift from the first to the third person narration of her story.

As a journalist, "Rennie looks, which is her function" (88), and carries a camera "to increase her scope" (67), but her gaze is impotent: "I see into the present, that's all. Surfaces. There's not a whole lot to it" (26). Rennie's gaze reflects images of herself, which, according to Berger, is the female condition: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."[18] Atwood depicts this situation literally when Rennie sees herself in her lover's gaze: "Paul is looking at her, his face is right there, she can see two little faces, white and tiny, reflected back at her from his sunglasses" (99). This scene recalls the moment of Marian's engagement to Peter in *The Edible Woman*, in which Marian says: "I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (83).

In both instances, this reflection marks a loss of self; Marian is absorbed into Peter's greater ego, but for Rennie, the moment represents an absence of ego, or rather, a terminal narcissism. Like a child trapped in the mirror phase, her self exists only in the reflection of a projected image in countless surfaces. She is, in Irigaray's words, "a lack, an absence … a *hole* in men's signifying economy".[19] She is assigned this role by men but sustains it herself. This is a situation that Irigaray considers: "one may wonder why she submits so readily to

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[17] *Ibid*., 46.

[18] *Ibid*., 47.

[19] Irigaray, "Another 'Cause' – Castration", 433.

this make-believe, why she 'mimics' so perfectly as to forget she is acting out man's contraphobic projects, projections, and products of her desire."[20]

Berger's response to this same question is the discussion of power from which Atwood took her epigraph. He argues that:

> Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated.[21]

The result is the same masquerade of powerlessness articulated by Riviere decades earlier, when she discovered that: "womanliness … could be assumed and worn as a mask both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it."[22] Both Irigaray and Riviere believe that women collude in a myth of female objectivity to reassure the male of his subjectivity. According to Berger, their motivation for this collusion is fear, and Rennie agrees with him: "she's afraid of men" (290). However, in *Bodily Harm*, Atwood shows that women are exposed to violence even when they capitulate in the masquerade, even when, like Rennie, they refuse to see. Rennie instinctually realises that looking is an illicit activity. "She likes to stare but she doesn't like to be caught doing it" (43). Later, Paul advises her that the police "don't like you to stare" (146), but Rennie has already averted her eyes, thinking, "If you look they want something" (68). In the novel it is made clear that Rennie's refusal to look at the world is motivated by her fear of it.

Until the last, Rennie resists the temptation to look at anything beyond the surface. Even in prison, surrounded by torture and corruption, she insists "There's nothing to see" (272). Eventually, she does look, and is seen looking by another prisoner. She responds to being caught with great anxiety: "he can see her, she's been exposed, it's panic, he wants her to do something, pleading, *Oh please*" (290). In fact, Rennie suffers no reprisals because the prisoner is at least as impotent as she, but for Atwood, looking carries its own responsibilities. At the start of her trip, Rennie was "flying blind" (17) but by the end, "she's paying attention" (301). Her look has

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[20] *Ibid*., 435.

[21] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

[22] Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", 38.

implicated her and she understands that it is her duty to report what she has seen.

Tourism: the disembodied gaze

In his book, *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry writes that "tourism results from a basic binary between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary",[23] and he locates the desires and motivations that propel the twentieth-century phenomenon of mass tourism in the nineteenth-century tradition of the flâneur:

> The anonymity of the crowd provided an asylum for those on the margins of society who were able to move about unnoticed, observing and being observed, but never really interacting with those encountered. The flâneur was the modern hero, able to travel, to arrive, to gaze, to move on, to be anonymous ….[24]

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie seeks this privileged position of external observer.

The fundamental aspect of the observer is his or her position on the outside looking in. The observer transcends his or her body in order that he or she might watch the bodies of others unhindered. When speaking of the "voyeuristic separation" promoted by film-watching, Mulvey points out that the darkness of the cinema also works to "[isolate] the spectators from one another".[25] In the dark their physical selves disappear. Betrayed by her cancerous body, it is this transcendence that Rennie seeks when she escapes to the Caribbean. In the alien landscape she is "a tourist. A spectator, a voyeur" (125). Surrounded by volatile politics, Paul reassures her, "you won't get hurt. You're a tourist, you're exempt" (78). Accordingly, Rennie falsely believes that leaving Canada has enabled her to escape reality: "Rennie's lucky that she can manage these sidesteps, these small absences from real life" (16). This same escape instinct propelled Joan to flee to Italy in *Lady Oracle*, and compelled the narrator of *Surfacing* to retreat to the wilderness, and this same desire for dissociated observation informs Lesje's fantasy life in *Life Before Man*, where in her daydreams, "Lesje crouches in the topmost frond-

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[23] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2nd edn, London, 2002, 12.

[24] *Ibid*., 126.

[25] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 440.

cluster of one of these trees, watching through binoculars, blissful, uninvolved" (18).

In the latter novel, Atwood questioned the subjective value system at work behind the seemingly transparent figure of the objective scientist, the innate gender bias founded in Baconian scientific philosophy and the assumption of man's centrality to evolution, cemented by the Enlightenment – what Lynn Margulis calls "our tenacious illusion of special dispensation".[26] This notion of the objective observer relies on the possibility of the disembodied gaze. According to Seyla Benhabib, "We can adopt 'the view from nowhere' … only if we can also conceive of ourselves as 'unencumbered' selves".[27] The "unencumbered self" creates itself; it can step outside of experience and still retain core values and essential knowledge. Such an idea is inimical to postmodern theories, as Waugh describes in a quotation already given in Chapter III:

> Postmodernists … see knowledge of the world as indissociable from being-in-the-world: knowledge and experience are inextricably bound to each other and always culturally situated. There can be no transcendental "view from nowhere", no position from outside culture from which to offer a criticism of it.[28]

In his 1986 book, *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel writes about the question of "how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included".[29] Throughout her work, Atwood can be seen to return to this question, and her ongoing struggle to reconcile her liberal and postmodern instincts resurfaces yet again in *Bodily Harm*. Rennie's growing belief in the existence of "the true story" is at once a regression to the liberal politics of the 1970s and, through her acknowledgement of her indissociable part in it, a progression towards a postmodernist acceptance of the collapse of rationalist boundaries.

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[26] Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet*, 119.
[27] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Cambridge, 1992, 71.
[28] Rice, *Modern Literary Theory*, 290.
[29] Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford, 1986, 3.

Rennie, however, does not initially want to accept her interiority, and thus her responsibility, within her culture. She seeks to escape her culture much as she seeks to transcend the body which demonstrably locates her within the world. The concept of transcendence, extensively discussed by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, is familiar to Atwood. De Beauvoir argued the Sartrean principle that man achieves liberty by transcending the body, whereas woman remains immanent: "Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature."[30] The sexes appropriate a master-slave relationship, described by de Beauvoir in terms of a power struggle in which reciprocal need is evident but denied. Genevieve Lloyd traces de Beauvoir's argument through Sartre and back to Hegel, and reinstates the concept of the look that passes between master and slave and facilitates the power struggle – an element that is ignored in de Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex*.

For Hegel, self-consciousness is achieved through a struggle for recognition. He argued that "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged".[31] In Sartre's hands, Hegel's notion of recognition became more explicitly "a struggle between competing looks", as Lloyd explains:

> Only one of the antagonists … can be a looker; the other must be the looked-at. If the looker is a "subject", the looked-at turns into an "object". There is for Sartre no possibility of reciprocal recognition between transcendent selves.[32]

For de Beauvoir, the master/looker is inevitably male, and although the female can achieve transcendence, her body compels her towards immanence. De Beauvoir saw reproduction as a reminder of the animal nature of humanity, and a reminder that is more evident in women. Lloyd questions her argument, asking why man's experience of his body should not be equally defining, equally limiting. However, she accepts that "the experience – however direct – of a female body which [de Beauvoir] is describing is the experience of a body which

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[30] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15.

[31] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.

[32] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 93.

has been culturally objectified by exposure to the male look".[33] In this way, Lloyd concedes, the woman's body is both self and other. The man views the female as the embodiment of immanence, something he must overcome to achieve transcendent liberation, and prescribes immanence to her through his look. Consequently, it is not her body, but the cultural values attached to her body that makes the woman immanent.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie experiences irrefutable evidence of the immanence of her physical self when she is diagnosed with breast cancer. Suddenly, her body becomes other to her self:

> The body, sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it. Nothing had prepared her for her own outrage, the feeling that she'd been betrayed by a close friend. She'd given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She'd trusted it. Why then had it turned against her? (82)

The cancer acts much in the same way that the intruder's presence had acted on Rennie, making evident a split within her: "her real fear, irrational but a fear, is that the scar will come undone in the water, split open like a faulty zipper, and she will turn inside out" (80). Suddenly "inside" and "outside" are distinct properties and any transgression of those boundaries is experienced with distress. When Rennie meets Lora, a Canadian woman living on the island, her first impression is repulsion at Lora's nibbled fingers:

> She wouldn't want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn't like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that. (86)

Rennie's loathing stems from her fear of death, which Kristeva terms "the utmost of abjection".[34] Kristeva speaks of death as a border, necessarily crossed by bodily waste, and eventually crossed entirely: "Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the

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[33] *Ibid.*, 99.
[34] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

limit."[35] Rennie has significantly touched this limit and feels tainted: "She was convinced also that there was a faint odour of decay seeping through the binding: like an off cheese" (35). Subsequently, she tries to resurrect the boundary between outside and inside, clean and unclean, and hygiene becomes a crucial procedure for her:

> She unpacks … her toothbrush and the other pieces of cleaning and sterilizing equipment people use on their bodies. She's ceased to take such things for granted; "Prevention of Decay" is no longer just a slogan. (48)

Rennie alienates herself from her body so that it can more easily be treated and sterilised. When Daniel tells her he removed about a quarter of her breast, she muses "You make it sound like a pie" (34). It is his distance that she covets.

Daniel is the ultimate observer, seeing not just the surface, but penetrating the inside. After her operation, Rennie envies him his perspective, wishing that she could "see what Daniel saw when he looked into her". She envies his position on the outside looking in, and "this is partly why she fell in love with him: he knows something about her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like inside" (80-81). Ironically, it is Daniel who tries to dissuade her of this fantasy: "the mind isn't separate from the body" (82), he tells her. This is ironic because Daniel does not fully inhabit his own body:

> he didn't care what he ate, he didn't care what he wore … he knows we're not all that well glued together, any minute we'll vaporize. These bodies are only provisional. (141-43)

The only part of Daniel's body with any real substance are his hands. After holding one, Rennie "could feel the shape of his hand for hours" (144). Initially, she believes them to contain healing properties, but as Daniel's detachment becomes more evident, they become little more than tools for observation, or probes. When he touches her, "she did not see hands but an odd growth, like a plant or something with tentacles, detachable. The hand moved: he was patting her" (32). This rather grotesque image of a severed and autonomous hand lends itself to the increasingly gothic aspect of the novel.

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[35] *Ibid.*, 3.

A gothic fairytale

In fact, *Bodily Harm* is littered with detached body parts. Daniel's alienated hands recall the hallucinations of Rennie's senile grandmother:

> My hands, she said. I've left them somewhere and now I can't find them. She was holding her hands in the air, helplessly, as if she couldn't move them. (57)

This image of "a hand cut off at the wrist", along with various others that occur in the novel, form part of Freud's inventory of archetypal aspects of the uncanny. Paul's dream of walking towards "a hole in the ground, with the earth that's been dug out" (249) plays out the claustrophobic fear of being buried alive, which Freud explains is another example of the uncanny: "To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all."[36]

Another example can be found in the motif of the man with no eyes who haunts the entire novel, from the Canadian official with "the tinted glasses" (294), to the stranger "with silver eyes" (287) who Rennie initially thought was Paul. When she does actually see Paul wearing his sunglasses, she thinks, "Without his eyes his face is expressionless, he's a faceless stranger" (99). Freud suggests that "something uncanny is directly attached to the … idea of being robbed of one's eyes".[37] He associates this fear with castration anxiety, linking the power of the gaze with the potency of the phallus.

Atwood's novel is saturated with the uncanny, which frequently overlaps with the gothic, resulting in an inability to distinguish between safety and danger, between the hero and the villain. These same shifting perceptions were experienced by Joan in *Lady Oracle*, for whom they became a symbol of an inescapable postmodern textualism. Similarly, their accumulating prominence in *Bodily Harm* plunges Rennie into an increasingly imprisoning gothic narrative.

Susan Rosowski describes the fundamental aspect of the gothic novel as "the similarly reassuring and simple appeal of escape".[38]

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[36] Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition*, 1955, XVII, 244.
[37] *Ibid*., 230.
[38] Susan J. Rosowski, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: Fantasy and the Modern Gothic Novel", in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, 199.

Rennie's immersion into an alien environment assures her that she has achieved such an escape. Arriving on the island:

> She discovers that she's truly no longer *at home*. She is away, she is *out*, which is what she wanted. (39)

However, Rennie's attempt at escape proves ineffectual because the island she flees to is filled with terror for her. Removed from all familiar points of reference by which to judge the situations and the people with whom she comes into contact, Rennie loses any ability to accurately judge their potential threat to her safety. Paul calls this "'Alien reaction paranoia' … Because you don't know what's dangerous and what isn't, everything seems dangerous" (76).

What becomes increasingly evident as the novel progresses, however, is that the situations that Rennie encounters on the island are not frighteningly unfamiliar, but on the contrary, they echo the very same fears that she thought she had left behind her in Canada. For example, the aimlessness of the unfamiliar black faces of the men on the streets disturbs Rennie, but in a way that she recognises: "It's too much like teenagers in shopping plazas, it's too much like a mob" (39). And other aspects of Canadian life are reproduced for Rennie on the island. The two most significant moments of potential danger within the novel mirror each other almost exactly. The first occurs after an intruder is chased from her apartment. She returns home to discover "The front door was open … Two policemen were sitting at the table" (12). Later, on the island, this scene is replayed with more deadly consequences: "the door, which was shut and locked, is open. Two policemen are standing in the doorway" (261).

Even in her personal life, this mirroring continues, as her lover and her best friend find uncanny doubles on the island. Jake, whom she recalls "grinning like a fox" (103) is supplanted by Paul who "smiles, a kindly threatening smile" (150), and Jocasta, for whom "she had a certain contempt" (25) easily becomes Lora, by whom she is "irritated" (220) and eventually "disgusted" (285). The consequence of this doubling of experience is a creeping claustrophobia. The myth of escape is exploded, as the fears to be faced prove pervasive and universal. Rennie begins to realise that she can no longer take "these sidesteps, these small absences from real life" (16), because they

never really existed. Eventually, this restriction of space is taken to its ultimate conclusion as Rennie is confined in a five-by-seven foot cell.

For many feminist critics of the gothic genre, the conventional imprisoning spaces can, as Kate Ferguson Ellis says, "be read as metaphors for women's lives under patriarchy". The confining codes of patriarchy are all-pervasive, be it in a prison cell, a Caribbean island, or suburban Canada. The claustrophobia of the island echoes in the claustrophobia of the prison, and both are recognised as microcosms of the power structures at play elsewhere in the world. Towards the end of the novel:

> Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything. (290)

The only means of resolution for the gothic heroine is to negotiate a little more space for herself. The conclusion of the plot, which requires that "the monsters and the madwomen … be punished and ostracised while the 'good' submissive women have been rewarded",[39] merely removes the heroine from the prison to the equally imprisoning home.

Helena Michie refers to the notion of space in an essay on pregnancy. She speaks of the idea of a safe domestic space, with "home and marriage as benign alternatives to a gothic world of ghosts, robbers and rapists who come in from outside". However, recalling the excitable character of Catherine in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for whom a discovered "ancient manuscript" turns out to be no more than a laundry list, Michie gives the feminist reading that "the laundry list [is] as dangerous to the well-being of a heroine as the ghost or the dead body".[40] This gets to the heart of female gothic, which is the tension between the safe space that must be defended from external threats, and the paradox that the heroine's greatest threat emanates from her domestic fate: that the "safe space" is in fact a site of danger and repression.

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[39] Kate Ferguson Ellis, "Can You Forgive Her? The Gothic Heroine and Her Critics", in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter, Oxford, 2000, 258.

[40] Helena Michie, "Confinements: The Domestic in the Discourses of Upper-Middle-Class Pregnancy" (1996), in *Feminisms*, 58.

In *Bodily Harm*, Lora's screaming protest at the prison guards defines her as the madwoman within the convention, and the subsequent beating she receives is an effective punishment, as "after the first minute she's silent, more or less" (292). When Rennie comes to be released, she learns from Lora's fate and promises silence: "She understands that unless she makes a mark on this paper they may not let her out" (293). By now, Rennie has understood that this does not mean that she is free or that she has escaped, simply that her space has been expanded. However, within this space, "she is a subversive. She was not one once but now she is" (300-301). Atwood reads the Gothic fear of the inescapable prison as a postmodern metaphor.

Another Gothic convention, that of the hero-villain, is also reconsidered by the novel as a fictional representation of a contemporary reality. In *Bodily Harm* the impossibility of knowing a person's true identity is played out in comic form as everyone on the island speculates which of its inhabitants are spies: "spot the CIA, it's a local game; everybody plays it" (242). A photographer informs Rennie, "there's only two kinds of guys, *a prick* and *not a prick*" (103), and like her gothic counterpart, she is incapable of distinguishing between the two. The paranoia that this creates was depicted humorously in *Lady Oracle*, in which Joan suspected everyone of being a potential killer, including Arthur, her ineffectual husband. In *Bodily Harm*, the threat is much more real, much more sinister. Her dismissal of the CIA plot, with which the reader had readily concurred, suddenly appears naïve, as revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries take control of the island. Rennie quickly comes to see that the island is filled with violent forces – forces no less present in Canada – and seemingly innocuous acquaintances become potential enemies. In Kate Fullbrook's words: "the violence in this story … seeps through everything, crushing both men and women; the ordinary world is punctuated by casual terror."[41]

Using Michelle Masse's 1992 study of women, masochism and the gothic, Ellis briefly discusses the connection between pornography and the gothic tradition. She puts forward the view that "romance is merely a form of pornography tailored to the 'soft core' erotic tastes

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[41] Fullbrook, *Free Women*, 186.

of women".[42] Masse, however, makes the connection far more explicit:

> The Gothic uses woman's whole body as a pawn: She is moved, threatened, discarded, and lost. And, as the whole person is abducted, attacked, and so forth, the subtext metaphorically conveys anxiety about her genital risk. Pornography reverses the synecdochal relation by instead using the part to refer to the whole: a woman is a twat, a cunt, a hole. The depiction of explicitly genital sexual practice which is pornography's metier can be simply a difference in degree, not in kind, from the Gothic's more genteel abuse.[43]

In *Bodily Harm*, Atwood juxtaposes references to pornography with the implicit gothicism of the text, and achieves a layering effect of degrees of threat.

Rennie's initial reaction to pornography is detached and sophisticated. When she views the police display, she notes: "There were a couple of sex-and-death pieces, women being strangled or bludgeoned or having their nipples cut off by men dressed up as Nazis, but Rennie felt it couldn't possibly be real, it was all done with ketchup" (210). When she later witnesses disturbingly similar scenes of police brutality, and realises that the policeman is "doing it because he enjoys it" (289), the line between art and life is lost. Violence permeates the text and is typically associated with women's bodies. Lora's litany of abuses, which seem to Rennie to be part of "a poor-me contest" (90), are better read as the stories of many women. From her mother's unhappy marriage, to Lora's childhood abuse at the hands of her stepfather, and her later rape by an intruder, and then her story of a local man's revenge on his unfaithful girlfriend – "he made her take off all her clothes .… Then he tied her to a tree in the backyard, right near an ant hill, the stinging kind" (214) – Lora vocalises the abuses of countless nameless women.

Rennie has difficulty associating Lora's accounts with her own suburban lifestyle, despite her previous near-encounter with an unknown intruder, and cannot help fictionalising them, thinking only that "Lora has better stories" (271). But when she witnesses prisoners being beaten, "at first Rennie thinks they're women" (288). Her

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[42] Ellis, "Can You Forgive Her?", 259.
[43] Masse quoted in Ellis, "Can You Forgive Her?", 259.

instinctual assumption is that the weak and the victimised are female. The implied threat of the pornography informs the actual threat of the prison cell, which in turn, works as a metaphoric device for the threat of confinement and harm that hangs over the whole novel.

On the island, Rennie confronts the same fears that she has experienced in Canada but in heightened, nightmarish form. And so the policemen who originally tell her "You're damn lucky" (12) return on the island to say "We arrestin' you" (262). This magnification of the real is an elemental aspect of the gothic, as Alison Milbank suggests. According to Milbank's psychoanalytic interpretation, the heroine's "flight from the castle [is] an attempt to escape from sexuality".[44] That is, her fears of capture and confinement are not the figments of a gothic imagination, but the heightened realisation of her genuine fears about marriage and motherhood. Freud gives a similar reading of the uncanny, which in many ways informs the gothic, and explains that "[the] uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression".[45]

The gothic drama gives shape to Rennie's shadowy fears, forcing her to look beneath the surface of her subconscious. This, according to Frank Davey, is the nature of gothic in Atwood's novels, in which, "once behind the mirror, or behind the photograph, or under the surface of picturesque nature, we may see unsettling and unwanted things".[46] Rennie, the self-confessed "expert on surfaces" (26) is terrified by what such an examination could bring up:

> And when you pull on the rope, which after all reached down into darkness, what would come up? What was at the end, *the end?* A hand, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally a face. At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger. (41)

But Rennie progresses beyond the role of gothic heroine, whose ultimate fate is to confront her fears and resolve them, becoming

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[44] Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction*, New York, 1992, 11.

[45] Freud, "The Uncanny", 241.

[46] Davey, *Margaret Atwood*, 98.

mistress of the house. Rennie acknowledges her uncanny fear, which Freud summarises as "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light",[47] and asserts its reality: "She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like" (290). Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, Rennie's fears are based on truth, leading her to conclude that "She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational" (290). Rennie will not become the heroine rewarded with marriage because she realises that her rescuer, the Canadian official, is just as sinister and dangerous as her West Indian captors.

The gothic other

In a discussion of the manner in which gothic fiction counterfeits past traditions, Jerrold Hogle attempts to explain how a genre that is so evidently "fake" manages to arouse such strong feelings in its readership, and in doing so, he touches on a distinctly post-colonial argument. Using Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, he sees the gothic text working through a process of abjection, "whereby the most multifarious, inconsistent and conflicted aspects of our beings in the West are 'thrown off' onto seemingly repulsive monsters or ghosts that both conceal and reveal this 'otherness' from our preferred selves as existing very much *within* ourselves".[48]

The gothic world functions as a fantastic but definably "other" space onto which feelings of unease that threaten to undermine cultural stability can be projected, and ultimately conquered. According to Kristeva, "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject". Following Hogle, the response to abjection is to transfer its source onto an alien other. Taking the hypothesis that the island Rennie visits functions as a heightened reality of her Canadian experience, it becomes evident that she has projected her abjection onto the new surroundings. As Kristeva says, abjection is caused by that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules".[49] Her cancer was the first significant transgression of boundaries that Rennie suffered, closely followed by the intruder who slipped in through the window. As these two violences begin to connect in her subconscious, she

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[47] Freud, "The Uncanny", 241.
[48] Jerrold E. Hogle, "The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection", in *A Companion to the Gothic*, 258.
[49] Kristeva, "Powers of Horror", 4.

becomes aware of each insidious threat to her security, from Jake's pictures to her editor's chauvinism.

To combat her impotence against a myriad of formless threats, Rennie moves outside of her familiar environment, thus distancing her fears from her everyday life. Rennie's journey to the island may prompt "alien reaction paranoia", but it allows her to safely work out those fears in an unreal environment. This is what the gothic narrative allows, as Hogle explains: "gothic fiction … becomes a site into which widely felt tensions arising from this state of culture can be transferred, sequestered, disguised, and yet played out."[50] Rennie mistakenly believes that this is what she is doing, that:

> there's nothing to worry about, nothing can touch her. She's a tourist. She's exempt. (203)

Rennie sets up the island as an opposing other, against which she can be defined, but which holds no power over her. Hogle explains this impulse: "most of us in the West strive to 'throw away' from ourselves as repugnant, and 'throw under' a cultural norm as being outside it, in order to interpret ourselves and be interpreted as having a solid 'identity', a oneness to ourselves instead of an otherness from ourselves in ourselves."[51] A stable definition of the self is aided by a creation of the other, but the other cannot be contained and defined, it acts and influences. Rennie discovers there is no safe position on the outside from where to work through her abjection, instead she is plunged into the midst of it, and forced to realise her fears.

The question of responsibility

In *Surfacing*, Atwood proposed that the victim is ultimately responsible for their continuing victimisation. In *Bodily Harm*, she extends this discussion to an examination of the innocence of a person or state that does no harm but is witness to the harms of others. Her main proposition again centres on the postmodernist refutation of the "view from nowhere". In *Bodily Harm*, Atwood comes to the conclusion that there are no innocent external witnesses because there is no external position. When Rennie chooses her holiday assignment, she asks for "Nothing political" (16), but once on the island, she is

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[50] Hogle, "The Gothic Ghost", 296.

[51] *Ibid.*, 295-96.

told "Everyone is in politics here, my friend" (124). Far from home, Rennie is confronted with the practical reality of Canada's foreign aid policy: the repressive regime being funded by "all that money from the sweet Canadians" (134). Even Rennie herself is implicated in the violence, naïvely collecting a gun from customs at the request of Lora.

As a non-imperial nation, Atwood's Canada regards the unrest caused by Britain's retreat from the island as a "foreign affair". It believes itself on the outside of ex-colonial politics, or rather, on the side of the innocents. Like the "neutral coloured Canadian" (191) sent by the Canadian government, Rennie refuses to see the reality of the situation around her, although frustratingly, "she felt implicated, even though she had done nothing and nothing had been done to her" (40). Eventually she comes to recognise that she *is* implicated, that it is impossible not to be. Characters like Daniel, good but unconscious of the world around them, are not fully partaking of life and its responsibilities, and she imagines him "enclosed in a glass bubble like an astronaut on the moon, like a rare plant in a hothouse" (284). This seclusion prevents Daniel from recognising or accepting the responsibilities of humanity.

Unlike many of Atwood's characters, Rennie does not like to think of herself as a victim, although she may unconsciously position herself as one; she does not want to enter into Lora's "poor me" competition. Despite this, however, her status becomes confused. She is not the intruder or the policeman or the pornographer – the aggressor – therefore she must be the victim. On the island however, faced with the poverty of the local people, her white Canadian-ness makes her a symbol of power, and when she is taken to view the refugee camp, she becomes "a voyeur" (125): a possessor of the empowering phallic gaze. As Paul tells her: "I eat well, so I must have power" (241). The ambiguity of Rennie's status as a white woman is depicted for her in a postcard image:

> On the front is a tanned white woman laughing on a beach, sheathed in one-piece aqua Spandex with a modesty panel across the front. A black man in a huge straw hat is sitting on the sand beside her .… Behind him is a machete propped against a tree. He's looking at her, she's looking at the camera. (68)

The woman, symbol of wealth, leisure and consumer fantasy, is the focus of attention and envy, but in fact she is powerless, caught between two proprietoral gazes and a machete.

Like Paul, Rennie eats well, and must accept the consequent responsibility of power. However, this power does not preclude her victim status, and she comes to accept that they can be experienced simultaneously. This is something that the early feminist movement struggled to convey. Cultural theorists of the late 1970s such as Christopher Lasch accused feminists of the narcissism of what was termed "the 'me' generation".[52] Paul is sympathetic to this accusation, and he tells Rennie: "When you've spent years watching people dying, women, kids, men, everyone, because they're starving or because someone kills them for complaining about it, you don't have time for a lot of healthy women sitting around arguing whether or not they should shave their legs" (240).

Rennie, however, learns that what power she has is based on a rationalist notion of division and separation, which can only operate in binary terms of aggressors and victims. This same principle of the self and the other subjects her to the masculine gaze and threatens her selfhood. The text offers two possible solutions to this problem. The first is the possibility of an embodied feminine touch to counteract the disembodied masculine gaze. The second is the power of words, again offered as an alternative to the gaze. Both of these qualities are proven in the prison cell when Rennie is forced to reach out to Lora, to break the distance set up between the looker and the looked-upon:

> She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born.
>
> "Lora," she says. The name descends and enters the body, there's something, a movement; isn't there? (299)

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[52] Tom Wolfe coined the phrase "the 'me' decade", usually recalled as "the 'me' generation", in his essay, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening". Lasch continues Wolfe's argument in *The Culture of Narcissism*, and argues that the late twentieth century is characterised by a culture of ego-centric narcissism: "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity" (Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, London, 1980, 5).

Rennie, who learnt as a child "how to look at things without touching them" (54), heals Lora with her touch, with her compassion. Her words also give power to Lora by naming her as a person after the policemen have treated her like an animal. *Bodily Harm* was written after a time of rapid politicisation of the feminist movement, and in the novel, Atwood is pointing to the importance of words in that process. Although Rennie's camera is taken from her, and thus the means by which she can legitimate her story, she is undeterred: "She will pick her time; then she will report" (301).

Rennie's new understanding of her responsibility to her society refutes the liberal belief that a person has the right to act as they choose, insofar as they do not impinge on the rights of others to do the same. This liberal view, discussed in Chapter II, also argues that the individual must work out his or her moral code in isolation, and bring it to bear on his or her society. This, of course, is incompatible with postmodernism. However, in *Bodily Harm*, Atwood falters on this opposition between postmodernism and liberalism. The novel asserts that each person is bound by their society and must therefore take responsibility for the actions of their society, which is analogous to the communitarian view, but it concludes with Rennie recognising her duty to report the true story. Atwood struggles to reconcile the loss of the "view from nowhere" with an essentialist belief in right and wrong, and an equally essentialist belief in the existence of the true story. Atwood's affiliation with Amnesty International, of which she says, "It makes *the story* known. Such stories have a moral force, a moral authority which is undeniable",[53] is significant, because her views, which propose the concrete existence of abstract notions such as "truth" and "morality", conflict irreconcilably with postmodernism.

Atwood's interest in the significance of the story and the importance of telling the story becomes even more prominent in her next novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, but the tension between the two world views remains unresolved in *Bodily Harm*. By the time Atwood comes to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist Offred, in contrast to Rennie's acceptance of the postmodern concept of the inescapable "prison" of culture, responds to her imprisonment with the belief that "there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there" (115). At this point, it is possible to

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[53] Atwood, *Second Words*, 350.

locate in Atwood's thinking a fundamental shift away from postmodernism and towards liberalism: a shift that occurs in contradiction to the direction being taken by second-wave feminism at this same time.

CHAPTER VI

THE HANDMAID'S TALE:
SECOND WAVE FEMINISM AS ANTI-UTOPIA

By the end of *Bodily Harm*, Rennie has progressed from a false belief in innocent spectatorship to an acceptance of the inescapable nature of society. She comes to acknowledge her implication in, and responsibility for, the actions of her society. The postmodern aspect of this lesson, however, is tempered by a growing belief in the existence of a true story, which Rennie finally comes to believe it is her moral duty to report.

In 1985, three years after the publication of *Bodily Harm*, Atwood published her most well-known novel to date, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which relates the oral history of the handmaid Offred, who is caught up in a repressive totalitarian regime. Both novels place the female protagonist within an alien environment that threatens her physical and psychological space. However, the reactions of the two women to their imprisonment represent two fundamentally different philosophical perspectives. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie had assumed that the move from the periphery to the centre was a positive move towards accepting social responsibility; Offred, however, understands that her survival depends on her belief in a position outside of culture. In exploring these two viewpoints, Atwood moves against the growing postmodern trend within 1980s feminism.

Like *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasises the power of the story, which for Offred lies in its ability to posit a listener, "even when there is no one".[1] In its self-conscious examination of the function of narrative and the role of narrative in creating the historical record, Offred's tale is a metafictional examination of metahistory, and the history in question is, to a significant extent, that of the feminist movement.

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), London, 1996, 49. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Against a backdrop of postmodernist debate, the mid-1980s became a point of evaluation and reinvention for feminism, as a second generation of feminists inherited the second wave. *The Handmaid's Tale* looks back at this transition, examining the changing concerns and evolving vocabulary of an increasingly theorised feminism. Through her dystopian vision, Atwood exposes something of the limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism that had underpinned much of the feminism of the early second wave. By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with contemporary descriptions of Gileadean practices, each informs the other, so that *The Handmaid's Tale* comes to satirically depict a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist aims.

Atwood signals the novel's connection to satire with her inclusion of an extract from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" as epigraph:

> But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal …

Krishnan Kumar describes satire as an older version of anti-utopia, explaining that "in the early period utopia and anti-utopia familiarly jostle each other within the same satirical form, often confusing the reader as to the author's true intent".[2] In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood demonstrates the unexpected proximity of utopia and anti-utopia; the distinction, she suggests, is a matter of perspective. Consequently, the dystopia that occurs in the novel is largely an examination of questions of liberty: how to regulate the utopian impulse so that it does not, either intentionally or inadvertently, position others in an anti-utopia.

Utopia has an intimate relationship with questions of liberty and autonomy. In Atwood's examination of the topic, she seems to follow a similar assessment to that given by Lyotard in his influential 1986 essay, "Defining the Postmodern". Lyotard relates utopianism to the metanarratives of modernism, and connects both uncompromisingly with totalitarianism, asking, "what kind of thought is able to sublate Auschwitz in a general (either empirical or speculative) process

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[2] Krishnan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Oxford, 1987, 104.

towards a universal emancipation?"[3] Kumar accords with Lyotard's view, and argues that the connection is inherent. "The very announcement of utopia", he suggests, "has almost immediately provoked the mocking, contrary echo of anti-utopia".[4] Lucy Sargisson describes Kumar's approach to the utopia, which she terms "formulaic", as the understanding that utopias are "thought to be finite and perfectible and to offer a blueprint for the ideal polity". Sargisson believes that this institutional-bureaucratic definition is too narrow, and necessarily excludes, for example, "contemporary feminist utopias that broaden the conception of the political to include sexual relations and child rearing".[5] However, following, at least initially, Lyotard and Kumar's understanding, utopianism becomes increasingly inimical to a postmodern worldview. To a certain extent, postmodernism can be understood to have grown out of, or at least alongside, anti-utopianism: a rejection of the belief in a perfectible and ultimate society unites both projects. Consequently, the reliance of utopianism on a metanarrative of society's perfection excludes postmodernism from its project.

In many ways, *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its metafictional narrator, is as postmodern in theme as *Lady Oracle*. However, Atwood's denunciation of utopia is limited. Just as the feminist movement, despite its progressively postmodern aspect, is arguably inseparable from its utopian beginnings, so Offred survives her confinement by envisioning the existence of a utopian other place to which she might escape.

This "other place" is her pre-Gilead past, which accords with Kumar's view that: "in anti-utopia, ordinary life can itself become utopia, as remote and longed-for as utopia appears to its votaries".[6] In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred fantasises about family life: "Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly" (154). She craves these glimpses of normality as others crave the perfect utopian society. The tension that exists between utopian and anti-utopian writing is the contradictory impulse to simultaneously expose and

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[3] Jean François Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern", in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents 4*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, London, 1986, 6.

[4] Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 99-100.

[5] Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, London, 2000, 8.

[6] Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 103.

desire the myth of human perfectibility, and this tension is also at the heart of an increasingly postmodern feminism.

Utopia and anti-utopia

Lyotard's essay, in attempting to define the postmodern, uses as the basis of its argument the collapse of the belief in an ever-improving society. He suggests that "one can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the two last centuries in the idea of progress". Using Auschwitz as illustration, he attributes this decay to the fact that "neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind".[7] Kumar follows this same reasoning when he asks "how could utopia stand up in the face of Nazism, Stalinism, genocide, mass unemployment and a second world war?"[8] For Lyotard, this loss of belief results in "a sort of sorrow in the *Zeitgeist*", which finds expression in "reactive or reactionary attitudes or by utopias, but never by a positive orientation offering a new perspective". For him, utopia cannot be a positive creative force; all metanarratives of social construction are undermined by the passing of modernism. Like postmodern architecture, utopia is forced "to give up the project of a last rebuilding of the whole space occupied by humanity". In postmodern times, "we can no longer call this development by the old name of progress".[9] With its motivation so thoroughly undermined, utopia can only find negative expression in anti-utopia.

Following Tom Moylan's definition, *The Handmaid's Tale* would better be understood as a dystopia rather than an anti-utopia. According to Moylan, the dystopia "opens in the midst" of a terrible "elsewhere" (whereas Sargisson, in contrast, points to the utopian convention of "the visitor" who "visits another world and views it from a position of critical estrangement"[10]), and then focuses on a single alienated protagonist, enabling the text to "trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system". Crucially, "in some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia". Where the utopia

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[7] Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern", 6.

[8] Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 381.

[9] Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern", 6.

[10] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies*, 8.

(the good place that is no place) and the anti-utopia (the absolute denial and negation of utopia) are in direct political opposition, the dystopia "negotiates the continuum" between the two extremes.[11]

Moylan also states that "dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century",[12] and *The Handmaid's Tale* is certainly grounded in contemporary fears and preoccupations. In the "Historical Notes" that conclude the novel, the speaker comments that "there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis" (319). (In this the dystopia shares common ground with the parody and pastiche of postmodernism.) Like Orwell's reading of Soviet Russia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Huxley's critique of consumerist America in *Brave New World*, Atwood appropriates themes and topics from her contemporary political environment. Evidence of this is found in an extensive compilation of newspaper clippings kept by Atwood at the time of writing the novel, referring to nuclear waste, declining birth rates, religious cultism, surrogate motherhood, and more.[13]

According to Frye, this assimilation technique is fundamental to utopian writing. In the utopia, says Frye:

> the utopian writer looks at his own society first and tries to see what, for his purposes, its significant elements are. The utopia itself shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed.[14]

In these terms, both the anti-utopia and the dystopia follow the same pattern and spring from the same origin. According to Frye, whereas the utopia assumes the presence of natural virtues that could realise a perfect society if given free reign, the anti-utopia is pessimistic of human nature and "presents the same kind of goal in terms of slavery, tyranny, or anarchy".[15] For the anti-utopian, the individual has the right to protect themselves from the interference of the state, and the utopian goal is in itself an encroachment on individual liberties.

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[11] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder: CO, 2000, xiii.

[12] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, xi.

[13] Box 96:1, Margaret Atwood Collection (200), Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

[14] Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel, London, 1973, 26.

[15] *Ibid*., 28.

Utopia, by this understanding, is a universalising discourse that cannot avoid the shadow of totalitarianism.

With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood knowingly wrote herself into a tradition of twentieth century anti-utopia. She describes the novel as "a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*".[16] Each of these novels deals with questions of liberty, and the extent to which the state can demand conformity of the individual. This question became important for feminism when its concerns began to shift from a demand for equal rights, to a demand for equal recognition.

This shift came about with anti-essentialist politics, and Linda Alcoff describes an emerging argument that "woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are 'objectively identifiable'".[17] When woman is a specific, universal category, feminism can concentrate on particular demands for universal equality. Once gender division is deconstructed, however, an identity politics emerges in which each individual demands recognition and respect for their individual situation. In fact, Waugh locates a divisive quality, not simply within the discourse of recognition taking place between feminists, but in the discourse of feminism itself. She argues that "simply in articulating issues of sexual difference, the very existence of feminist discourses weakens the rootedness of Enlightenment thought in the principle of sameness".[18] Diana Fuss, however, points to an instance where postmodernist deconstruction can paradoxically negate difference, when she discusses Jacques Derrida's attempts to speak "as woman":

> For a male subject to speak as woman can be radically de-essentializing; the transgression suggests that "woman" is a social space which any sexed subject can fill. But because Derrida never specifies *which* woman he speaks as (a French bourgeois woman, an

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[16] Promotional Material by Houghton Mifflin, taken from CBC interview, 1986, box 149:4, Margaret Atwood Collection.

[17] Linda Alcoff quoted in Teresa De Lauretis, "Upping the Anti (Sic) in Feminist Theory: Conflicts in Feminism", in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. Mary Eagleton, Oxford, 1986, 383.

[18] Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism*, 119.

> Anglo-American lesbian, and so on), the strategy to speak as woman is simultaneously re-essentializing.[19]

For postmodernists and anti-essentialists, gender categories are historically, socially, and culturally situated, and as such, are restrictive labels that do not recognise the individual.

In Atwood's novel, each of the characters is categorised in a manner that is seen as limiting and dehumanising. Social status is colour-coded, and the women of Offred's household are easily inventoried: "One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green …" (97). Similarly, the executed criminals displayed as a deterrent to others are catalogued according to their crime:

> one Catholic, not a priest though, placarded with an upside down cross, and some other sect I can't recognize. The body is marked only with a J, in red. It doesn't mean Jewish, those would be yellow stars. (210)

Like the patronymic that belongs, not to the handmaid herself, but to the post she holds, each of these categories diminishes the individual by reducing him or her to an ostensible group status. Offred considers the loss of her name: "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter" (94). In this, Atwood leans towards a politics of recognition, which is in contradiction to the liberal notion of blind justice.

Other influences on which Atwood specifically draws are American Puritanism and the totalitarian regimes of the early twentieth century, but she also takes up the feminist utopia of the 1970s and, following Frye's reasoning, shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed. When asked if there are some good things about Gilead, Atwood responded:

> Yes. Women aren't whistled at on the street, men don't come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are "protected." Sardonically speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets are much safer for the most part.[20]

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[19] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, New York, 1989, 13 (emphasis in the original).

[20] Box 149:1, Margaret Atwood Collection.

In her previous novel, *Bodily Harm*, a number of men had climbed through women's windows; it became a motif for the fear and vulnerability of women in a hostile male environment. According to Marlene Barr, feminist writers responded to such motifs by creating utopian spaces in which the men were prevented from further violent invasions either by force or by their absence. She suggests that:

> The characters in speculative fiction's female communities would share the following reaction: …. "Is this world unsafe for women? If so, then declare a curfew and keep the men indoors."[21]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood examines the dystopian fruition of this particularly repressive utopian idea.

At the Red Centre, at which the handmaids are indoctrinated, they are shown old clips of sadistic pornography films:

> Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. (128)

In Gilead, there is no pornography and no objectifying images of women; the society has realised a feminist goal. When living out this dream within the repressive walls of Gilead, Offred recalls an early memory of attending a book burning with her mother and her mother's feminist friends in the early 1970s: "Their faces were happy, ecstatic almost" (48), and the young Offred is encouraged to throw a pornographic magazine onto the bonfire. This scene is later recalled when the Commander offers her an illicit copy of *Vogue*:

> But these were supposed to have been burned, I said. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires … (166)

The repetition subtly implicates Offred's mother and her friends in the deeds of the Gileadean society. The difference between the two acts of censorship, it is implied, is simply one of degree.

At this point, Atwood questions the validity of any political or philosophical system that is prepared to limit basic freedoms in the

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[21] Marlene Barr, *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, New York, 1987, 5. Barr's quotation is taken from a character in E.M. Broner's novel, *A Weave of Women*.

pursuit of its goal. Similarly, Offred relates an old argument she had with her lesbian friend Moira:

> I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them. (181)

In time, Moira comes to witness the realisation of her utopia, first at the Red Centre, in which the supervision and indoctrination is undertaken by "Aunts" in a strictly single-sex environment, and later in Jezebel's, the government brothel also run by Aunts, in which Moira is forced to work. In a weak attempt to comfort the distressed Offred, Moira tells her, "Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (261). In fact, much of Aunt Lydia's language ironically echoes the slogans of early utopian feminism:

> For the women that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together …. There can be bonds of real affection …. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together … (171-72)

With this vision, she apes the feminist project of communal living and shared labour that was propagated by Marxist feminists such as Firestone. The anti-utopia or dystopia, Atwood demonstrates, realises utopian ends by unexpected means.

It is Aunt Lydia who best articulates Gilead's partial satisfaction of feminist demands. Although politicised women like Offred's mother are now officially designated "Unwomen", Aunt Lydia grudgingly admits: "We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today" (128). The Unwomen in the film shown to the handmaids hold banners proclaiming "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT" (129). This movement was particularly strong in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. A 1982 publication by The Women's Press, *Still Ain't Satisfied!* – released to commemorate the ten year anniversary of their first publication, *Women Unite!* – describes some of the activities of the movement:

> In Toronto, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) demonstrated at Metro and City executive committee meetings to demand that the film *Snuff* be banned .… And all over North America similar groups have demonstrated to "take back the night" from the merchants of sexual ghoulishness, repeatedly making the connection between porn and all other violence done to women …[22]

Offred remembers the reality of living in this period, and recalls, "I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. Women were not protected then" (34). Gileadean society successfully takes back the night from the pornographers and abusers. Even the young government guards are not allowed contact with women until they achieve a more senior level of promotion. This repression constitutes a new liberty for the women who previously suffered rape or fear of sexual abuse. Offred feels the impotent looks of the guards and savours their frustration. "I enjoy the power" (32), she admits. But the enjoyment is minimal because, in restricting the liberties of the men, the women have not found liberation. Or, to consider an alternative perspective:

> There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it. (34)

With these words, Atwood's novel coincides almost perfectly with the thesis Isaiah Berlin presents in "Two Concepts of Liberty", first given as a lecture in 1958.

In the essay, Berlin introduces the notion of "freedom from and freedom to", and describes it, rather confusingly, in terms of "negative" and "positive" freedom. A negative notion of freedom accords that "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity".[23] In desiring a positive notion of freedom, however, "I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind". Although initially indistinct, the essential difference in these two states lies in the extent

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[22] Myrna Kotash, "Whose Body? Whose Self?: Beyond Pornography", in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Women Today*, eds Maureen Fitzgerald, Connie Guberman, and Margie Wolf, Toronto, 1982, 49-50.

[23] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugral Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31st October 1958", London, 1958, 7.

to which the desire to "live and let live" becomes the "desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled". These desires are fundamentally different:

> So different is it, indeed, as to have led in the end to the great clash of ideologies that dominates our world. For it is this – the "positive" concept of liberty: not freedom from but freedom to – which the adherents of the "negative" notion represent as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny.[24]

The confusion arises with the realisation that Berlin uses "positive freedom" to describe the ideology that he considers to be more prone to authoritarianism. It is the ideology of the individual who seeks to create their own concept of society, and in doing so, necessarily interferes with the social reality of other individuals: the ideology from which utopianism is more likely to spring. Further confusion arises when applying this distinction to *The Handmaid's Tale*, as it becomes apparent that Aunt Lydia contradicts Berlin's application of the terms of liberty. Her idea of "freedom to" is one of ungoverned liberal hedonism that results in immoral liberties, whereas Berlin directs this phrase towards "positive freedom", the stance taken by the political architects of Gilead for whom Aunt Lydia works. Conversely, the "freedom from" that she advocates to the handmaids as a lesser but more secure form of liberty is in fact Berlin's description of liberalism: freedom from governmental interference.

The idea of positive or negative freedom can be extrapolated to the beliefs of the various utopian thinkers in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Another such thinker is the Commander's wife, Serena Joy. She and Offred's mother, despite the massive differences in their political convictions, both advocate a philosophy of positive freedom. The societies that they envision – fundamental Christian and radical feminist – both necessitate a form of governance that prescribes for its subjects. Moira, however, could more closely be read as an advocate of negative freedom. Her activities, whilst strictly feminist and superficially close to those of Offred's mother, involve demands for freedom of action but are lacking the prescriptive element of the earlier feminisms. The burning of books symbolises this shift: the

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[24] *Ibid*., 15-16.

attempt to censor and destroy sexualised images of women later becomes, with postmodernism, the impulse to subvert and defuse the pornographic image. Although, with her embrace of lesbianism, Moira's feminism reverts to positive freedom as she charges Offred with perpetuating patriarchy by entering into a heterosexual relationship.

Unlike Offred's mother and Moira, Serena Joy's utopian project actively envisions the state of Gilead. Formerly lead soprano for the televised "Growing Souls Gospel Hour", she later became a political Christian activist, preaching the sanctity of the home. Offred contemplates her fate:

> She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (56)

It appears that even those who actively pursue a particular manifestation of utopia, that is, its conscious engineers, can experience its realisation as an anti-utopia.

Kumar speaks of this phenomenon in terms of the socialist disillusionment prompted by Stalinism, suggesting that "It became plausible to argue that socialism – like Christianity? – was an inspiring and creative force only so long as it remained in the imagination, as an apparently practicable but actually unrealizable goal".[25] Once this premise is admitted, utopian thinking collapses, for whilst it may achieve success in its perpetual deferment, the nature of utopianism demands a sustained attempt at its actualisation. The process of actualisation in itself cannot formulate the utopia, for if that process becomes coterminous with the creation of the anti-utopia, the utopian dream becomes insupportable as its failure proves inevitable.

This analysis is qualified by Moylan and by Erin McKenna, both of whom propose a possible alternative understanding of utopianism that can overcome its propensity to degenerate into anti-utopianism. Moylan argues for an understanding of what he terms the "critical utopia", which envisions a better, but unsettled or ambiguous society, where the possibility of further improvement is not denied. These texts, he suggests, "while preserving the utopian impulse and the utopian form, they nevertheless destroyed both the anti-utopian

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[25] Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 382.

rejection and the utopian compromises that had come to haunt the utopian tradition".[26]

A critical utopia is critical of (that is, it offers a critique of) both the sociopolitical situation and the utopianism that proposes to improve it. McKenna's reconfiguration of utopia, like Moylan's critical utopia, is based on the principle of a dynamic rather than a static utopian model, which she calls a "process model of utopia". McKenna argues that, instead of understanding utopianism only in terms of universalism and absolutism, it is possible to incorporate into it elements of pluralism and diversity; rather than seek perfection, the utopia is understood to sustain a continual movement towards a more desirable future. In this way, she suggests, "utopia can become an ongoing task rather than a resting place", and so can avoid the problems of static totalitarian visions.[27]

Following Moylan's understanding, it would seem that *The Handmaid's Tale* could be read as a critical utopia. Atwood criticises many aspects of Offred's liberal America, but also exposes the tyranny of Gilead's proposed utopian resolution to America's problems. However, the critical utopia situates the author within the utopian vision, as an insider – Moylan states that "[critical utopias] reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream"[28] – whereas, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both Atwood and the reader are situated, with Offred, as an alien within the Gilead regime. *The Handmaid's Tale*, instead, can be more accurately categorised as a critical dystopia.

Moylan points to the appropriation of the rhetoric of utopia by capitalist governments in the 1980s as the cause of the subsequent rejection of utopianism, even critical utopianism, by fiction writers.[29] Consequently, he argues, the critical dystopia came into prominence. Moylan refers to Raffaella Baccolini, who suggests that critical dystopias "reject the more conservative dystopian tendency to settle for the anti-utopian closure by setting up 'open endings' that resist that closure and maintain 'the utopian impulse *within* the work'".[30]

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[26] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 83.

[27] Erin McKenna, *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*, Lanham: MD, 2001, 3.

[28] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, London, 1986, 10.

[29] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 183-88.

[30] *Ibid*., 189.

Accordingly, *The Handmaid's Tale*, whilst evidently a dystopia critical of both the extraordinary utopian project and the sociopolitical norm of the society, ends ambiguously with Offred's words, "whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing" (307), and so provides a utopian element of hope for the future.

Feminist eutopias

Feminism, for fairly obvious reasons, has always been drawn to utopia, or rather, to eutopia (the good place). In Daphne Patai's words, given in 1983:

> Feminism, today, is the most utopian project around. That is, it demands the most radical and truly revolutionary transformation of society …[31]

In 1984, *Women's Studies International Forum* produced a special issue entitled "Oh Well, Orwell – Big Sister is watching herself: Feminist Science Fiction in 1984". In the period between the publication of Orwell's novel, which epitomised the dystopianism of the twentieth century, and Lyotard's pronouncement that postmodernism had destroyed utopia once and for all, feminist interest in female utopias was thriving.[32] For some critics, utopia was more naturally a female genre, as men lack the anarchism needed to envision an entirely different space. Lyman Tower Sargent, for example, argues that:

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[31] Daphne Patai, "Beyond Defensiveness: Feminist Research Strategies", in *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*, eds Marleen Barr and Nicholas D. Smith, Lanham: MD, 1983, 151.

[32] Erin McKenna provides the following list of texts that contributed to the surge of interest in women's utopias in the 1980s and 1990s: "Frances Bartkowski's *Feminist Utopias*; Angelika Brammer's *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism*; N.B. Albinski's *Women's Utopias*; N. Rosinsky's *Feminist Futures*; Marlene Barr's *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*; Marlene Barr and Nicholas Smith's *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*; Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin's *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*; and Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch's *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers* (McKenna, *The Task of Utopia*, 136).

> men are given to authority and hierarchy as well as patriarchy. Women, being given to freedom and equality, are most likely to be anarchists …[33]

Similarly, in comparing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with Katherine Burdekin's 1937 novel, *Swastika Night*, Patai argues:

> Although Orwell seems to believe he is attacking power in itself, he never focuses on male power over females. Thus he limits himself to traditional nightmarish visions of abuses of power, without ever noting that these abuses are simply a further point along the male continuum of a sexually polarized society.[34]

Thus, by this rather essentialist understanding, the feminist utopia is not destroyed alongside the loss of man's belief in his own perfectibility, because it subordinates the project of perfecting man to that of realising woman's true, unrepressed nature.

The classic text of the feminist utopian genre is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel, *Herland*, which despite being written in 1915, was not published in book form until 1979, and envisions a female pantheistic society populated by parthenogenesis. In analysing the text, Lucy Freibert points to some concerns about Gilman's vision, including "Gilman's advocacy of selective breeding, which would produce the 'superior race' at the expense of 'defective citizens'".[35] Although Freibert attributes this to the period and time in which Gilman was working (eugenics was a popular subject in early twentieth-century America) Lee Cullen Khanna's description of feminist utopia suggests an underlying pull towards an illiberal essentialism. She argues that "freed from the generic and imaginative restrictions of realistic fiction, women artists create societies reflective of a female value system".[36] This assumption of a "female value system" contradicts the liberal assertion of the individual's right to

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[33] Lyman Tower Sargent, "A New Anarchism: Social and Political Ideas in Some Recent Feminist Utopias", in *Women and Utopia*, 3.

[34] Daphne Patai, "Orwell's Despair, Burdekin's Hope: Gender and Power in Dystopia", *Women's Studies International Forum*, VII (1984), 93.

[35] Lucy M. Freibert, "World Views in Utopian Novels by Women", in *Women and Utopia*, 71.

[36] Lee Cullen Khanna, "Frontiers of Imagination: Feminist Worlds", *Women's Studies International Forum*, VII (1984), 99.

work out their own moral code. Similarly (and like ecofeminism, which is equally involved in the imagining of a utopian female space), women in utopias such as *Herland* are frequently associated with nature, intuition and pacifism, and with what Sargent terms "the traditional powers of women".[37]

The feminist utopia is frequently a communitarian project. In novels such as *Herland*, the matriarchal society works out a system of politics that actively attempts to offer quality of life to its inhabitants, rather than simply passively assuring their rights. Khanna points to other similar themes as typical qualities of feminist utopias:

> Social and political institutions necessary for the maintenance of just hierarchies and the control of the individual crumble in women's worlds. As part of the ethic of care and the refusal of dualisms, the further concept of affinity with the natural cycle and celebration of change inform feminist utopian thinking. Thus, the worlds depicted in these novels are not static achievements of a perfect order, but dynamic societies where change is not only accepted but respected.[38]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood envisions a society in which the institutions that guarantee just hierarchies have crumbled. Women's affinity with nature is celebrated through reproduction, and the static concept of immutable rights has been opened to change. The utopia hangs on the belief that, given such control, human beings – men *and* women – would not exploit it. The only advantage that feminist utopianists have over their male counterparts, so Atwood seems to suggest, is that their claims have never been tested.

Liberals and communitarians

In the same year that Lyotard denounced utopianism in "Defining the Postmodern" – 1986: the same year that *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in Britain – Seyla Benhabib wrote her book *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, in which she proposes an argument in favour of utopian thinking. In opposition to Lyotard's hypothesis that postmodernism precludes utopianism because it abandons the modernist belief in "progress within rationality and freedom",[39] Benhabib argues that this

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[37] Sargent, "A New Anarchism", 32.
[38] Khanna, "Frontiers of Imagination", 100.
[39] Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern", 6.

loss of belief in rational progress actually encourages utopianism. As universalistic metanarratives are undermined, and a rational belief in humanity's evolutionary progression towards a predetermined end becomes insupportable, the individual comes to take responsibility for their own destiny. "At this point", says Benhabib:

> a certain anticipatory utopia, a projection of the future as it could be, becomes necessary. Since the lines of development leading from present to future are fundamentally under-determined, the theorist can no longer speak the language of evolution and necessity, but must conceive of him or herself as a participant in the formation of the future.[40]

If this basic postmodern principle is allowed, then social theories of justice such as feminism must struggle to reconcile their utopian project with their belief in liberty and justice. Any system that legislates for the individual needs of the concrete other puts at risk the unregulated liberty of the generalised other.

This "liberal versus communitarian" debate is, for Benhabib, at the crux of utopian critique. A liberal theory of justice, following that articulated by John Rawls, is blind to difference. It posits a generalised other whose liberty must be protected in so far as it does not encroach on the liberty of any one else.[41] Benhabib's outline of this view is an extrapolation of Berlin's notion of negative liberty:

> as long as the *public* actions of individuals do not interfere with each other, what they need and desire is their *business*. To want to draw this aspect of a person's life into public-moral discourse would interfere with their autonomy, i.e., with their right to define the good life as they please as long as this does not impinge on other's rights to do the same.[42]

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[40] Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York, 1986, 331.

[41] According to Rawls, "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others" (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, 1972, 3-4).

[42] Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 332.

In the pre-Gileadean era recalled in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this liberal doctrine – the foundation of the American Bill of Rights – is common practice. In Aunt Lydia's understanding of the words, the American citizens had "freedom to".

Offred remembers her college days, when Moira organised "an underwhore party" – "You know, like Tupperware, only with underwear. Tart's stuff". Such an event, which would be unthinkable in Gilead, suggests that under liberalism, women were free to explore their sexuality. However, this freedom, we are told, has not been exploited out of desire, but rather out of necessity:

> It's big in the suburbs, once they start getting age spots they figure they've got to beat the competition. The Pornomarts and what have you. (66)

Free access to pornography creates a commodified sexual environment that compels these women to pursue a liberty they do not desire, and as such is no liberty at all. Conversely, Offred's right to experience something as mundane as a laundromat – "my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself" (34) – was curtailed by one of the unspoken rules known by every woman: "Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night" (34). Although liberalism defends her right to enter the laundromat, it refuses to enforce her safety because to do so would require proactive measures that would impinge upon the rights of her potential attacker, who has yet to commit a crime, to enter the laundromat late at night. And so, despite being theoretically free, in practical terms she is bound.

Critics of liberalism question the value of liberty without purpose or moral worth. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the scene in Jezebel's creates a telling contrast with the rigidly secure and codified domesticity of Gilead. Entering the brothel, Offred enters into an excessively hedonistic alternative world of consumption. "It's like walking into the past" (247), says the Commander who accompanies her. Initially, she is struck by the variety and freedom, and experiences a sense of release:

> I can stare, here, look around me, there are no white wings to keep me from it. My head, shorn of them, feels curiously light. (246)

The club defies the restrictions of Gilead: "No nicotine-and-alcohol taboos here!" (250). The women she sees are "tropical" and "festive" (246) in their costumes, but it quickly becomes apparent that Offred's sense of normality has changed. The sight of their make-up distresses her: "their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening" (247). The initial gaiety of the club begins to disintegrate:

> At first glance there's a cheerfulness to this scene. It's like a masquerade party… Is there joy in this? There could be, but have they chosen it? You can't tell by looking. (247)

The symbols of consumerism – the clothes, prostitution, drugs – have become confused with symbols of liberty. "Freedom of choice" has become a consumerist slogan. In Jezebel's, the women can do what they like. "It doesn't matter what sort of vice we get up to" (262), says Moira. But they are afforded this freedom because they are not free, because "nobody gets out of here except in a black van" (255).

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Eagleton exposes the sympathy between the postmodernist concept of freedom and the rhetoric of the consumer culture. He argues that "in thus aping the commodity form", postmodernism has "succeeded in reinforcing the rather more crippling austerities generated by the marketplace".[43] Postmodernist values of parody and play dismay the moralist but delight the advertiser. Eagleton then continues to locate the postmodern impulse within the liberal tradition. He suggests that the idea of the autonomous self can also contain "a negative notion of liberty as doing your own thing free of external restraint".[44] Whereas in traditional liberalism, the liberty of the self was always curbed by respect for the autonomy of others, once we accept the postmodern view that there are no autonomous others, suddenly the self is free to pursue its will without restraint. This results in the aggressive liberal capitalism that is so closely tied to postmodern consumerism.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jezebel's becomes an alternative reading of the situation of women under liberal capitalism. The club is full of the familiar. The underwear Moira sold at college, "Lace crotches,

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[43] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 28.
[44] *Ibid*., 87.

snap garters. Bras that push your tits up" (66), resurface in the brothel uniforms, "strapless, wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts" (250). The women, also, are the same women that once Offred might have known: "the one in green, she's a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position …" (249). Although Offred initially associates this familiarity with a sense of liberation, and particularly experiences freedom in the shedding of her handmaid's uniform, the loss of the veil also means that she is exposed to the scrutiny of strange men who "keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't" (248). The variety of the women's costumes soon homogenises into a monotony of cheap male fantasies, uncomfortable and tacky. Eagleton comments that "It is a striking feature of advanced capitalist societies that they are both libertarian and authoritarian, hedonistic and repressive".[45] In Jezebel's, which functions as a cynical microcosm of liberal America, the sex-and-drugs hedonism is closely regulated by an Aunt with a cattle prod. The choice that the women have exercised in choosing to work at the club – "most of them prefer it" (249), the Commander tells Offred – is more accurately an absence of positive alternatives.

Where liberalism guarantees justice, it refuses to legislate for quality of life. Communitarians point to this as its central flaw, and Taylor uses Hegel's theory of the master and slave to counteract the monological idea of the autonomous self that predominated in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards. This recalls Taylor's statement that "people do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own".[46] It is this idea of the dialogical self, the self created through the community, which draws communitarianism to postmodernism. Despite their differences, both argue for the creation of the self through culture, and this same belief is at the heart of Offred's experience of Gilead:

> Ordinary, says Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary. (43)

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[45] *Ibid*., 132.

[46] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 32.

At one point, Offred comes to accept that there is no external reality, that normality is subjective and that "context is all" (154). She becomes so convinced of this that she begins to internalise the teachings of her society:

> I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in. (298)

The liberal idea of the autonomous self is seriously undermined at this moment.

The distance from Taylor's advocacy of mutual recognition to Offred's acceptance of totalitarian indoctrination may seem insurmountable, but they are founded in common principles. The first is a willingness to abandon the refusal to legislate for difference, whether in a positive or negative context. As an example of positive discrimination, Taylor gives the French language laws passed in Quebec, which discriminated against Anglophones on the communitarian premise that "certain minorities will get the right to exclude others in order to preserve their cultural integrity".[47] Immediately, it becomes apparent that many subjective definitions are involved in this statement, but Taylor argues:

> A society can be organized around a definition of the good life, without this being seen as a deprecation of those who do not personally share this definition. When the nature of the good requires that it be sought in common, this is the reason for its being a matter of public policy.[48]

This argument instantly begins to encroach on the assertions of liberalism, given by Rawls, that "the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests".[49]

In the choices that must necessarily be made about the direction it will take, postmodernism teaches that the traditional utopia (what McKenna would call "the end-state model of utopia"[50]) involves a culturally or morally situated idea of the good life, despite being

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[47] *Ibid*., 40.

[48] *Ibid*., 59.

[49] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

[50] McKenna, *The Task of Utopia*, 3.

frequently posited as an objective, or scientific metanarrative, and the implementation of that idea necessitates a public policy that impinges on those citizens who do not share the common goal. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's liberty has been curtailed by the Christian fundamentalists' desire to pursue their concept of the good life. They have denied her her rights, but this is something that, to a certain extent, communitarianism allows for. Taylor differentiates between "fundamental and crucial" rights such as rights to life, liberty, free speech, etcetera, and "privileges and immunities that are important, but that can be revoked or restricted for reasons of public policy".[51] This, of course, raises the question of who is qualified to distinguish between the two. Although Gilead makes no pretence to respect any rights that contradict the common cause, by demonstrating the potential for exploitation once the safeguard of a liberal assurance of mutual rights is removed, Atwood plays out a scenario of the possible.

Benhabib seeks to resolve the clash of liberty and utopia. She argues that if we accept that all universal discourses are a consequence of culturally-situated subjective logics, and therefore, so-called "blind" theories of justice are unachievable, then we must accept that "culture and personality patterns enter into those practical discourses which explicitly seem only concerned with institutional justice". Subjective needs inform institutional justice, and by recognising this, it becomes apparent that "issues of justice and the good life flow into one another".[52]

A second similarity that communitarianism inadvertently holds with totalitarianism is the necessary loss of an external position from which to regard and critique the system within which one exists. Benhabib talks of this in *Situating the Self*. She explains that communitarians criticise the liberal view of the world on the grounds that it requires the individual to take on the role of the unencumbered self, "but, argue communitarians, the kinds of people we are and the epistemic perspective required of us by Enlightenment liberalism are antithetical to each other".[53] Instead, communitarians suggest that the individual need not attempt to become the unencumbered self because "it is not necessary for them to define themselves independently either of the ends they cherish or of the constitutive attachments which make

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[51] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 59.

[52] Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 335-36.

[53] Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 71.

them what they are".[54] If the postmodernism implicit in communitarianism is taken to its logical conclusion, then there can be no position on the outside, no "view from nowhere", for everything is necessarily culturally situated. Consequently, there can be no external and immutable truths by which to judge and oppose the present culture.

This idea was central to *Bodily Harm*, in which Rennie believed that "she's a tourist. She's exempt."[55] In that earlier novel, Atwood argued a theory of mutual responsibility, and the denial of the "view from nowhere" took on a moral force. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, she destabilises her earlier conclusion by exposing the dangerously illiberal aspect of this postmodern concept. Whereas the "veil of ignorance", whereby the social legislators "do not know how the various alternatives will affect their own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations",[56] as posited by Rawls, requires a position external of cultural and social influences, postmodernism (and communitarianism) denies this possibility. Benhabib states that "in communicative ethics, individuals do not stand behind any 'veil of ignorance'".[57] However, if there is no way to know your society, except through your society, the individual is left defenceless against any concerted effort to manipulate their reality. This latter view also precludes utopianism, for utopia necessitates the ability to imagine a space other than the present.

Offred's memories provide an alternative experience of utopia that follows Kumar's view that ordinary life can become utopia within dystopian circumstances. Offred's memories allow her to envision the other, and so provide a form of rebellion against the totalitarian system. Her memories motivate her to assert "there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there" (115). Aunt Lydia recognises this covert form of resistance, and looks forward to a period when pre-Gilead will only be recalled by the state:

> You are a transitional generation .… For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

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[54] *Ibid.*, 73.

[55] Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 203.

[56] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 136-37.

[57] Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 73.

> She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other
> way.
> She said: Because they won't want things they can't have. (127)

If the postmodernist view of the entirely acculturated self is conceded,
then Aunt Lydia's hopes are justified: without knowledge of
alternatives, and unaided by an instinctual sense of justice that is not
derived from their society, future generations would unwittingly
conform to the totalitarian regime.

These debates appeared concurrently with a corresponding shift in
feminist preoccupations in the mid-1980s. In *The Handmaid's Tale*,
Offred's mother and Moira supply sketches of the first and second
generation of second-wave feminists, and it is at the transition of their
periods of influence that this shift takes place. The early feminism that
is portrayed in the novel is radical and issues-based. The activities
depicted range from book burning to pro-abortion rallies, and Offred's
pregnant mother is attacked by her fellow feminists for being "pro-
natalist" (130). By Moira's time, feminism is becoming more
theorised, although it is yet to reach the level of academic
preoccupation that is to characterise the third wave. She writes essays
on date rape; "You're so trendy" (48) Offred tells her. Her
"underwhore party" is full of postmodern irony and play. Offred's
mother, disillusioned and defeated, is left angry and bemused:

> You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know
> what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at
> him, slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives,
> how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that
> far? (131)

Following the postmodern view of Lyotard, the utopianism of early
feminism cannot avoid the taint of totalitarianism. Yet feminism, like
Marxism, is a utopian theory of equality and mutual-recognition. This
is the language of communitarianism, and Taylor argues the feminist
position that women have "internalized a picture of their own
inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their
advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of

the new opportunities".[58] The solution, he suggests, requires positive discrimination of a type not allowed for by liberalism.

According to Hutcheon:

> Both the feminist and the postmodern contexts in which Atwood works have suggested that the real tasks to be undertaken within a liberal humanist culture are those of exploding, not exploring, the myths of "human" nature and "human" values .… Exposing the tendency to ignore gender, class and race is where the real risks lie today …[59]

This puts Atwood at the increasingly postmodern end of the scale – at exactly where feminism was heading in 1985. Hutcheon certainly seems to thinks so, and, based on its narrative play, describes *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1988 as "perhaps Atwood's most postmodern novel to date".[60]

Postmodernism allows for a pluralism of difference that benefits the feminist project. However, postmodernism is not without its difficulties, as Owens warns: "Pluralism, however, reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction to difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, inter-changeability."[61] Postmodernism requires a relinquishing of metanarratives that feminism cannot countenance. Offred certainly cannot countenance it. Her temporary realisation of postmodernist self-creation almost resulted in her acceptance of a contextual reality. On the contrary, her survival depends on her belief in a reality external to her culture; not an alternative culture, as represented by the Japanese tourists, but a permanent embodiment of immutable values that cannot be eradicated by a cultural consensus – a blind justice: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (115). Unlike Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, who comes to the realisation that "this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything",[62] Offred fiercely believes that if there is an inside, there must be an outside.

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[58] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 25.
[59] Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, 153.
[60] *Ibid*., 156.
[61] Owens, "The Discourse of Others", 58.
[62] Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 290.

Atwood is fully cognisant of the disadvantages facing minority groups within a liberal tradition, but in imagining an anti-utopia, she explores the dangers of abandoning that tradition. A final comment in the epilogue gives the strongest indication of her instinctual suspicion of postmodern pluralism, as Professor Pieixoto lectures:

> in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific .… Our job is not to censure but to understand. (314-15)

This advocacy of cultural relativism is commended by his audience, but by juxtaposing his remote intellectualism with the immediacy of Offred's "I", Atwood undermines his position by demonstrating how it disregards her suffering.

It is an issue that Eagleton takes up with postmodernism, which, he argues:

> has produced in the same breath an invigorating and a paralysing scepticism, and unseated the sovereignty of Western Man, in theory at least, by means of a full-blooded cultural relativism which is powerless to defend either Western or Eastern Woman against degrading social practices.[63]

Pieixoto attempts to situate and diminish Offred's private experience by subordinating it to the public experience, arguing, "Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (317). Her narrative works to oppose this subordinating compulsion, and it is in this opposition between oral narrative and academic discourse that Atwood works out her position between the postmodern, located micronarrative, and the liberal metanarrative – an opposition that has significant consequences for feminism.

Metafiction and metahistory
The metafictional status of Offred's tale is founded in the self-consciousness of her storytelling and the self-reflexivity of her narrative. "In providing a critique of their own methods of

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[63] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 27.

construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text."[64] Yet *The Handmaid's Tale* is an imperfect metafiction. In one sense, the "truth" of the tale is maintained – its narrator never acknowledges her own fictionality; the story that she relates seems to encapsulate a whole world, without exposing the borders of the page. At the same time, Offred's narrative is a concealed retrospective, and this device is only exposed by the epilogue, which acts as an equally concealed frame to the tale, dislocating the reader from the immediacy of Offred's "I" and refocusing on her as a contained text.

The epilogue works to historicise Offred and her experience. Whilst the state of Gilead is absolutely alien in much of its aspect, its proximity to a familiar time and culture implicates the reader. Offred's narrative opens in the strikingly commonplace setting of the Red Centre:

> We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there. (13)

This past is close enough to be tangible: "I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat." A swift catalogue of evolving high school fashions – "Felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair" (13) – brings the reader up to what should be the familiar present of 1985, but the novel imagines history taking an alternative direction. Thus, when the 2195 Gileadean Studies conference deconstructs the history and culture of 1985, the reader's own time, if not their culture, uncomfortably becomes the focus of academic scrutiny and historical debate.

This shift from lived experience to documented history necessarily creates a space in which the text attempts but fails to reconstruct the event. It is Offred's awareness of this distance set up between the word and the act that lends her narrative to metafiction. Lying in bed, reliving the events of the day, she muses:

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[64] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 2.

> This is a reconstruction .… When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to
> set this down … it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another
> remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because
> what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something
> out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances … (144)

What Offred's narrative struggles to convey is that, whilst her words
are necessarily a situated interpretation, they are equally true, they
relate actual events that carry implications.

Offred's acknowledgement of the limitations of her narrative
coincides with the understanding of metahistory outlined by Hayden
White, who argues that "all historical narratives contain an irreducible
and inexpungeable element of interpretation".[65] According to his 1978
book, *Metahistory*:

> the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *pre*figures
> the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring
> to bear the specific theories he will use to explain "what was *really*
> happening" in it.[66]

According to this, Offred does not act as a historian, because she
makes no attempt to critique or theorise her situation. Her narrative
fits more easily into White's catalogue of historical works somewhere
between chronicle and story: "both represent processes of selection
and arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical record* in the
interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience*
of a particular kind."[67]

Pieixoto is particularly frustrated by this, and laments Offred's
preoccupation with the personal, which leaves many gaps in her
witness:

> Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had
> she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about
> the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a
> reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty

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[65] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, London, 1978,
51.
[66] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century
Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, x.
[67] *Ibid*., 5 (emphasis in the original).

> pages from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us. (322)

There is heavy irony employed in the epilogue, and much of it is directed at male-dominated academia. Particularly laden is Atwood's hypothesis that when all the white male academics truly are dead, they will be replaced by non-white male academics. Where the former were famed for their enlightenment essentialism, the latter parade their anti-enlightenment anti-essentialism, yet in real terms, nothing changes. Women are still the object to be gazed upon by men, either in the form of academic study, or as muse to their creativity. As for the women, Offred tells us, "We lived in the gaps between the stories" (67).

What Offred does, which Pieixoto fails to recognise, is to create an audience for her narrative at a time when no such audience exists. When even to imagine the possibility of an audience is to defy everything that her society is telling her. She considers, "if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself" (49). By imagining the other, the person on the outside, Offred is also moving towards a liberal concept of the self: the self that can step outside of its society and offer a critique of that society, founded in a system of ethics and justice that exist independently of contemporary concerns.

Once again, Atwood's connection to Amnesty International proves significant. In an address to the organisation, she argued:

> The writer … retains three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: a human imagination, in the many forms it may take; the power to communicate; and hope.[68]

The narrator who can create the other, be it in the form of a utopia, in a memory of better times, or in a belief in a resistance, imagines an alternative that could potentially be realised. On the contrary, warns Eagleton, "Postmodern end-of-history thinking does not envision a future for us much different from the present".[69] This, along with its

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[68] Atwood quoted in Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, 157.
[69] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 134.

cultural relativism, scepticism, pragmatism, and localism, he argues, leaves its propagators defenceless against fascism.

Despite Hutcheon's assertion that *The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's most postmodern novel to date, in its eventual inability to offer an alternative to liberalism that could also withstand totalitarianism, it fails the postmodern thinker. In *Bodily Harm*, Atwood attempted to reconcile the loss of the "view from no where" with an essentialist belief in right and wrong, and the existence of the true story, and consequently, Rennie became "a subversive".[70] In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, Atwood struggles to reconcile the communitarian demand for equal recognition with the liberal demand for universal liberty. Recognising the failings of both, and unable to answer Taylor's plea for "something midway between the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards on the other",[71] Offred, unlike Rennie, can only become a fugitive: unable to live within her society, yet uncertain as to whether an alternative exists. This irresolution reflects the position of mid 1980s feminism. In articulating the potential danger of certain directions in which the movement had been heading, *The Handmaid's Tale* points to Atwood's decision to advocate caution, and to defend liberty before ideology.

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[70] Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 300-301.
[71] Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 72.

CHAPTER VII

CAT'S EYE: ARTICULATING THE BODY

With *Cat's Eye*, Atwood returns to a number of issues first explored in the earlier novels. Published in 1988, nearly twenty years had passed since the publication of *The Edible Woman* in 1969, and the passing of time is central to the focus of this novel, which opens with the words "Time is not a line but a dimension … you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once".[1] Echoes of the novels written in those twenty years permeate *Cat's Eye*, providing a subtext to the protagonist's own recollections of a changing world. Returning to Toronto for work – "I'm having a retrospective, my first" (15) – the narrator Elaine is particularly sensitive to the passing of time:

> this is the middle of my life. I think of it as … the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over. (13)

Time in the novel is largely expressed through the physical: through evolving fashions and disintegrating bodies. Elaine thinks to herself, "I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty" (5). As Elaine reassesses her past from this midway point, so Atwood holds up previous preoccupations and assumptions to the approaching light of the 1990s and examines their continuing and changing significance.

The turn of the decade from the 1980s to the 1990s saw the long-standing feminist preoccupation with the body begin to shift towards an increasing interest in issues of gender and gender construction. Influential writers such as Carol Gilligan, Marilyn French and Diana Fuss were exploring these fields throughout the 1980s in, respectively, *In a Different Voice* (1982); *Beyond Power* (1985); and *Essentially Speaking* (1989). In 1990, Judith Butler's seminal text, *Gender Trouble*, prompted the decisive move for feminist critical theory

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, London, 1990, 3. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

towards a postmodern concept of the socially constructed gendered self. With *Cat's Eye*, Atwood produces a text that begins to bridge the gap between the bodily essentialism of the feminisms of the 1970s and the acculturated body that predominated in the 1990s as a consequence of Butler's work.

Elaine is the typical Atwood protagonist, uncomfortable with universalising feminist discourses. "Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me", she says, "because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not" (345). These words, which point to a learned rather than an instinctual response to gender, situate her on the constructionist side of the gender debate, and it is this position that Atwood begins to open up and explore in the novel.

Elaine's early childhood is largely spent in the wilderness, accompanying her entomologist father on his fieldwork. As in *Surfacing*, the wilderness is a site of innocence, and for Elaine, this period functions as a pastoral retreat from society. Elaine recalls:

> Until we moved to Toronto I was happy. Before that we didn't really live anywhere. (21)

This "nowhere place" is characterised by innocence and freedom, particularly freedom from social divisions. Her family operates within relatively unstructured gender roles, in which mother and father divide their labour along roughly traditional lines but with significant blurring of physical difference, as Elaine describes:

> we're used to seeing our father in windbreakers, battered grey felt hats, flannel shirts .… Except for the felt hats, what our mother wore wasn't all that different. (34)

Similarly, Elaine, "wearing a blue striped jersey of my brother's, a worn pair of corduroy pants" (64), busy "turning over logs and rocks to see what's underneath", is her brother Stephen's co-conspirator in a sibling relationship that is careless of gender distinction. In this period they are "like nomads" (25), "far from anything" (23), and their temporary absence from society is liberating. However, when they re-enter civilisation by moving to suburban Toronto, Elaine and her family must quickly learn or re-learn their socially acceptable roles. From this scenario, Atwood examines the construction and function of

femininity in society, and so re-evaluates the essentialism debate begun at the start of the second wave.

The question of essentialism has divided feminist theorists ever since de Beauvoir stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".[2] Fuss defines essentialism as "a belief in true essence – that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing". Anti-essentialism, or constructionism, however, "articulated in opposition to essentialism and concerned with its philosophical refutation, insists that essence is itself a historical construction".[3] Throughout the 1980s, the growing influence of postmodernism drew feminism increasingly towards anti-essentialism. However, the revolutionary impact that French feminism made on Anglophone feminism in 1981 with the publication of Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's anthology of translations, *New French Feminisms*, meant that the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism was more pronounced than ever.

French feminism and the essential body
Although there were many different schools of feminist thought coming out of France, by combination of their appearance in the influential anthology *New French Feminisms*, the synchronicity of many of their ideas, and their near-immediate influence on Anglophone feminism, the works of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous came to dominate the British and American perception of French feminism. All three highlight the role of the body in the construction of language, and this emphasis on the physical has led to many accusations of the essentialism of their thinking.

Fundamentally, French feminism ties language to the body. Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous all begin their linguistic analyses from the assumption of language's power to name and so define reality. Language is understood to be the frame of patriarchal logic. In her essay "Sorties" (1975), Cixous writes that "philosophical discourse orders and reproduces all thought", and within this discourse, "either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist".[4] Similarly, in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), she argues that because language is masculine, woman's voice cannot be heard. Women, therefore, must discover a

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[2] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 295.

[3] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 2.

[4] Cixous, "Sorties", 91-92.

way of writing feminine experience into masculine language. For Cixous, woman's language is fundamentally different from man's. When a woman speaks, she uses her body to "support the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true … she signifies it with her body."[5] Woman's language, she argues, is disruptive and anarchist: "If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man … it is time for her to dislocate this 'within', to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers."[6] French feminism argues that feminine experience is in essence a marginal experience and consequently, female resistance to patriarchal repression must be subversive and marginal.

Working from the premise that feminine experience is marginal and oppositional, Irigaray developed an understanding of the disruptive capacity of an alternative, semiotic language working in opposition to the language of the symbolic, disrupting its logic and its authority. In "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1977), Irigaray defines female sexuality as typically multiple and fragmented, suggesting that it is "more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle" than the symbolically unified phallus. The multiplicity of feminine sexuality is not in opposition to masculine unity, but instead defies opposition (which Cixous defined as a masculine compulsion in "Sorties"). Like Cixous, Irigaray ties this physical difference to feminine language (*ecriture feminine*), which operates in the same diffusive, oppositional manner. Irigaray describes this as "the multiple nature of female desire and language".[7] Where male writing is traditionally linear, logical and progressive, affirming the authority and unity of the writer, *ecriture feminine* is typically highly symbolic, inconclusive and with multiple and even contradictory meanings.

Because of the emphasis placed on the physical body in *ecriture feminine*, it came under severe attack for propounding essentialist ideas of a feminine aesthetic. Though variously pointing towards or away from essentialism, in its reliance on the body as a signifier of feminine difference, French feminism resisted the emphatic anti-essentialism of Anglo-American feminists who were working to entirely separate psychology from biology. In particular, "This Sex

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[5] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms*, 251.

[6] *Ibid*., 257.

[7] Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1977), trans. Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, 103-104.

Which Is Not One" and Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" clearly achieve a sense of the body – the real, physical, grotesque body – despite their moves to theorise its connection with language. Even de Beauvoir, frequently termed anti-essentialist, demonstrates in *The Second Sex* an acknowledgement of the body as incontrovertible fact: "In boys as in girls the body is first of all the radiation of a subjectivity, the instrument that makes possible the comprehension of the world: it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts."[8] The body, by these readings, refuses to be reduced to a cultural symbol.

"This Sex Which Is Not One" came under particular criticism for its essentialising emphasis on the body: what Fuss describes as "the relentless emphasis on the two lips". Fuss, however, argues that "it is not Irigaray who erects the phallus as a single transcendental signifier but Lacan: Irigaray's production of an apparently essentializing notion of female sexuality functions strategically as a reversal and a displacement of Lacan's phallomorphism".[9] By this understanding, Irigaray uses the female body as a construction, or as a signifying metaphor, and not as a transparent referent of difference. Showalter, however, refused to accept this compromise, arguing that "simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past".[10]

The Anglophone impulse to deny difference in order to promote equality seemed to signal an insurmountable rift between it and Francophone writings, but French feminism moved to breach this gap. Specifically, there emerged an understanding of *ecriture feminine* as a mode of writing that could be appropriated by either sex. Cixous, for example, works to "avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine" by arguing that the difference between masculine and feminine is not "distributed according to socially determined 'sexes'".[11] In this, Cixous is consciously anti-essentialist. Similarly, Kristeva prefers the term "anti-phallic writing" to *ecriture feminine*. This anti-phallic, or anti-symbolic, writing is fragmentary rather than unified and is located in the avant-garde works of Joyce and

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[8] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 295.
[9] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 58-59.
[10] Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", in *The New Feminist Criticism*, 250.
[11] Cixous, "Sorties", 93.

Mallarmé, which "introduc[e] ruptures, blank spaces and holes into language". "Feminine" writing, she argues, can be performed by men, and indeed, she proves this so thoroughly that Kristeva is frequently accused of focusing on male avant-gardists to the exclusion of female writers.

French feminism reinstates the body into the text, and recalls the biological difference that the body suggests, but simultaneously undermines biological oppositions by situating phallic and anti-phallic writing as attributes open to any writer, regardless of anatomical gender. According to Kristeva, in "traversing or denying" the phallic position, anti-phallic writing allows that "the subject experiences sexual difference, not as a fixed opposition ('man'/'woman'), but as a process of differentiation".[12] From this position, later gender-theorists took the power of binary transgressing language but all too frequently abandoned the sense of the body as a lived experience, moving instead towards a preoccupation with the cultural signifiers of gender.

Fashion and the construction of gender

As postmodern and anti-essentialist readings of gender grew in significance for feminism through the works of gender theorists such as Butler and Marjorie Garber, the French feminists' fascination with the anatomically sexed body was countered with an alternative preoccupation with social and cultural signifiers of gender, that is, with the costume and appearance of the artificial body. The most predominant motif that recurs throughout *Cat's Eye* is that of clothing and fashion, and it is through this medium that Atwood articulates both sexual difference and group identities. The first indication Elaine receives that her life in Toronto is to be fundamentally different from its previous nomadic wanderings is when her parents change their clothes:

> our father wears jackets and ties and white shirts, and a tweed overcoat and a scarf …. Our mother's legs have appeared, sheathed in nylons with seams up the backs. She draws on a lipstick mouth when she goes out. She has a coat with a grey fur collar … (34)

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[12] Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial" (1974), trans. Marilyn A. August, *New French Feminisms*, 165.

This unexpected metamorphosis signifies the new gender binary that Elaine will have to learn to negotiate. No longer interchangeable, this shift in her parents' appearances signals an insurmountable polarisation of their roles, with Stephen and Elaine's roles shifting in parallel.

In Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* (1985), she argues that:

> modern fashion *plays* endlessly with the distinction between masculinity and femininity. With it we express our shifting ideas about what masculinity and femininity are. Fashion permits us to flirt with transvestism, precisely to divest it of all its danger and power.[13]

Following Wilson's reasoning, the shift of Elaine's parents from androgynous dress to highly gendered fashion is simply a move along a continuum of playfulness. Elaine, however, recalls the happiness with which her mother abandons her fashionable "hat with a feather in it that makes her nose look too long" (34) and returns to the garden, dressed in "baggy gardening pants, smudged with mud" (238). The costume that Elaine's mother appropriates has real expression in her emotions and her sense of self.

In middle age, Elaine retains a strong ambiguity to clothing and to its artifice. Shopping for a dress, she thinks, "I would like to be transformed", but the postmodern liberation of the self that she seeks is fleeting and illusory, it "becomes less possible. Disguise is easier when you're young" (44). The myth of self-invention seems, with age, to give way to the reality of the essential self. "I tuck myself into my clothes" (42), says Elaine, and an awkward division is created between the artificial costume and the real body. Fashion, at this early point in the novel, is an externalised and transient illusion appropriated in addition to an internal reality, but at the same time, it is understood to have a strong consequential function in society that extends far beyond Wilson's notion of playfulness.

Feminism, of course, had been preoccupied with fashion and its political implications long before the rise of postmodernism. In 1970, Greer argued that "The 'normal' sex roles that we learn to play from our infancy are no more natural than the antics of a transvestite".[14] Fashion for Greer is not liberating and playful, but binding and

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[13] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, London, 1985, 122.
[14] Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 33.

repressive. It creates the stereotype of the "Eternal Feminine", an artificial "female fetish" constructed of "cosmetics, underwear, foundation garments, stockings, wigs … [and] the effect is to be built up layer by layer".[15] According to Wilson, however, the early feminist accusations of fashion's repressive system were either naïve or wilfully misrepresentative. She asks:

> Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women, or is it a form of adult play? Is it part of the empty consumerism, or is it a site of struggle symbolized in dress codes? Does it muffle the self, or create it?[16]

Adorned in Dreams was published three years before *Cat's Eye* and a year after Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition*. In accordance with postmodernist thinking, Wilson questions the nature of the self that fashion is presumed to be camouflaging. By ghettoising fashion into the artificial, and therefore into the morally inferior, feminists, she argues, make two assumptions: firstly, that nature is superior to culture (Wilson locates this impulse in the Romantic reaction to the industrial revolution), and secondly, that beneath the acculturated self, there is a natural self capable of release. Wilson counters these assumptions when she argues:

> human beings, however, are not natural. They do not live primarily by instinct. They live in socially constructed cultures.[17]

With this, Wilson positions herself within a postmodern understanding of the self; she believes that there can be no essential self, only adopted expressions of selfhood, of which fashion is one of the more powerful.

Cat's Eye's preoccupation with costume and appearance draws it most closely to *Lady Oracle*. In the chapter addressing that earlier novel, the beginnings of the feminist interest in the concept of masquerade were examined. A development was plotted, beginning with Joan Riviere's essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), through de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather

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[15] *Ibid*., 66-68.

[16] Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 231.

[17] *Ibid*., 234.

becomes, a woman" (1949), and continuing into Lacan's deconstruction of gender, best recalled in his essay, "The Signification of the Phallus" (1977). But where *Lady Oracle* was wilfully camp in its gothic excess, *Cat's Eye* is more contemplative of the means by which costume can create reality. This understanding of the term "camp" as it is used here is taken from Susan Sontag's essay, "Notes on Camp", in which she argues:

> Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre.

This sense of play, of performance or masquerade, is critical to gender theory, but where Sontag argued that camp "is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical",[18] theories of gender and gender construction are deeply political.

Written in 1964, "Notes on Camp" both preceded and unwittingly anticipated postmodernism. It argued that "Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."[19] In the collection in which "Notes on Camp" appeared, *Against Interpretation*, Sontag called for a new aestheticism that would free art from interpretation. In the title essay, she suggested that "to avoid interpretation, art may become parody".[20] Responding to what she saw to be a "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling"[21] tradition of textual deconstruction, Sontag saw parody and play as a means of neutralising critical authority.

Only later was this same idea to become formalised into postmodernism, in which the refusal to recognise a unique and identifiable latent meaning to the text, whether moral or psychological, became a political statement of a simultaneous multiplicity of viable interpretations. What Sontag referred to as "the democratic *espirit* of Camp"[22] could equally refer to the questionable democracy of postmodernism's refusal to elevate one interpretation

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[18] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London, 1987, 280.

[19] *Ibid*., 290.

[20] *Ibid*., 10.

[21] *Ibid*., 7.

[22] *Ibid*., 289.

over another. It is this amorality that Sontag used to argue for the natural affinity of the homosexual aesthetic to camp, and equally, this same feature within postmodernism has drawn gender theorists to it with its promises of boundary transgression and multiple interpretations. However, by removing the overt element of play that characterised *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* examines the postmodern impulse behind social constructionism with a more austere eye.

Seven-year-old Elaine's entry into the social symbolic really begins with her decision to pass through one or other of the entrances to her new school, "inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering: GIRLS and BOYS" (45). This differentiation confuses her:

> I am very curious about the BOYS door. How is going through a door different if you're a boy? (46)

This sequence recalls Lacan's discussion of the function of the signifier in creating the signified, for which he uses the example of the twin doors of the segregated public toilet. In "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" he writes: "The image of twin doors symboliz[es], through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities, by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation." Lacan uses this example to demonstrate how "the signifier enters the signified, namely, in a form which, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality".[23] The signifier – here, the skirted figure of the "Ladies" or the trousered figure of the "Gents" – creates the difference in the signified (the two identical doors) that does not otherwise exist; it is only through the social acknowledgement of gender differentiation that the sexual divide is known and maintained.

Garber discusses Lacan's essay in *Vested Interests*, and points out that "The signs on the doors do not contain pictures of sex organs; they satisfy a desire for cultural binarism rather than for biological certainty".[24] By emphasising the outward, social manifestations of gender, this particular sign demonstrates the relative insignificance of

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[23] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, 2001, 167.
[24] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, London, 1993, 13.

biological gender, and so gender actually becomes further ensconced in the social realm. As long as what appears female behaves female, the social surface remains calm. It is the glimpses of transgression that prompt cultural anxiety.

In *Cat's Eye*, young Elaine comes to recognise that this binary division cannot satisfy a multiplicity of gender possibilities when she is faced with the formidably sexless Miss Lumley: "although Miss Lumley is not what anyone thinks of as a girl, she is also not a boy. When the brass handbell clangs and we line up outside our GIRLS door, whatever category we are in includes her" (81). By walking through the GIRLS door, Miss Lumley reinforces the gender binary, but in her evident difference, she simultaneously undermines it by demonstrating its apparently arbitrary nature. In a similar vein, Garber speaks of transvestism as "not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself".[25] This goes back to Cixous's cataclysmic question in "Sorties": "What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?"[26] Gender, and subsequently, cultural and social stability, depends on a display of categorical difference.

In *Cat's Eye*, the most manifest aspect of this difference is, again, costume rather than biology. After a brief summer interlude into the wilderness, Elaine returns to the codification of school and gender:

> Now that I've changed back from pants to skirts, I have to remember the moves. You can't sit with your legs spread apart, or jump too high or hang upside down, without ridicule. I've had to re-learn the importance of underwear … (77)

In the novel, costume not only signals difference, but creates difference. The obligatory skirts and the attendant underwear taboo restrict the movement of the little girls, so that whilst the boys "run around in the mud" (59), the girls "stand around … their heads bent inwards, whispering" (46). Elaine is unused to such sedate occupations:

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[25] *Ibid*., 17.
[26] Cixous, "Sorties", 92-93.

> Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it (52).

The alacrity with which she does get used to her newly feminised role, however, seemingly points to its naturalness. Suddenly, Elaine finds herself changing:

> I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse of my own. Something is unfolding, being revealed to me. I see that there's a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all. (54)

These desires are not entirely new; Elaine has always been attracted by images of femininity. In their wilderness days, whilst Stephen drew "wars, ordinary wars and wars in space", Elaine drew girls "with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves". These fictional girls are "elegant, delicate" and "have an exotic appeal" (29).

Elaine's fascination with exotic femininity encourages her participation in what she instinctively feels to be a masquerade. Sensing the insincerity of her self-deprecating playmates, Elaine concludes, "it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too" (53). In reality, the games the girls play are dull and unimaginative, lacking in the competition and inventiveness of the games she used to play with Stephen:

> I don't have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well … think about whether I've done these things well, as well as a boy .… Partly this is a relief. (54)

Elaine's appropriation of an evidently artificial femininity is prompted by a combination of curiosity, compulsion, and an internalised consumerism, and is maintained by social approval.

Although the novel is written in the 1980s, and articulates many of the theoretical developments of that decade, it is largely set in the 1940s and 1950s, and Elaine's retrospective narrative enables Atwood to readdress the consumerism of the post-war period that she had first examined in *The Edible Woman*. Elaine and her friends play out the effects of an artificial stimulation of desire by collecting scrapbooks of

possessions – "cookware, furniture" (53) – cut from catalogues. This childhood game is later re-imagined in high school, where some girls "are already collecting china and housewares, and have Hope Chests" (234-35).

Consumerism in the novel is significantly associated with domesticity and femininity, recalling Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which echoes throughout *The Edible Woman*. Although this early mass consumerism predates postmodernism, with retrospect, it can be understood as part of the first anticipatory moments of a growing postmodern aesthetic. Jameson locates the beginnings of late capitalist or post-industrial society at the conclusion of World War II. This new society, he argues, could be characterised by "new types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising".[27]

Writing in the late 1980s, Atwood's political understanding of consumerism and fashion has inevitably developed and become more sophisticated than it had been twenty years earlier when writing *The Edible Woman*. Where Atwood had already been considering the idea of the acculturated body in that earlier novel, in *Cat's Eye* she is able to draw a line from 1950s consumerism through to 1980s postmodernism, in accordance with Jameson's statement that "the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism".[28] The paper dolls that Elaine plays with – "Veronica Lake in her bathing-suit and dozens of outfits you can stick onto her with tabs that fold around her neck" (52) – take on new meaning when viewed in the light of postmodern theories of gender, image, and the acculturated body.

Through the games that the girls play, Atwood examines the extent to which the consumer fantasy of femininity is internalised by the female, and the acknowledged artifice of the consumer culture and its dissemination through advertising begins in the novel to reflect on the seemingly natural construction of femininity. This is an issue that Garber addresses, although again in the context of transvestism rather than consumerism. She asks, "if female impersonators are conscious constructors of artificial and artifactual femininity, how does a 'female

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[27] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", 124.

[28] *Ibid*., 125.

impersonator' differ from a 'woman'?".[29] Similarly, the extent to which the image of "the perfect woman" differs from its actualisation becomes questionable; if the former is self-evidently artificial, yet indistinguishable from the latter, the boundary between artifice and reality is indeterminable.

Riviere addresses the same issue when she says:

> The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade". My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.[30]

For Riviere, the concept of womanliness is itself a construct. The attributes by which the womanly woman is most commonly known, such as passivity, coquettery, dependency, signify the masquerade adopted by women to pacify men. This cycle, in which womanliness is a masquerade and the masquerade is a mask of womanliness, allows for no escape into reality: there is no "real woman".

Again, turning to transvestism, which in many ways provides a theatrical acting out of that which occurs symbolically in the everyday construction of femininity, Butler poses a similar question:

> Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex.[31]

This question of where the woman ends and where the masquerade begins has changed little over the decades of the gender debate. Where Butler departs from Riviere, however, is in her questioning of where the *self* begins in this whole masquerade.

Arguing against the need to assert an identity before entering into political demands, which is a path that feminism has traditionally followed, Butler puts forward her belief that "there need not be a 'doer

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[29] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, London, 1993, 354.

[30] Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", 38.

[31] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

behind the deed', but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed".[32] With this, Butler articulates the pull towards postmodernism that is felt in Wilson's earlier text, demonstrating the theoretical developments made in the intervening five years.

Articulating the body

Cat's Eye plays out a tension between the social expression of the classical body, and the lived experience of the grotesque body. Discussed previously in relation to *Lady Oracle*, the grotesque body is the lived reality behind the acculturated classical body, and it is in its repression by the social order that it comes to resemble what Freud termed the unconscious and Kristeva called the semiotic. These psychoanalytic terms are appropriate to a text in which the narrator undergoes a "talking cure" to uncover a repressed history.

Elaine's attempts to stem the perpetual disintegration of her body reflect the equally arduous repression of her self-loathing, which is prompted by Cordelia, her childhood tormentor. Her obsession with fashion reflects this need to conceal the dark impulses of her subconscious. Wilson argues that:

> fashion's perpetual mutability, its "death wish", [is] a manic defence against the human reality of the changing body, against ageing and death. Fashion, Barthes' "healing goddess", substitutes for the real body an abstract, ideal body; this is the body as an idea rather than as an organism.[33]

In *Cat's Eye*, make-up has a similarly repressive function, and Elaine admits that she would "use anything if it worked … anything at all to mummify myself, stop the drip drip of time" (113). As Elaine ages, the grotesque body, and the abjection it prompts – "I'm headed for a future in which I sprawl propped in a wheel chair, shedding hair and drooling" (413) – becomes increasingly irrepressible, and in tandem, so does her unconscious.

Throughout the novel, various manifestations of Elaine's unconscious can be detected, most notably in her paintings, the conceptions of which she describes as peculiarly passive:

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[32] *Ibid*., 142.

[33] Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 58.

> I paint Mrs. Smeath. She floats up without warning, like a dead fish, materializing on a sofa I am drawing. (338)

Equally, the memory flashes, dreams, and auditory and olfactory hallucinations that Elaine experiences, are all understood to be surfacing elements of her repressed unconscious.

As children, Elaine and her brother are fascinated by the grotesque body. Playing with microscopes in their father's laboratory, they examine the body in minute detail:

> We put our fingers under the lenses and examine our fingernails .… Or we pull hairs out of our heads to look at them …. We like scabs. We pick them off … and turn the magnification up as high as it will go .… We look at ear-wax, or snot, or dirt from our toes … (36-37)

Only later, prompted by Cordelia, does Elaine begin to contemplate the terrible possibilities of the grotesque body:

> I haven't thought much about grown-up women's bodies before. But now these bodies are revealed in their true, upsetting light: alien and bizarre, hairy, squashy, monstrous. (93)

In response to these horrors, Elaine develops a fascination with the scientific body, which is full of blood and bone, but is cleanly penetrable, and clearly labelled. Although the anatomist's skill appears grotesque, it actually involves another imposition of the classical body onto the grotesque, as is made evident in Elaine's satisfaction with her dissection skills: "I draw a diagram of the worm, cut open, beautifully labelled" (246). This dispassionate observation controls and represses her instinctual horror. According to Kristeva:

> the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.[34]

Dislocated from God by the Smeaths' religious hypocrisy, Elaine wields science like a talisman, keeping the body at bay. Science, her father informs her, "is dispassionate and without bias, it is the only

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[34] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

universal language" (248). But science, she soon realises, cannot explain the terrors of the body:

> I know it's called "mating". I know about ovipositors, for laying eggs, on leaves, on caterpillars, on the surface of the water; they're right out on the page, clearly labelled .… None of this is much help. I think of Mr. and Mrs. Smeath, stark naked, with Mr. Smeath stuck to the back of Mrs. Smeath. (94-95)

For Elaine, the rationalism of science fails to account for her instinctual repulsion at this image of the grotesque, sexualised body.

In her study of the body in pain, the philosopher Elaine Scarry points to the impossibility of fully articulating the body. She says: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[35] For Scarry, there is a crucial element of the bodily experience that defies the symbolic. As such, the body possesses a certain power. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine instigates physical pain in order to remove herself from Cordelia's grasp:

> I would bend my foot up and bite a small opening in the thickest part of the skin, on the bottom, along the outside edge. Then, with my fingernails … I would pull the skin off in narrow strips … I would go down as far as the blood. (113-14)

Elaine tortures the body, not to diminish it, but to elevate it above all else, which accords with Scarry's view that "in serious pain the claims of the body utterly nullify the claims of the world".[36]

Later, faced by an irrepressible unconscious, Elaine learns that biology cannot articulate her sense of the body, her instinctual fear and loathing of the mature female form, and turns instead to art. In her paintings of Mrs Smeath, the grotesque body finally finds expression:

> I put a lot of work into that imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork-fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear. (404)

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[35] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, 1985, 4.

[36] *Ibid*., 33.

An ongoing struggle between art and science to best articulate the world is described throughout the novel, and is embodied and enacted by Elaine and her astrophysicist brother, who functions as her dark twin at least as much as Cordelia does.

Beginnings

Running through *Cat's Eye* is a discussion of origins, of evolution, and of the nature of time. Elaine's exploration of her own subconsciously repressed past is mirrored by Stephen's investigation into the origins of the universe, and the brief introductory chapter plots the important lesson he teaches her, that "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space". Theoretically, she learns, it is possible to exist in two places at once. From this, Elaine develops her own ideas of time as a place:

> You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (3)

This notion of time functions equally successfully as an image of her unconscious.

When Stephen says time travel is possible, Elaine contemplates the repercussions:

> On the other hand there's something menacing about this notion. I'm not so sure I want to travel back into the past. (220)

Later, as Stephen becomes expert in his field, Elaine is able to empathise with his doubts: "The universe is hard to pin down; it changes when you look at it, as if it resists being known" (388). This echoes Freud's paper on "The Unconscious" in which, in the words of his editor, he asserts that:

> the mind, which appears so chaotic, contradictory, beyond causation, is ruled by inexorable laws. Mental events are like pearls on an invisible chain, a chain largely invisible precisely because many of the links are unconscious.[37]

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[37] *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, London, 1995, 572.

It is apparent that Atwood draws a parallel between the psychologist's exploration of the mind and the physicist's exploration of the universe.

The chain of mental events that Elaine has been tracing culminates in the title of the penultimate chapter, "Unified Field Theory". Stephen Hawking, whom Atwood credits in the novel's acknowledgements and quotes in one of its two epigraphs, explains that the difficulties of constructing "a complete unified theory of everything in the universe" are met by "finding partial theories that describe a limited range of happenings and by neglecting other effects or approximating them by certain numbers".[38] Elaine's art strives to achieve a similarly unified theory of her life. In the painting that gives the chapter its name, she brings various contradictory images together. Set on the bridge over the ravine in which she experienced the terrors and seduction of death, the dark "Virgin of Lost Things" (408) is depicted, holding the cat's eye marble of Elaine's childhood. Long haunted by her inability to control her consciousness – "I've forgotten things, I've forgotten that I've forgotten them" (200) – the cat's eye becomes a symbol of knowledge, of the repressed unconscious, and of the past. Referring to the cat's eye, Elaine says, "I look into it and see my life entire" (398).

This impossible perfect knowledge ("impossible" because, as Freud teaches, "at any given moment consciousness includes only a small content"[39]) is held by the impossible vision. In her art, Elaine the once-biologist, seemingly abandons rationalism. But in Stephen's theoretical physics, she finds a possible resolution to her conflict between art and science. As Hawking states: "the uncertainty principle is a fundamental feature of the universe we live in. A successful unified theory must therefore necessarily incorporate this principle."[40] Elaine recognises that beginnings and endings are all part of the same system. Stephen was right, "time is not a line". In her painting "Unified Field Theory", she displays this simultaneity:

> Underneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy

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[38] Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Toronto, 1988, 155.

[39] Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious", in *The Freud Reader*, 574.

[40] Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 155-56.

upon galaxy: the universe in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground. (408)

In this sky-earth, Elaine imagines a resolution of the physical body and the acculturated image, of the surface consciousness and the depths of the unconscious, and also of her brother's science with her own art.

Images of the unconscious and the semiotic

The recovery of repressed memories, which constitutes the purpose of Elaine's narrative, points toward a psychoanalytical reading of the text. Primarily, the repressed trauma of her childhood centres on Cordelia. Freud argued that "repression is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning … it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity".[41] The point at which Elaine moves to Toronto, already discussed as her entry into the symbolic, also signals her move into a complex psychology, in which the thing that is most feared – Cordelia – is simultaneously desired: "Cordelia is my friend .… I want to please" (120).

This contradictory experience of loathing and desire mimics the wish to return to the pre-linguistic, semiotic state of identification with the mother, an idea central to object relations theory. After maternal separation, the child experiences a "profound sense of loss and desire to return to the imaginary whole security of the pre-oedipal state, but also a profound *fear* of the loss of identity which such regression would entail".[42] Anything which transgresses moral or physical boundaries, which recalls the vulnerability and corporeality of the body, allows the semiotic to break the surface of the symbolic, and prompts both disgust, or abjection, to use Kristeva's term, and repressed desire.

The topography of Elaine's memory is dominated by subconscious images of the body and the boundaries that must be maintained or transgressed. The new house is incomplete when they move in, with "wide, rough boards with cracks in between" and "wires dangling out of the middle of the ceiling" (32). These flaws expose the fragility of

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[41] Sigmund Freud, "Repression", in *The Freud Reader*, 569.

[42] Waugh, *Feminine Fictions*, 69.

her new home, denying her fantasy of cleanliness and safety. "We are a far cry from picket fences and white curtains, here in our lagoon of postwar mud" (33), says Elaine, bringing to mind the abjection of the Second World War, which forms part of her earliest memories. In Kristeva's words: "The abjection of the Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things."[43]

Unlike Stephen, whose early confidence in law and science makes him believe "our side is the good side, and therefore it will win" (24), Elaine does not believe in the invulnerability of the symbolic; both science and childhood fail her.

Images of abjection permeate the text in its mixture of clean and unclean. In particular, the social function of the girls' mothers seems irreconcilable with their proximity to the body. "It's hard to imagine them without clothes" (93), and yet they encompass all that is unmentionable:

> they wrap up the garbage in several layers of newspaper and tie it with string, and even so it drips onto the freshly waxed floor. Their clotheslines are strung with underpants, nighties, socks, a display of soiled intimacy .… They know about toilet brushes, about toilet seats, about germs. The world is dirty no matter how much they clean .…
> (94)

This abjection located beneath respectability is best evidenced in Mrs Smeath, whose repulsiveness manifests itself in her body. From her grotesque appearance – "a single breast that goes all the way across her front and continues down until it joins her waist" – to her bad heart, envisioned as "red, but with a reddish-black patch on it, like rot in an apple" (57-58), Mrs Smeath is the monstrous mother figure, containing all that is abject.

Cordelia, it becomes apparent, is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the female body. "Breasts fascinate Cordelia, and fill her with scorn" (92). The pull towards the grotesque, the abject and the semiotic is ever present in Cordelia, and it is this that makes her such a dangerous person, and what eventually draws her towards madness and suicide. In one example of the twinning of Elaine and Cordelia

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[43] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

that recurs throughout the text, Elaine also finds herself tempted by suicide. At this moment, she experiences an auditory hallucination, "the voice of a nine-year-old child" (374), and recognises Cordelia's influence within her.

Howells speaks at length on this doubling aspect of the novel, arguing that "Lacking, her dark double trapped in an earlier period of time, Elaine remains unfixed, incomplete".[44] Elaine's autobiographical narrative, which is simultaneously both a self-construction and self-deconstruction, is haunted by the impossibility of completing and containing the self. Again, this was a lesson Stephen taught when he told her that "there are no such things as discrete objects which remain unchanged, set apart from the flow of time" (219). Without fixed boundaries, Cordelia, functioning as Elaine's semiotic, her unconscious double and her past, is able to permeate Elaine entirely, until she admits:

> I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when. (227)

Ineluctably bound together, Elaine creates Cordelia, much as Cordelia, in their youth, fashioned Elaine.

A further textual symbol of the semiotic is the ravine that runs through the city, rupturing the respectable suburban landscape. This is an image that Atwood has used previously in *The Edible Woman*, in which Marian entered the underworld of the ravine with her guide, Duncan. In *Cat's Eye* the ravine is filled with "empty liquor bottles … and pieces of Kleenex … broken bottles and rusty pieces of metal". The girls find a used condom, "even finding such a thing is dirty" (74-75). It is here that a girl is raped and murdered, and "It's as if this girl has done something shameful, herself, by being murdered" (241).

The gap formed by the overgrown ravine disrupts the consciously structured suburban world, and Cordelia, functioning as Elaine's death drive, is compelling her towards this space:

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[44] Coral Ann Howells, "*Cat's Eye:* Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art", in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*, 207.

> It's as if she's driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She's backing me towards an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I'll be over and falling. (154)

Cordelia succeeds, and Elaine falls through the frozen creek. Here, Elaine enters death in much the same way that the narrator of *Surfacing* entered the lake. In it she is cold and still and finally free, "a dead person, peaceful and clear" (188).

Saved by an apparition of the Virgin Mary, "her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal" (189), Elaine finds in this image the mother figure that she has been seeking: "She is still with me, invisible, wrapping me in warmth and painlessness, she has heard me after all" (190). This figure replaces her own mother who has failed to protect her because, "as far as this thing is concerned, she is powerless" (157). With this vision of the Virgin, however, it becomes apparent that regardless of her residual anger, for Elaine, the mother is at core a protecting and nurturing figure.

To reconnect the body

Despite Elaine's feeling of repulsion towards the bodily semiotic, in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood also treats the symbolic with caution and distrust. As Kristeva documents the powerful compulsion and abjection prompted by the semiotic, so Atwood envisions the clean and proper world of the symbolic as a site of seductive ambivalence. At the height of Cordelia's persecution, Elaine attempts temporary escapes by helping her mother with the laundry: "The water turns grey and I feel virtuous because of all the dirt that's coming out" (122). This fascination becomes a dangerous fantasy:

> I think about what would happen to my hand if it did get caught: the blood and flesh squeezing up my arm like a travelling bulge, the hand coming out the other side flat as a glove, white as paper. This would hurt a lot at first, I know that. But there's something compelling about it. A whole person could go through the wringer and come out flat, neat, completed … (122-23)

Where the semiotic involves the desire to give oneself over to chaos, Atwood recognises an equally devastating compulsion to embrace the classical body, to become clean and pure and innocent.

This impulse to bind and contain the body is detectable in certain feminist theories of subjectivity. The fear of essentialism has pushed many feminists away from the biological body, which remains the ultimate signifier of difference. Moi, for example, argues that "to define 'woman' is necessarily to essentialize her".[45] Fuss, however, qualifies this statement, warning that "personalizing exploitation can often amount to depoliticizing it".[46] Fuss is concerned that by deconstructing the body and negating its worth as the unifying signifier of "woman", female group identity will be undermined and identity struggles will be reduced to isolated conflicts between individuals rather than between groups and systems. Discussing feminist subjectivities, Kemp and Squires ask "are we dealing here with metaphor, representation, or some kind of 'real'?".[47] Anti-essentialists prefer to read the body as a metaphor rather than as the "real", which, like Sontag's Camp and its successor, postmodernism, they see in quotation marks.

Feminist anti-essentialism articulates a common dissent within the feminist movement. The refusal to be homogenised within a single political expression comes most frequently from non-white and non-heterosexual women, but it is a protest that Atwood recognises. Faced by groups of newly politicised women, Elaine protests: "I am not Woman, and I'll be damned if I'll be shoved into it" (379). From this anti-essentialist position, gender theories followed.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler went further than distinguishing gender from sex, and questioned the stability of sex itself:

> Can we refer to a "given" sex or a "given" gender without first enquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? .… If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender …[48]

From this idea, Butler progresses to an absolute negation of the body, arguing that "bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender".[49] Butler's text deconstructs cultural

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[45] Moi quoted in Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 56.

[46] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 117.

[47] Kemp, *Feminisms*, 216.

[48] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6-7.

[49] *Ibid*., 8.

ontological assumptions, exposing the artifice behind each supposedly immutable layer of identity in a "chicken and egg" debate that ultimately negates the significance of both. Eventually, Butler's subject can only function as Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, who "is like someone making herself up as she goes along. She's improvising" (301).

Yet for Atwood, and despite Elaine's refusal to be "Woman", the body demonstrably exists, and is known through its physicality. Elaine absolutely inhabits her body in pregnancy: "My body was like a feather bed, warm, boneless, deeply comforting, in which I lay cocooned." She experiences a pure physicality: "My adoration was physical, and wordless. I would think *Ah*, nothing more" (341).

Atwood's text examines anti-essentialism, and largely supports its position, but it also asserts the body, refusing to reduce it to its cultural expression. In *Cat's Eye*, she attempts to articulate the body and to reconnect it to its theoretical shadow. Elaine is left to strike a balance between the biology of her rationalist father, which decisively separates the organism from the self and imposes the scientist's objective eye over nature, and the dangerous sensuality of Cordelia, who abandons all rationalism when she greets Stephen's physics with a derisory "So?" (4). Consequently, the final chapter of the novel is called "Bridge", and it is on this bridge over the ravine that Elaine can finally try to connect all the contradictory forces within her: Cordelia, her brother, mind and body.

Two years before Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Atwood equivocates yet again on the topic of anti-essentialism. Although *Cat's Eye* initially appears to be emphatic in its depiction of the construction of gender through costume, masquerade and social compulsion, Atwood wilfully retains the sense of the body in her text. In her next novel, *The Robber Bride*, Atwood begins to look at the position of the "other woman". This subject will lead her further away from postmodern readings of the body, and cause her to re-examine essentialist identities in racial and post-colonial terms.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROBBER BRIDE:
THE OTHER WOMAN IN POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE

Atwood published her eighth novel, *The Robber Bride*, in 1993. The postmodernism with which her work had always been in dialogue was now a permanent feature of academic discourse in general, and feminism in particular. In *The Robber Bride*, however, Atwood also articulates a recognition of the growing interest in post-colonial discourse, translating post-colonial ideas of difference and otherness to fit her own understanding.

With its insistence on de-centring positions of power, undermining stable structures, and refocusing debates at the margins, postmodernism would seem to be naturally sympathetic to post-colonial discourses. Postmodernism, like feminism, challenges the stable epistemology of patriarchal western cultures. Simon During, however, argues that whilst postmodernism's openness to difference draws post-colonial discourse into sympathy with it, a second aspect of postmodernism simultaneously destroys the post-colonial project, because "the post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity",[1] and this notion of identity is deconstructed by postmodernist thinking.

The problem post-colonials face is similar to that faced by feminists encountering postmodernism, and as feminism became further entrenched in postmodernist theories, the compulsion to investigate and interact with post-colonial discourse became more insistent. Atwood's interest in post-colonial politics, however, is long standing, and has interacted with and informed her feminist sympathies from the start of her literary career. Ever since the publication of *Surfacing*, which is generally considered to be her most nationally-aware novel, along with her critical survey of Canadian

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[1] Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today", in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, London, 1995, 125.

literature, *Survival* (both in 1972), she has been recognised as a novelist for whom all forms of oppression, sexual and cultural, are of concern.

The split voice of a racially divided feminism becomes, in Atwood's novel, the separation of the narratorial focus into three separate subjects. For each of the three (white) protagonists, Tony, Roz and Charis, there is a detailed history; for each woman, origins are of fundamental importance. Post-colonialism in this novel is largely read through the experiences of white women, which may seem to undermine the authenticity of the examination, but also allows Atwood to challenge Canada on some of its assumptions of racial innocence by examining the way in which the First World self responds to the presence of the other.

Further to this, Atwood interacts with many of the issues thrown up by post-colonial thinking in her depiction of the shape-shifting Zenia. This character's instability, demonstrated by her compulsive re-reading of her own origins, creates a powerful depiction of the "other woman". Most frequently read in terms of sexuality and greed (most notably by Howells and Atwood herself, as will be discussed below), Zenia's otherness, when considered through the lens of post-colonialism, becomes simply a metaphorical figure of the other. By examining the interaction of each of the three protagonists with this alien other, *The Robber Bride* plays out a number of tensions, including exoticism and orientalism, currently being articulated by post-colonial theorists.

Black feminism

Feminism and race intersected in two quite different ways in early second-wave feminism. For many white theorists, race could be utilised as a metaphor for sexual oppression. Sheila Rowbotham, for example, wrote in 1972:

> Certain similarities exist between the colonization of the under-developed country and female oppression within capitalism. There is the economic dependence, the cultural take-over, the identification of dignity with resemblance to the oppressor.[2]

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[2] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, Harmondsworth, 1972, 201.

Other early second-wave feminists were careful to acknowledge the particular political situation of black women and to recognise their double bind. Writing in 1970, Robin Morgan stated that "black women, who are obviously doubly oppressed, have, for the most part, chosen to fight beside their black brothers, fighting racism as a priority oppression". Morgan, however, still concluded that race was of secondary importance to gender: "We share a common root as *women*, much more natural to both groups than the very *machismo* style of male dominated organizations, black, brown, and white."[3] For such theorists, gender was the over-arching signifier of difference and identity.

At the same time that race was being uncritically absorbed into the feminist revolution, non-Caucasian women were continuing to express frustration at the lack of cultural and racial specificity within the feminist movement. In 1982, Mary Berry argued that "the women's movement and its scholars have been concerned, in the main, with white women, their needs and concerns".[4] The negation of black identity came to appear as another form of colonisation: a domination and sublimation of the black experience by the white voice of academic feminism.

Black women had been an important and vocal element of second-wave feminism since its earliest days. Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith explain that the early women's movement gained inspiration from black liberation organisations, and that black and working class women were heavily involved at the inception of second-wave feminism. However, they argue, because of "the increasing involvement of single, middle-class white women … the divisive campaigns of the white-male media, and the movement's serious inability to deal with racism", black women were written out of an increasingly white feminism.[5]

With the ascendancy of post-colonial studies came a new direction from which black feminists could tackle the issue of their exclusion

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[3] *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan, New York, 1970, xxix-xxx.

[4] Mary Berry, Foreward, in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, eds Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barabara Smith, New York, 1982, xv.

[5] Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "The Politics of Black Women's Studies", in *All the Women*, xx.

from the dominant feminist discourse: a direction from which their experiences of blackness and femaleness, previously read as mutually exclusive attributes, could be reconciled in a fully recognised speaking subject.

Atwood as post-colonial writer

In the canon of post-colonial writers, Atwood is a troublesome figure. Despite her notable search for an understanding of Canada that is not first mediated by an English or American aesthetic, Atwood remains uncompromisingly white, middle-class, university-educated, indeed "waspish", as she described William in *Life Before Man*. However, in examining her post-colonial instincts further, it becomes apparent that Atwood carries her own definition of what colonialism and post-colonialism entail.

In *Cat's Eye*, she recalled the anglophilia that dominated Canadian schooling in the 1950s. Elaine ponders "Rule Britannia":

> Because we're Britons, we will never be slaves. But we aren't real Britons, because we are also Canadians. This isn't quite as good. (80)

Here, the post-colonial reality is experienced as a mild but insistent inferiority complex: a sense of internalised alienation. In *Life Before Man*, in which Marianne tells Lesje, "ethnic is big these days. Change your last name and you'll get a multiculturalism grant" (91), Atwood gave her most overt representation of multicultural Canada. Perhaps more tellingly, however, in *Surfacing* Atwood addressed the pressures of America's cultural colonisation of Canada, and in an interview she expanded: "it's impossible to talk about Canadian literature without also talking about the fact that Canada's an economic and cultural colony."[6] This broader view of colonialism encompasses various manifestations of national domination and suppression, and for Atwood, Canada's marginal position in terms of political and economic power places her, as its citizen, as a marginal, colonial, and post-colonial subject.

Asked about her connection to feminism, Atwood aligns the movement specifically to American feminism, a position from which she feels excluded:

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[6] Atwood quoted in Mary Ellis Gibson, "Thinking About Skiing When You're Halfway Down the Hill", in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 35.

> Someone who understands my position would more likely be from a peripheral culture such as my own, someone from Scotland or the West Indies or a black feminist in the States .… What the term "feminist writer" means to certain American feminists cannot mean the same thing it means to me. They are on the inside looking at each other, while I am on the outside.[7]

Again, she identifies with a marginal position.

Discussing her right to such an identification, Graham Huggan argues in *The Post-Colonial Exotic* that "there is something of a staged controversiality surrounding Atwood and her work. Her putatively anti-establishment views have always tended to move with the fashions of the moment."[8] Discussing Atwood alongside other post-colonial writers such as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, Huggan speaks of a shared phenomenon of "staged marginality", a process by which "marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience. Staged marginality", he goes on to explain, "far from being a form of necessary self-subordination, may function in certain contexts to uncover and challenge dominant structures of power".[9] This highly ambiguous reading of Atwood's celebrity simultaneously berates Atwood for her self-assumed marginalism, and promotes its function as a tool for empowerment.

Atwood, however, is not unaware of the relative nature of power. In *Bodily Harm* she used the character of Paul as antagonist to the Canadian woman's claim of victimisation. He tells the protagonist Rennie: "when you've spent years watching people dying, women, kids, men, everyone, because they're starving or because someone kills them for complaining about it, you don't have time for a lot of healthy women sitting around arguing whether or not they should shave their legs" (240). Paul's attack is founded in a belief that action must come before theory. This resonates with Smith's belief, quoted above, that the black woman's activism is in opposition to the white woman's academicism.

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[7] Atwood quoted in Fitz Gerald, "Evading the Pigeon-holers", 139.
[8] Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London, 2001, 216.
[9] *Ibid*., xii.

Atwood broadly concurs with this division of purpose. "Feminism for women in India", she says, "starts with getting them jobs and money".[10] Atwood's marginal position is evidently not the position of the Indian villager; her post-colonial voice has a power, largely connected to its white, First World status, which undermines its connection with other post-colonial speaking subjects. In *The Robber Bride* she examines these shifting patterns of power and peripheralism in a necessarily symbolic representation of the colonial opposition between self and other.

The other woman

If *The Robber Bride* is read as a tale of dangerous female sexuality, as it has been by Howells, for example, the character of Zenia takes on the figure of "the other woman" – "the Demonic Woman", as Howells terms her, when she argues that "Female sexuality – like Zenia – is still outside the fold and on the loose, a powerfully transgressive element which continues to threaten feminist attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics".[11] Zenia is a destructive and manipulative force, who devastates, in turn, the lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz, by stealing their partners, and becoming the other woman in their lives. Roz recalls:

> "The Other Woman will soon be with *us*," the feminists used to say. But how long will it take, thinks Roz, and why hasn't it happened yet?[12]

Showing a grudging respect for her enemy, Roz admits that Zenia has manipulated the male fantasy of a sexualised woman: "The Zenia's of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies, they've done it themselves" (392). Zenia mimics the passive woman of male fantasy – "a big-breasted knockout" (102) – in a

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[10] *Ibid.*, 184.
[11] Coral Ann Howells, "The Figure of the Demonic Woman in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*", in *Postmodernism and Feminism: Canadian Contexts*, ed. Shirin Kudchedkar, Delhi, 1995, 133.
[12] Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, London, 1994, 392. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

deliberate and active move that enables her to subvert the fantasy from within, which is an ability that makes Roz both envious and admiring.

Speaking in 1994, Atwood lamented the dearth of Lady Macbeths in literature, as well as the early feminist instinct to "polarize morality by gender … to divide along allegiance lines". She argued that female characters who behave badly can be "explorations of moral freedom …. because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences".[13] In response to this perceived feminist conspiracy of silence, Atwood's work seems to consciously undertake the depiction of female villains during this period, from Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, to Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, with of course Zenia appearing in the interim. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Cordelia can be seen to function as Elaine's dark double, and in *The Robber Bride*, Atwood continues this idea, although Zenia, with characteristic excess, provides the alternative self of not just one but three women.

In her article on *The Robber Bride*, Isla J. Duncan uses the myth of the Wendigo, a flesh-eating monster appearing in various forms in traditional Canadian tales of the wilderness, to inform the image of Zenia as "man-eater". Whilst this is again a reworking of the interpretation of the novel as platform for uncontainable female sexuality, Duncan's use of the Wendigo myth also leads to a reading of Zenia as a double. Quoting from Atwood's essay, "'Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice': The Wendigo", written in 1995, Duncan documents Atwood's interpretation of the beast as:

> A "fragment of the protagonist's psyche, a sliver of his repressed inner life made visible." Such wendigoes are humans who have, as she says, "turned themselves inside out, so that the creature they may only have feared or dreamed about splits off from the rest of their personality".[14]

Atwood invokes a similar connection when she depicts the relationship of Zenia with each of the three main characters.

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[13] Margaret Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature", Address, 1994: <http://www.web.net/owtoad /vlness.html> (accessed 6.12.2000).

[14] Isla J. Duncan, "The Wendigo Myth in *The Robber Bride*", *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, XIV/I (1999), 75.

In the relationships between the women, a three-fold process occurs by which Zenia "consumes" the secret selves of each of the three friends, reflects that self back to them, and finally, has them recognise themselves in her. This process of absorption, reflection, and recognition results in the ambiguity of the feelings that the friends hold towards their persecutor. Howells points to this when she says "It would appear that Zenia is threatening not because she is the other of these women, but because she is their double, forcing them to look at repressed dimensions of otherness within themselves".[15]

That otherness manifests itself differently within each character. Tony, for example:

> is a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is – and he has made this clear – not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gestures. (145)

From Tony's story of her childhood, Zenia pieces together a counterpart; she creates a heightened fantasy of Tony's reality:

> "She abandoned me," says Tony.
> "My own mother *sold* me," says Zenia, with a sigh. (163)

Tony is seduced by the reflection of herself that Zenia is offering, "for aren't they both orphans? Both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves" (166).

This appropriation of another woman's concept of her self is a skill that Zenia continues to perfect. Presenting herself to Charis as a terminally ill patient, Charis takes Zenia into her home and nurtures her. Recalling her grandmother's healing powers, Charis employs her own with Zenia: "All those positive energies are ranging themselves against the cancer cells, good soldiers against bad, light against darkness" (227). Absorbing the story of the grandmother, Zenia offers her own hereditary fortune-telling powers:

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[15] Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Discourse of Nation and National Identity in the 1990s", in *The Rhetoric of Canadian Writing*, ed. Conny Steenman-Marcusse, Amsterdam, 2002, 205.

> "My mother was a Roumanian gypsy," says Zenia carelessly. "She said it ran in the family." (271)

Zenia becomes, for Charis, an embodiment of Karen, the abused child Charis used to be, and also an opportunity to heal and comfort that part of her self. Finally, Zenia plays on Roz's insecurities about her father, and becomes the little girl that he protected during the war when he was absent from his own daughter's early childhood. Like Tony, who responds to the image of the triumphant orphan, Zenia allows Roz to recognise something of herself in Zenia's glamour, and to think "So Zenia is a mixture, like herself!" (360). From these beginnings, all three are complicit in creating Zenia as their double: as a heightened projection of their inner selves.

The complicity of the three women is acknowledged by Tony, who recognises that "nature abhors a vacuum" (130). Each woman contains such a vacuum: a space of potential that draws Zenia into their lives. For Tony, it is her imaginary twin, *Tnomerf Ynot*. "When she was little her twin was merely an invention, the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing" (137), however, Tony's need for another self, stronger and braver than the reality, provides Zenia's opening. Subsequently:

> Tony looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. *Tnomerf Ynot*. Herself turned inside out. (167)

For Charis, the other self of her repressed childhood is the vacuum to which Zenia responds:

> Karen is coming back. Charis can't keep her away anymore .… She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia. (266)

With Roz, instead, Zenia steps into the hole created by Roz's consuming desire to be different, to be the man-eater rather than the "big mom". Zenia understands that "Sometimes – for a day at least, or even for an hour, or if nothing else was available then five minutes would do – sometimes she would like to be Zenia" (393). Consequently, each in their own way is responsible for creating Zenia who is, ultimately, a reflection of their own desires and fears.

"Other" women

In her examination of "why and how the stereotypes of 'other' women are so integral to white Western women's constructions of themselves", Chilla Bulbeck asserts that in feminism, a division, "separates the west from the rest … the self from the other".[16] This division of women into the self and the other, with Western women firmly established as the self in feminist discourses of identity, is at the heart of much of the criticism of the feminist movement by antiracist women and women of colour. Becky Thompson, for example, opposes what she considers to be "hegemonic feminism" with the alternative of multiracial feminism. The former, she argues, "is white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of colour, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression".[17] Published in 2002, her essay argues that:

> Not surprisingly, Jewish women and lesbians often led the way among white women in articulating a politic that accounted for white women's position as both oppressed and oppressor – as both women and white. Both groups knew what it meant to be marginalized from a women's movement that was, nevertheless, still homophobic and Christian biased.[18]

Again, this is the same dilemma posed by Atwood in *Bodily Harm*, in which Rennie had to come to terms with what Laura Donaldson calls "the contradictory social positioning of white, middle-class women as both colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects".[19] In *The Robber Bride*, Charis, Roz and Tony all experience to a certain extent something of the ambivalence of this dual position of privilege and oppression.

In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood confronts the implicit racial prejudices of her white protagonists. Toronto is depicted as an eclectic and multiracial city. "Chinatown has taken over mostly, though there are still some Jewish delicatessens, and, further up and off to the side,

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[16] Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Post-Colonial World*, Cambridge, 1998, 1-2.

[17] Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", *Feminist Studies*, XXVIII/2 (2002), 337.

[18] *Ibid*., 342.

[19] Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire-Building*, London, 1993, 6.

the Portuguese and West Indian shops" (36). It is what Howells calls "a representation of Toronto in a contemporary globalized context".[20] Old power balances are disrupted, and when white Tony walks through this heterogeneous area, she feels "foreign", "among strangers" (36). However, the old racial oppositions are undeniably present. In Roz's expensive home, her children are cared for by a Filipino housekeeper:

> Dolores fills Roz with anxiety and misgivings: should Dolores be here? Will Western culture corrupt her? Is Roz paying her enough? Does Dolores secretly hate them all? Is she happy, and, if not, is it Roz's fault? (303)

Roz's post-colonial guilt is humorously depicted but telling. Her situatedness in her Canadian culture creates an insurmountable barrier between her and Dolores.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses an ongoing inability to relate to the "other woman" that characterises white feminism's failure to extend the achievements of the battle for recognition to their non-Western counterparts. In their disregard for the subjectivity of Third World women, Western women indulge in the same stereotyping of which they accused men. Consequently, there exists an image of the "average Third World woman" as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-orientated, victimized".[21] In *The Robber Bride*, these same cultural perceptions have been absorbed by Roz, who is fully cognisant of her own power, which only induces further guilt.

Working in opposition to the perceived powerlessness of the other is an equally ill-founded investment of power. In illustration of this tendency, Thompson speaks of "white feminists who treat Native American women as innately spiritual, as automatically their spiritual mothers".[22] This situation is evinced in Atwood's novel in Charis' relationship with her enigmatic boss, Shanita, a shape-shifter like Zenia:

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[20] Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Discourse", 204.
[21] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", in *Colonial Discourse*, 199.
[22] Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism", 346.

> Sometimes she's part Chinese and part black, with a West Indian grandmother … but there are other grandmothers too, one from the States and one from Halifax, and one from Pakistan and one from New Mexico .… But sometimes she's part Ojibway, or else part Mayan, and one day she was even part Tibetan. (57)

Charis invests in this woman a shamanistic power, having her read her fortune, and believing that "Anything from Shanita is good luck" (40). The reality of Shanita as an entrepreneurial and astute business woman is wilfully ignored by Charis because it does not fit into the narrative that she has pre-constructed around Shanita's exotic appearance. What Charis reads as magnetism and power translates into an everyday experience of displacement, despite the fact that Shanita "was born right in this very city!". Sensitive to thoughtless enquiries into her origins, Charis' interpretation of these questions as "where are your parents from", translates to Shanita as "when [are you] leaving" (57). Charis refuses to believe Shanita's understanding, but Atwood emphasises its significance when Tony later speaks to Zenia with forked tongue: "'Where are you staying?' Tony asks politely, meaning when are you leaving" (182).

This contradictory comprehension of a seemingly shared language is discussed by Bulbeck in terms of what she calls "the doubled vision of migrant and indigenous women":

> It is … possible that when Hispanic, Indian, African, Arab but western-educated women speak in English they "do not talk the same language." Perhaps they cannot fully translate their worlds, and end only in communicating the experience of exclusion.[23]

This concept of an assumed colonial discourse, which nevertheless presents an ironic gap between the speaker and the spoken, later becomes central to a number of theorists working in the field of post-colonialism.

A double-voiced discourse

In his book, *The Double and the Other*, Paul Coates makes a strong connection between language and the literary trope of the Double. He says:

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[23] Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*, 188.

> stories that deal explicitly with the Double seem in the main to be written by authors who are suspended between languages and cultures .… Here the Double is the self when it speaks another language.[24]

Perhaps surprisingly, Atwood fits Coates' description of an author balancing between two languages – "English" English and "Canadian" English – and is subject to its doubling effects. She draws attention to this through the character of Tony, for whom language is central to her sense of otherness:

> *Don't talk like that!* She hisses at Tony. She means the accent. Flat, she calls it. But how can Tony talk the way her mother does? (145)

This double language, which is both hers and not hers, is metaphorically illustrated in Tony's reversal of words, a practice which fascinates Zenia when it is mistakenly revealed:

> Which was the magic word, *raw* or *war*? Probably it was the two of them together; the doubleness. That would have had high appeal, for Zenia. (130)

Through its reversal, Tony disrupts the signifier, infusing each word with a powerful alternative significance: "They are Tnomerf Ynot words. They make her feel powerful, in charge of something" (139). It is this secret power of the transgressive, of the distorting reflection offered by the Double, that attracts Zenia, who inhabits a similarly marginal world of identification and difference.

The double language is reflective of the double self: a hybrid identity made common by post-colonial emigration and refugee migration. Like Shanita, who is both Canadian and not; like Tony who is foreigner to both English mother and Canadian father, the hybrid is, in Homi Bhabha's words, "almost the same, *but not quite*".[25] This difference is also felt by Roz, whose relative racial stability, provided by her Irish Catholic mother, is shattered by the return of her Jewish father and her two "uncles" with their multiple passports:

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[24] Paul Coates, *The Double and the Other: Identity as Ideology in Post-Romantic Fiction*, New York, 1988, 2.

[25] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in *Modern Literary Theory*, 361.

> "I'm a Hungarian, he's a Pole," says Uncle Joe, "I'm a Yugoslav, he's a Dutchman. This other passport says I'm Spanish. Your father now, he's half a German. The other half, that's the Jew." (334)

This proliferation of possible identities is instinctively understood by Roz to equate in reality to an absence of identity. In suburban Canada, whiteness is the only signifier of selfhood, with all possible alternatives considered as "other" and labelled as "DPs": "DPs meant Displaced Persons. They came from the east, across the ocean .… Sometimes Roz got called a DP herself, because of her dark skin" (324-25).

The broadness of the geographical definition of these marginal peoples illustrates the sweeping equation of non-white with other. And even though she *is* white, Roz is still able to feel the migrant woman's experience of exclusion described by Bulbeck:

> Even if Roz wasn't a DP, there was something. There was something about her that set her apart, an invisible barrier, faint and hardly there .… She wasn't like the others, she was among them but she wasn't part of them. (325)

In response, Roz learns to mimic an appropriate exterior: "She imitates. She picks up their accents, their intonations, their vocabulary; she adds layers of language to herself, sticking them on like posters on a fence" (345).

However, even in her wealthy Jewish school, Roz retains the mark of her difference:

> whereas once Roz was not Catholic enough, now she isn't Jewish enough. She's an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person. (344)

In attempting to embrace the Jewishness for which she was previously abused, Roz experiences what Bulbeck refers to as "anti-racist racism". Bulbeck explains that "affirming one's racial identity *in opposition to whiteness* condemned the mixed-race or hybrid identity as inferior". Writers such as Bhabha try to negotiate an alternative discourse capable of undermining this oppositional discourse of racial purity: "Instead of merely asserting the value of one's pure (but formerly denigrated) identity, postcolonial writers suggest hybrid or

mixed identities which encompass the contradictory history of colonisation."[26]

With relevance to Roz's tactic of appropriating the hegemonic culture, Bhabha discusses the function of mimicry within post-colonial discourse. Bhabha claims that the Enlightenment project of civilisation, used to justify much of colonialism, contains an impossible inevitable conclusion in which the other attains the status of the self, and the colonial project is forced to accept its anti-Enlightenment premise. To resolve this dilemma, argues Bhabha, colonial discourse uses mimicry, an "ironic compromise":

> Colonial mimicry is a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.[27]

By this move, the other is both assimilated through sameness yet safely diminished through difference.

What Bhabha argues, however, is that through this act of diminishment, the coloniser unwittingly contributes to his own loss of power. The partial presence of the colonised ("partial" because his or her subjectivity is not completely recognised by the colonising nation) proves incapable of reflecting back the whole image of the coloniser's self necessary to "the narcissistic demand of colonial authority". Consequently, "the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence".[28]

In *The Robber Bride*, all of the characters who perform the function of other to the white Canadian self – Zenia, Shanita, Roz's father and her two uncles – are characterised by a lack of stable identity or essence. Atwood depicts the common assumption that there can be no racial identification or concept of origins that lies outside of a Western discourse of identity. Following the Enlightenment concept that all knowledge and reason is situated on the side of the West,

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[26] Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*, 53.
[27] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man", 361.
[28] *Ibid*., 363-64.

anything that falls on the other side of the dividing line can only be known as disorder and difference.

The qualities attributed to the non-Western are frequently seen as freeing within the novel, for example by Roz, who "wanted to travel light, and was happiest in a mixed bag" (346), or by Charis, who envies Shanita because "She can be whatever she feels like, because who can tell?" (57), but it is always associated with something off-centre, transgressive, and disruptive. By investing in the other the contradictory properties of both sameness and difference, the identity of the colonising self becomes subject to the reflection offered by the other, and is therefore troubled by the inessential and shifting figure that is being presented. When Zenia first appears in the book, Tony asks, "What is she doing here, on this side of the mirror?" (34). The greatest threat posed by Zenia is that she refuses to remain merely a reflection of the self.

Orientalism and exoticism

The image of the returning gaze recurs in Atwood's work, most notably in *Bodily Harm*. It recalls yet again Hegel's master-slave dichotomy. In arguing that the partial gaze of the colonised (made partial by the coloniser's refusal to accept the selfhood of the colonised) destabilises the colonising gaze, Bhabha confers a power on the colonised. Initially, this would seem to coincide with Edward Said's text, *Orientalism*. Said argues that the West creates the Orient through the construction of Orientalism, a term loaded with implicit definitions and understandings of what it means to be Oriental. Furthermore, the Orient defines the West by functioning as its opposite, as a contrasting image or idea. However, within his concept of Orientalism, "The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor".[29] Orientalism represents the Western imposition of authority over the Orient. The possible construction of a site of power on the basis of the coloniser's need of the colonised is rejected by Said, for whom the Orient is inevitably and inescapably mute within a Euro-centric discourse.

When feminist postcolonial writers came to take up the question of female power, it became apparent that the situation was further

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[29] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, 1995, 109.

complicated. In her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the triple displacement peculiarly experienced by the poor, black female. Spivak explores the problem of how to speak for the subaltern woman, whose own voice is muted by her social and political position, without forgetting that there is necessarily an insurmountable distance between the Western feminist or the Third World intellectual feminist and the subject being represented. She suggests that intellectuals need to work to reduce this gap as far as possible. In an interview, she suggested that:

> There is an impulse among literary critics and other kinds of intellectuals to save the masses, speak for the masses, describe the masses. On the other hand, how about attempting to learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit. When I think of the masses, I think of a woman belonging to that 84% of women's work in India, which is unorganized peasant labour.[30]

However, for Spivak, despite the inevitable limitations of those who "speak for the masses", their work is still necessary, and she concludes her essay:

> The subaltern cannot speak .… Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.[31]

These words oppose the postmodernist strategy of abandoning all forms of representation in acknowledgement of their cultural situatedness. Whilst the realities of post-colonialism persist, Spivak defends a form of self-reflexive representation as the only mode of speech, albeit second-hand speech, that is currently available to the subaltern woman. Terry Eagleton supports this view. "No sooner have women become autonomous subjects", he points out, "than postmodernism sets about deconstructing the whole category".[32] Liberal essentialism, the flaws of which are acknowledged by Spivak, at least avows the existence of a coherent subjectivity from which the oppressed subaltern can begin to move towards self-articulation.

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[30] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym, New York, 1990, 56.

[31] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Colonial Discourse*, 104.

[32] Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 42.

What becomes apparent after reading *The Robber Bride* is that, despite her centrality to the story, the reader knows little or nothing about Zenia. Each narrative of her origins is exposed as another appropriated mask, and each one has been offered, not by Zenia, but by one of the three women who represent and re-inscribe her within their narrative frames. Although direct speech is limited in the novel, Atwood utilises free indirect discourse and a closely schematised narrative focus to equally represent the views of Tony, Roz and Charis. Zenia's perspective, however, is never represented, and her actions are only known through the narratives of the women.

Through Zenia, Atwood demonstrates the colonial project of silencing the colonised subject. Eventually, it is Charis who comes to understand that Zenia has not been considered as a subject of the narrative, and that in deconstructing her appearance, her actions, and her motives, she has only ever remained the object of speculation. Charis realises that, "although she has often thought about Zenia in relation to herself, or to Billy, or even to Tony and Roz, she has never truly considered what Zenia was in and by herself: the Zenia-ness of Zenia". However, Charis quickly abandons this recognition of Zenia's selfhood, reverting to the egocentrism that denies the autonomy of the other, and concludes that "Zenia was sent into her life – was *chosen* by her – to teach her something" (451). Despite the frequently devastating force of Zenia's actions and reactions, she remains an exotic mute within the text.

This notion of exoticism is related to Said's concept of Orientalism. By defining the other as exotic, the coloniser fetishises otherness, emphasising its strangeness and difference within the same process that assimilates it. Exoticism "oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity".[33] Whereas Bhabha's notion of mimicry emphasises the similarities of the other whilst maintaining a safe difference, exoticism makes the other into a spectacle of difference, whilst simultaneously domesticating and neutralising the power of that difference. This argument is given by Huggan, who goes on to explain:

> As a technology of representation, exoticism is self-empowering; self-referential even, insofar as the objects of its gaze are not supposed to

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[33] Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, 13.

> look back .… For this reason, among others, exoticism has proved over time to be a highly effective instrument of imperial power.

Connecting Huggan's definition of exoticism to Said's Orientalism is the colonising gaze of the West. For both, an aestheticising of the other takes place, which, in consumer postmodern culture, results in the commodification of the other. Huggan, however, warns that desire for the exotic does not diminish the assumption of Western superiority: "it is not that exotic spectacle and the curiosity it arouses replaces power, but rather that it functions as a decoy to *disguise* it."[34] Even in the global market of cultural tourism, the binary power structure of the coloniser and the colonised remains firmly entrenched; the practises of Orientalism and exoticism play out the subject-object divide that persists between West and East.

Zenia: double and other

Zenia functions as both the double of Tony, Roz and Charis and as the other to their self. These overlapping terms, whilst distinct, do inform and interact with each other. Coates attempts to differentiate:

> Works of fiction exist in a space between the Double and the Other. To enter into a work of fiction is in a sense to transform the Other into a Double: to discover in the apparent foreignness of another person the lineaments of one's own aspirations and hopes.[35]

For Coates, the double is an unconscious aspect of one's self, given form as an other. Whereas the other is all difference, the uncanniness of the double results from recognising the self in the other. In colonial discourse, the imposition of the image of the self onto the other becomes compulsive.

Whilst the double can be understood to constitute an externalised embodiment of aspects of the self, the other, whilst appearing to be all exotic difference, is in fact similarly a projection of repressed fears and desires found within the self, externalised and experienced as something "other". It is this mechanism that Freud is referring to when he speaks of the function of phobias in his discussion of anxiety. In the phobic patient, he states, an "internal danger is transformed into an

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[34] *Ibid*., 14.
[35] Coates, *The Double and the Other*, 1.

external one". This process involves the projection of an unconscious anxiety onto an external force. The motive, as Freud explains, is simple: "One can save oneself from an external danger by flight; fleeing from an internal danger is a difficult enterprise."[36]   When relating these ideas to phobia, and to xenophobia in particular, it becomes apparent that internal desires and fears are projected onto the feared stranger, and in *The Robber Bride*, that stranger is Zenia.

Throughout the novel, Zenia is figured in gothic terms as a monstrous object of fear. In particular, the image of Zenia as vampire or zombie is recurrent within the text, which opens with her returning from the dead. Tony pictures her with "bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair" (193), and for Charis, "Zenia would be shooting out blood-red sparks of energy; her black hair would be crackling like burning fat, her eyeballs would be cerise, lit up from within like a cat's in headlights" (417). Contemplating her unfading beauty, Roz wonders bitterly: "What kind of blood does she drink?" (438). When Zenia takes West from Tony, he is portrayed as her powerless victim, "a zombie" (184), and Roz accuses Zenia of similar vampirism in her relations with Mitch: "You cleaned him out, you sucked him dry, then you just threw him away!" (439). As with both Tony and Roz, Charis relates Zenia's actions to a vampiric attack upon her self: "she wants to squeeze Zenia, squeeze her and squeeze her by the neck until … all of the good things about her life that Zenia has drunk, come welling out like water from a sponge" (429).

The greed that characterises Zenia is loathed and feared by the three women, but the intensity of their emotions can be better understood as an anxiety prompted by their own repressed capacity for greed. Roz contemplates this possible interpretation:

> Most women disapprove of man-eaters; not so much because of the activity itself, or the promiscuity involved, but because of the greed. Women don't want all the men eaten up by man-eaters; they want a few left over so they can eat some themselves. (392)

This admission is not explored any further, but it suggests a level of consciousness at which Roz is aware of how she and the others use Zenia to project their own fantasies.

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[36] Freud, "Anxiety and Instinctual Life", in *The Freud Reader*, 776.

A xenophobic tension mixes with the post-colonial guilt of the text. Roz's money, and her awareness that all wealth "made a profit from human desperation", even if "at several removes", results in a simultaneous distance and connection with the poor around her: "she still has a sense of hands, bony hands, reaching up from under the earth, tugging at her ankles, wanting back what's theirs" (349). Similarly, Charis is overwhelmed with First World guilt:

> Being white is getting more and more exhausting. There are so many bad waves attached to it, left over from the past but spreading through the present .… There's so much to expiate! (58)

Zenia works on this guilt and the ambivalence it creates. As foreigner, she is part pitied, part feared, and part envied. Accordingly, the other side to her monstrosity is her much discussed exotic beauty. "Zenia stands out … like the moon" (126), and like Shanita, she prompts both fascination and repulsion.

This splitting of Zenia into beauty and monstrosity, confidante and traitor, good and bad, reflects the split felt within each of the characters. Just as each woman recognises a good about themselves within Zenia, so they also recognise previously repressed socially-unacceptable feelings. When Zenia declares "*Fuck the Third World! I'm tired of it!*" Roz feels an illicit rush of excitement and sympathy:

> an answering beat, in herself .… *Well, why not? You think they'd lift a finger, in the Third World, if it was you?* (98)

Zenia says the unsayable, and that unsayable, unthinkable, undoable, emanates from Roz, Tony and Charis.

Zenia is the stranger within the text, the other who is given no voice, but who prompts anxiety because she refuses to reflect a stable image back to the self. She appropriates a mask of mimicry, but the effectiveness of her disguise is in itself unsettling: "her fakery was deeply assumed, and even her most superficial disguises were total" (36-37). Zenia's mimicry is potent and unsettling, crossing the boundaries between sameness and otherness. Howells speaks of the transgression of boundaries in the novel, and suggests that "Zenia

operates on this edge of desire and lack which is the borderline territory of the marauding Gothic Other".[37]

In *The Robber Bride*, boundaries are also crossed by Roz's transgressive father:

> "He could walk through a border like it wasn't there," says Uncle Joe.
> "What's a border?" asks Roz.
> "A border is a line on a map," says Uncle Joe.
> "A border is where it gets dangerous," says Uncle George. (331)

With every border that Zenia crosses, she becomes more disruptive, more alien and more insubstantial. Even her name cannot be contained. It composes many aspects, as Tony realises when she seeks a definition:

> *Zillah*, Hebrew, a shadow; *Zenobia*, the third-century warrior queen … *Xeno*, Greek, a stranger, as in *xenophobic* …. Out of such hints and portents, Zenia devised herself. (461)

Eventually, still mute, Zenia self-destructs, and it is only in her death that the women finally recognise their own role in creating her:

> As with any magician, you saw what she wanted you to see; or else you saw what you yourself wanted to see. She did it with mirrors. The mirror was whoever was watching, but there was nothing behind the two-dimensional image but a thin layer of mercury. (461)

Despite her indisputable and subversive power, as a figure of the other woman, Zenia seems to confirm the unreality of the other rather than assert her autonomous subjectivity. According to Tony, there is nothing behind the narcissistic mirror erected by the self. However, taking direction from Charis' portentous reading of the Bible – "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face*" (45) – Zenia's demise can be understood to have been enabled by each woman's recognition of their role in creating the figure of Zenia, both exotic and monstrous. Acknowledging the subconscious patterns of dominance and fear existing between the self and the other enables a

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[37] Howells, "The Demonic Woman", 139.

mutually empowering recognition. Bulbeck advocates something similar:

> To avoid misappropriating the other, however, requires some sort of compensatory recognition to correct the devaluation of the other. We should recognise the identity of the other as a potential source of strength as well as a problem.[38]

Correspondingly, in concluding *The Robber Bride*, Atwood's protagonists acknowledge Zenia's strength and power as a force outside of their own perceptions of her monstrosity and exoticism.

In *The Robber Bride*, the examination of the idea of the self and other that was begun in *The Edible Woman* can be seen to have developed significantly in Atwood's work. In her next novel, *Alias Grace*, Atwood returns to a single protagonist, but she continues to explore the themes of identity and ontology that have been progressively developing throughout her canon.

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[38] Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*, 55.

CHAPTER IX

ALIAS GRACE: NARRATING THE SELF

Alias Grace (1996) is Atwood's ninth novel and her first to fictionalise an historical figure, although not her first writing to do so; she previously incorporated the autobiographical text of the famous Canadian pioneer Susanna Moodie into a volume of poetry entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie.* In her re-reading of the life of Grace Marks, a servant accused of murdering her master, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, in 1843, Atwood returns to issues of narrative, memory and the historical record which she had first examined in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

From one aspect, the reconstruction of a female history which takes place in both of these novels is in accordance with a major preoccupation of early second-wave feminism. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter stated:

> The interest in establishing a more reliable critical vocabulary and a more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers is part of a larger interdisciplinary effort by psychologists, sociologists, social historians, and art historians to reconstruct the political, social, and cultural experience of women.[1]

Early second-wave feminists were concerned with creating a history and a voice for a silenced feminine experience. Attempting, in 1970, to construct a history of American women, Connie Brown and Jane Seitz wrote: "the difficulty of learning about the history of women in America is that, for the most part, it is an unwritten history of millions of lives."[2]

Alias Grace seemingly enters into this same project of recovering lost female histories and giving voice to the silenced woman of the

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[1] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 8.
[2] Connie Brown and Jane Seitz, "'You've Come a Long Way, Baby': Historical Perspectives", in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, 1.

past. But Atwood also moves far beyond early feminist reconstructions of forgotten or muted feminine experience, and challenges, not just the assumption that there is a stable subject to be recovered from the historical record, but also the systems of power and desire that can be unwittingly exposed in the attempted construction of another person's identity.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood appropriates miscellaneous factual and fictional documents into her narrative in a manner quite unique from her other novels. These both function as corroborative evidence and, in their frequent contradictions, ironically move to undermine the belief in a verifiable truth. At the same time, the debate between an essentialist belief in a knowable and unified self, and a more postmodern concept of an inessential self comprised entirely of influences and experiences reappears in Atwood's concerns.

By juxtaposing the examination of historical accuracy with the novel's attempted psychoanalytical exposition of Grace's true self, Atwood is able to draw parallels between both projects. In his 1995 text, *Rewriting the Soul*, Ian Hacking discusses the manner in which the self, or the soul, as he refers to it, is affected by the construction and retention of memory, and how, correspondingly, the concept of a unified self is shaken by instances of memory loss or, more particularly, by manifestations of multiple personality. Hacking describes a process of "making up ourselves by reworking our memories". He explains that "new meanings change the past. It is reinterpreted, yes, but more than that, it is reorganized, repopulated."[3]

This description of how the individual reconstructs memory through reinterpretation bears a striking similarity to Hayden White's understanding of the construction of the historical record. White suggests that:

> First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a "spectacle" or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle and end.[4]

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[3] Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton, 1995, 6.

[4] White, *Metahistory*, 5.

Just as White explains that history is shaped to form a cohesive narrative, so, according to Hacking, the memories that supply a sense of the self are similarly manipulated to provide a suitable narrative. By this understanding, "the soul that we are constantly constructing we construct according to an explanatory model of how we came to be the way we are".[5] In *Alias Grace*, the past is reconstructed through Grace's memories, and the possible existence of an unequivocal and verifiable historical account comes to represent the belief in Grace's essential self.

The conflict of this basic ontological and epistemological dichotomy between essentialism and anti-essentialism recurs throughout Atwood's work, and is central to her interaction with feminism. The feminist drive to establish a unified feminine voice with which to counteract the dominant masculine discourse motivated and furthered early second-wave feminism. Countering with accusations of essentialism, racism and heterosexism, postmodernist feminist thinkers posited a feminist discourse founded in difference and experience, which would allow for a multiplicity of discourses that would undermine the unified masculine voice through parody and subversion and by dislocating concepts of hierarchy and centrality.

In her novels, Atwood has vacillated between these two oppositions, demonstrating her awareness of the flaws of both. In *Alias Grace*, more so than in any of her other novels, she self-consciously works to disrupt easy acceptance of either position. In telling her own story, Grace manages to be both a unified authority and a patchwork of voices. The reader experiences Grace simultaneously as an enigma to which there is a key, though hidden, and as a textual illusion, comprised merely of reflected images and impressions. In presenting a character that embodies both essentialist and anti-essentialist discourses, Atwood seeks to claim a site of autonomy for Grace, which must necessarily fall in the space between the two codes that seek to define and thereby limit her concept of her self.

Patchwork quilts
As a relatively recent addition to Atwood's canon *Alias Grace* has accumulated a correspondingly limited body of critical analysis. Of

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[5] Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, 94.

the critics that have addressed the novel, many have focused on the pervasive patchwork quilt metaphor, which connects quilting with the weaving and spinning of a story. Domestic imagery is fundamental to the novel, which is after all the story of a servant girl. By placing the traditionally masculine practises of historical and psychological investigation which are ostensibly the subjects of the novel within an undervalued domestic craftwork sphere, the novel disrupts established notions of textual authority. History is placed within the realm of storytelling, which was an idea that was important in *The Handmaid's Tale* and recurs in *The Blind Assassin*, and storytelling is likened to craftwork, with its attendant notions of design, artifice, construction, and discretion.

In an early analysis of the novel, Jennifer Murray interprets it as a historiographic metafiction, demonstrating "theoretical self-awareness through the undissimulated piecing together of information from historical documents, thereby drawing attention to its modes of construction and representation".[6] The documents to which Murray refers are primarily the double narrative scheme of the novel, comprising the first person narrative of Grace, and the third person narrative focused on Dr Simon Jordan, the pre-Freudian psychoanalyst employed to discover the secret behind Grace's amnesiac response to the murders. In addition, the novel comprises a number of inter-textual epigraphs, taken from a variety of sources: contemporary media reports of the murder trial, Susanna Moodie's recollections of seeing Grace in prison and in an insane asylum, as well as various other seemingly unrelated prose and poetry pieces. Taking each of these texts as a patch, the quilt of *Alias Grace* is constructed from the scraps of information that we glean from the text and assemble into a coherent, if not definitive, structure.

Magali Cornier Michael highlights the significance of the exclusively domestic role of quilting, and pays further attention to the quilt as a metaphor for the disruption of the public voice by an alternative, feminine discourse. She places this disruption within the postmodern shift from a traditionally objectivist concept of historical knowledge, to an acknowledgement of the inevitably subjective nature of all knowledge:

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[6] Jennifer Murray, "Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, XXVI/1 (2001), 66.

> In choosing patchwork quilting as the metaphor and model for an alternative form with which to think about and reconstruct the past, the novel participates both in current reconceptualizations of history and in a revaluation of a form traditionally associated with women and dissociated from the serious and valued realms of official history and art.[7]

Alias Grace is self-consciously postmodern in its assessment of the validity of modes of communication and its juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous texts, intended to destabilise the hierarchy of textual legitimacy.

Earl G. Ingersoll, however, argues that such readings require the hypothesis of a "naïve reader" to explore this text, whose "stitches and seams are … so obtrusive as to be unmistakable".[8] Atwood evidently does explicitly highlight the quilting metaphor. Each chapter is named for a quilting pattern, and Grace muses on the titles of such patterns, for example, "Attic Windows", a pattern in which the focus shifts, depending on the observer. She explains, "that is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light".[9] The quilting metaphor acts as an overt reference to the postmodernism of the novel, and legitimates the attention given to Grace's voice as marginal discourse, whilst seemingly refusing to privilege Grace's text over any other.

Grace's story, however, functions as the central square to the quilt of the novel. This pattern is called "The Tree of Paradise", and when sewing this quilt, Grace uses cloth from her friend Mary Whitney's petticoat, from the dress of murdered Nancy Montgomery and from her own prison night-dress. She explains:

> I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (534)

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[7] Magali Cornier Michael, "Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*", *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, XLVII/2 (2001), 426.

[8] Earl G. Ingersoll, "Engendering Metafiction: Textuality and Closure in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*", *American Review of Canadian Studies*, XXXI/3 (Autumn 2001), 385.

[9] Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, London, 1997, 187. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

This pattern is both a reinterpretation of the original pattern – Grace replaces the traditional vine border with one of snakes, "as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing" (534) – and a re-inscription of both Nancy and Mary's silenced texts. But whilst this story is in fact privileged within Atwood's novel, both in its length and its interspersed positioning throughout the text, it is not, however, definitive, and each pattern/text that borders Grace's both comments on and changes the reader's interpretation of her; each gives context and additional or oppositional meaning to the central story. Michael describes this feature of the narrative pattern as working in "a spatial rather than linear order".[10] By disrupting the traditional linearity of the masculine historical narrative, Atwood creates a space for the marginal figure who would normally expect to be written out of the historical record.

Can Grace Speak?

The postmodern multiplicity of the novel works to enable Grace, whose marginality is threefold due to her femininity, her criminality, and her possible insanity, to assert her voice. In her essay on the subaltern, discussed in the previous chapter, Spivak asks:

> Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context.[11]

In *Alias Grace*, it is not the first world subject creating the third world object, but rather the masculine speaking subject, Simon Jordan, creating the silenced female object, Grace.

Arguing that the intellectual elite create the subaltern woman through the same means by which they attempt to describe her, Spivak also acknowledges the current impossibility of the subaltern speaking for herself. Excluded from the dominant, socially legitimate discourse, the subaltern can only ever be re-inscribed through the mediation of another, and Spivak therefore supports the project of representation. This basically anti-postmodernist argument was explored by Atwood in her examination of the "other woman" in *The Robber Bride.* In *Alias Grace*, however, the other woman speaks. Grace, like Zenia, is

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[10] Michael, "Rethinking History", 429.
[11] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 90.

the site on to which others project their fears and desires, but unlike Zenia, Grace is able to speak with her own voice. This act of articulation, however, is not without its difficulties, and it is those difficulties that Atwood explores in the novel.

At the beginning of *Alias Grace*, the reader is led to assume, firstly, that the novel will conclude with a revelation of truth; secondly, that the truth is held by Grace and will be revealed by Grace; and thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, that there is a truth to be revealed. The novel sets up an association between the discoverable truth of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders and the essential "truth" of Grace's subjectivity. If, however, a postmodern resolution is accepted – if there is no single factual account of the murders, only interpretations and versions of truth – then Grace also slips away from the reader, who must accept that Grace, as a re-inscribed text, is equally open to interpretation.

Returning to one of the earliest and most fundamental arguments in feminist literary criticism, Atwood juxtaposes the traditional feminist project of identifying an authentic woman's voice amidst an overwhelming masculine tradition, with the postmodern proposition that all discourse is fractured and quoted, thereby undermining the very concept of the authentic voice. The former was a prominent feature of early second-wave feminism. In 1977, Ellen Moers described women's literature as "belonging to a literary movement apart from but hardly subordinate to the mainstream: an undercurrent, rapid and powerful".[12] This accorded with Showalter's 1977 statement that "when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation".[13]

Such attempts to establish a female literary tradition were later attacked for being "almost as selective and ideologically bound as the male tradition".[14] Moi accused Showalter of "a traditional emphasis [on] Western patriarchal humanism" and "a good portion of empiricism". "This attitude," argued Moi, "coupled with [Showalter's] fear of 'male' theory and general appeal to 'human' experience, has the unfortunate effect of drawing her perilously close to the male

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[12] Ellen Moers, "Literary Women", in *Feminist Literary Theory*, 11.

[13] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 11.

[14] Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, 3.

critical hierarchy whose patriarchal values she opposes".[15] For theorists such as Moi, the desire for subjectivity, which led the move to create a unified female tradition, soon dated. In rebellion, dissident voices who found no place in Showalter's tradition made a move towards postmodernism, and consequently, feminism became increasingly fractured.

Grace's discourse seems to correspond with the latter, more postmodern resolution. She is very aware of the extent to which she has been constructed by words:

> I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard … that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (25)

Each person responds to Grace according to one or more of these definitions, and she in turn presents them with various manifestations of her artificially constructed character. To Simon she belies her intelligence and literacy; aware that he is testing her knowledge of the bible, Grace dissembles:

> I know that it is the book of Job …. But I don't say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised. (43)

Each of Grace's appearances is tinged with artificiality. When finally released from prison, she realises that yet another version of her self is now required:

> I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued …. It calls for a different arrangement of the face. (513)

Grown accustomed to the appropriation of a multitude of masks, Grace's different versions of herself take on an independent reality. In her narrative she partially acknowledges to the reader the element of construction involved in the story she spins for Simon: "I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always

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believed that one good turn deserves another" (286). Such admissions make questionable the extent to which Grace is consciously deceitful or merely eager to please.

Grace's narrative increasingly suggests that her obsessive invention and reinvention in response to a multitude of imposed definitions has resulted in a loss of a true sense of self; like Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, "she is like someone making herself up as she goes along" (301). At times, Simon seems to approach this conclusion. He contemplates her essence:

> her story is over. The main story, that is; the thing that has defined her. How is she supposed to fill in the rest of the time? (105)

MacKenzie, Grace's lawyer, believes that she is a self-construct. He asks Simon:

> How did you check her facts? In the newspapers I suppose …. Has it ever occurred to you that she may have derived her corroborative details from the same source? (434)

Simon, however, clings to the belief that some indefinable essence survives the conclusion of Grace's storytelling. Grace herself is tormented by dreams of inessential dissolution, and recalls: "I felt as if my face were dissolving and turning into someone else's face" (513). Yet despite this, the novel still supports the possibility of an essential Grace, and it is this belief that in turn supports the sustained suspicion that Grace is "cunning and devious" (25).

Grace uses multiplicity as a defence against a world that seeks to define and limit her, and the competing texts of the novel reflect the unstable composition of Grace's character. From the start, it is possible to discern a multitude of voices speaking through Grace, seemingly to the negation of her own true voice, so that "Grace" becomes a transparent composite of competing discourses. In a single page she speaks in the past and present tenses, mixes dream with reality, and confuses an apparently factual past with a fantasised alternative future.

From this unstable beginning, Grace then continues to demonstrate her capacity for assimilation and quotation, which works in a variety of ways. In the Governor's house, she articulates the middle class sensibilities of his gossiping wife, as Grace relates the fates of the

missionary wives, "respectable gentlewomen", attacked by natives – "and a mercy they were all slaughtered and put out of their misery, for only think of the shame" (27). The subtlety of the shift from Grace's voice to that of the Governor's wife is not so great here that the irony of Grace's unsympathetic tone cannot be heard. A similar, but more complex appropriation of another voice occurs when Grace adopts the perspective of fellow servant Mary Whitney, "a person of democratic views" (39). Mary "speaks through" Grace when Grace callously muses on the state of Nancy's decomposing body: "still she went off surprisingly soon, you'd think she would have kept longer in the dairy" (29).

Using a more direct method of expository quotation, Grace also speaks as one of the many priests who visit her in prison:

> Confess, confess. Let me forgive and pity …. And then what did he do? Oh shocking. And then what? …. How far up exactly? Show me where. (39)

In quoting the duplicitous words of the priest, Grace turns his own voice against him and exposes the traitorous power of language. And finally, there are occasions when Grace openly shifts mid-sentence from "Grace" to someone else: "I'm being left to reflect on my sins and misdemeanours, and one does that best in solitude, or such is our expert and considered opinion, Grace, after long experience with these matters" (37-38). By appropriating the voices around her, Grace disrupts the boundary of her self, undermining attempts to define her.

This seems to return the novel to the theme of the patchwork quilt. In an interview, Atwood spoke of Grace's unsentimental appropriation of Nancy's dress after her murder: "This is where the patchwork quilt came from; you don't throw things out, you make them into something else."[16] Equally, Grace makes use of the voices and personae offered to her. However, although it may appear as though Grace assimilates the voices of others to the detriment of her own, in their orchestration she exercises an authorial intention that indicates a central self. The voices that Grace appropriates are invariably the voices of power: the Governor and his wife, the priest, the doctor, the prison warder, even Mary Whitney who, whilst appearing to be

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[16] Atwood quoted in Laura Miller, "Blood and Laundry", interview with Margaret Atwood, *The Salon*, 24 February 2003.

another powerless servant, functions as Grace's powerful alter ego or double.

Moving within the dominant discourses that make up the official languages of law, church, medicine, and history, Grace's impotent voice can only be heard when it masquerades as power. Whilst this might initially appear to be an inversion of Riviere's thesis on masquerade, Grace is skilfully dissembling here. Although she appropriates the voices of power, she does so with an overt humility and subservience that mocks the power discourse she is articulating. Just as Zenia in *The Robber Bride* gains power by becoming an overtly exaggerated expression of the sexual object that male authority would have her be, so Grace expresses her subversive opinion between the lines of the dominant discourse that she seemingly quotes verbatim. Indeed, Grace's method is arguably the more powerful because it places her in control of the discourses that she chooses to appropriate, thereby giving her a voice of sorts, which is something that Zenia, despite her near-supernatural potency, fails to achieve.

Telling stories

Grace's role as storyteller functions as her most significant site of power. Although the other narratives, in particular, Simon's third person perspective, work to mediate her influence, the reader is still instinctively drawn to Grace as the central voice of the novel. The opening section concludes with Grace's words – "This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (7) – emphasising their respective roles as active speaker and passive listener. And despite the divulgence of much material not given to Simon, the reader is equally held in passive thrall to the pace and pattern of Grace's unfolding narrative.

Grace's story is extensive and inclusive, and the volume and superfluity of detail strikes Simon as he listens: "although she can't seem to remember the murder, she has a minute recollection of the details surrounding it" (434). MacKenzie develops his own interpretation of Grace's volubility, which he shares with Simon: "[she wants] to keep the Sultan amused …. To keep the blow from falling. To forestall your departure, and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible" (438). To this extent, MacKenzie is correct; Grace admits to humouring Simon: "I say something about it just to keep him happy" (76), and also to enjoying the attention he

gives her: "now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well" (79). MacKenzie assumes that Grace is motivated by a secret love for Simon, an assumption discredited by his fantasy that she held similar feelings for him, but more accurately, Grace is simply seduced by the opportunity to speak.

After years of the prison regime, in which the forcibly silenced women are reduced to eating loudly "in order to make a noise of some sort even if not speech" (71), Grace craves conversation. She recollects, "it was difficult to begin talking. I had not talked very much for the past fifteen years, not really talking the way I once talked with Mary Whitney … and in a way I had forgotten how" (77). This seduction begins from their first encounter, when Simon presents Grace with an apple in a clumsy pre-Freudian attempt at word association. Initially rejecting what she sees as a reward for being good – "I am not a dog" (44), she tells him – by the end of their meeting, Grace has accepted the gift: "Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead" (47). She has been tempted by his offer of speech and has succumbed. Speaking becomes her release, her escape, and also her defiance of the imposition of silence that she has been placed under for so long.

Having begun to speak, Grace must then work to create a space for herself within the claustrophobic glare of Simon's attentions. Viewing the novel in terms of escape, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson considers Grace's authorial decisions as manifestations of her need to elide psychological imprisonment, and suggests that, "though incarcerated, Grace is far from captured, and her escape – her only escape for decades – rests upon keeping silent about her role in the murder of her employer".[17] By giving her story into the hands of MacKenzie, Grace has previously been rendered mute and impotent. She responds to Simon's enquiries with bitterness: "You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself" (46). Consequently, Grace learns to control her own narrative; when Simon asks her about her dreams, she thinks to herself, "I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for

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[17] Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Women's Movement: Escape as Transgression in North-American Feminist Fiction*, Amsterdam, 2000, 208.

myself" (116). Grace seizes what control she can by limiting and controlling her story. Even the apparently friendly attempts of Reverend Verringer's committee to discover her true nature is recognised as an alternative version of the same impulse to limit and define, to take over her story, and Grace continues to defend herself from them. Like the subaltern woman, Grace is trapped between silence and representation, and must work to discover an alternative.

The most extreme example of this covert rebellion occurs in the hypnotism session that Grace is coerced into. Variously hoping to prove Grace's innocence and to unlock the key to her amnesia, the organisers and witnesses, unaware that the hypnotist is Jeremiah the peddler masquerading as "Dr. Jerome DuPont", are duped into believing that Grace is possessed. (Further, in keeping with the text, the possibility that Grace is unwittingly manifesting a genuine alter personality is never explicitly denied).

Jeremiah functions in the novel as a subversive, as a shape-shifter, exotic and border-crosser, which are by now all familiar elements within Atwood's work. Like Grace herself, Jeremiah is skilled at appropriating voices, taking on the role of medic, preacher, and, as Grace recalls to Simon, on her first meeting with Jeremiah, "he did an imitation of a gentleman, with the voice and manners and all, at which we clapped our hands with joy, it was so lifelike" (179). The ease with which Jeremiah crosses the borders of class, race, and profession disrupts the authority of each. He describes his illegal border-crossings between Canada and the United States: "when you cross the border, it is like passing through air, you wouldn't know you'd done it; as the trees on both sides of it are the same" (309). This negation of difference and distinction suggests a postmodern freedom to move between genre and place: a freedom that becomes an increasingly valuable commodity to Grace in her imprisonment.

When apparently hypnotised by Jeremiah and assuming the persona of Mary Whitney, Grace is free to articulate anger denied to her as herself. Knowing that Simon's interest in her has become entangled with sexual fantasy, she responds to his questions about her relationship with fellow murderer James McDermott with vicious directness: "You want to know if I kissed him, if I slept with him …. Whether I did what you'd like to do with that little slut who's got hold of your hand?" (464-65). Grace exposes both Simon's fantasies and the flirtation of the Governor's daughter in a voice that the Reverend

Verringer dryly concedes was "not without a certain logic" (471). As Mary, Grace is also able to point to a concept of justice within her act of murder:

> She had to die. The wages of sin is death. And this time the gentleman died as well, for once. Share and share alike! (466)

Using the same biblical morality that had condemned Mary for her illegitimate pregnancy, Grace employs the democratic views of her friend and uses patriarchal authority against her master. Grace creates a delicate balance of speech and silence in order to create a site of subversive power in a culture that would render her powerless.

The discourse of madness

Throughout the novel, Grace speaks through the voices of others, and the other significant voice that she appropriates is that of madness, or hysteria. The politics of hysterical discourse has been a theme running through Atwood's work right from *The Edible Woman*, in which Marian's hysterical refusal of food was eventually acknowledged as an alternative, repressed, but nonetheless valid logic. In *Alias Grace*, Grace's defence against murder is her hysteria-induced amnesia, and possibly hysterical actions during the actual hours of the crime.

The question of Grace's madness remains unanswered. Atwood quotes Susanna Moodie's recollection of seeing Grace in an insane asylum: "no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment" (51), although Moodie's reliability is frequently questioned in the novel. Grace's apparent insanity is dismissed by Dr Bannerling, the previous Superintendent of the Asylum, who informs Simon that "her madness was a fraud and an imposture, adopted by her in order that she might indulge herself and be indulged" (81). Resulting in her temporary removal from the penitentiary, madness does indeed serve Grace as a tool of escape, seemingly supporting Dr Bannerling's reading. Grace, however, intimates that rather than seeking to be indulged, it is she who indulges her spectators:

> When they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my head and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one. (36)

Madness becomes a response to the expectations of others. A plea for leniency rests on the establishment of Grace's mental deficiency, and she reveals that "it was my own lawyer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., who told them I was next door to an idiot" (26). Such instances of apparent artifice, coupled with an equally dubious manifestation of multiple personality, or, to use the Victorian term, *double consciousness*, as well as Moodie's perhaps exaggerated, but according to Atwood, generally truthful account:[18] all prompt a questioning of the nature of Grace's madness, and further, of the cultural construction of madness itself.

Michel Foucault's seminal account, *Madness and Civilisation*, argues for an understanding of madness within a cultural context. Drawing on the biblical depiction of the leper as symbol of evil cast out from society, Foucault locates the response to insanity within the same symbolic structures: "Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained."[19] From this moment, Foucault charts the depiction of madness within a changing landscape of cultural and artistic fashion.

Although *Madness and Civilisation* makes no specific reference to the influence of gender in cultural perceptions of insanity, many feminists have fruitfully developed Foucault's thesis in that direction, arguing that "feminine disorders" such as hysteria are frustrated responses to a patriarchal and oppressive male culture. Frequent reference is made to Phyllis Chesler's 1973 statement that "what we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype".[20] Madness, according to this reading, is an attempt to articulate needs unrecognised by a dominant patriarchy that rejects the legitimacy of female anger, and also represents a refusal to be silenced; this was the reasoning that Atwood followed in *The Edible Woman*.

Despite this apparently positive reading of hysteria, Shoshana Felman, who uses Chesler's work, is quick to emphasise and support

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[18] "Moodie's first-hand observations are generally trustworthy, so if she reports a shrieking, capering Grace, that is no doubt what she saw" (Afterword, *Alias Grace*, 538-39).

[19] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London, 1967, 7.

[20] Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 53.

Chesler's insistence that this is not to be misunderstood as a romanticising of madness. She explains that:

> quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, "mental illness" is a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration.[21]

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood evinces some sympathy with this argument. The women in the Asylum are there for many reasons, few of which are recognised by the medical authorities. Contemplating their circumstances, Grace recognises madness as the final weapon of the impotent:

> a good portion of the women in the Asylum were no madder than the Queen of England …. One of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up; and another said she went mad in the autumns, as she had no house and it was warm in the Asylum, and if she didn't do a fair job of running mad she would freeze to death … (34)

Further, Grace recognises the physical and psychical restraints imposed by insanity, which, whilst effecting the escape of these women from one prison, only serves to place them in another. Grace contemplates the term *run mad*: "as if mad is a direction …. But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in" (37). In the novel, this "somebody else" is spuriously attributed to Mary Whitney, but more accurately, it can be understood as the dehumanising shift from person to "madwoman", which signals a loss of self.

In *The Female Malady*, Showalter describes the romanticising of the madwoman in nineteenth century art:

> to watch these operas in performance is to realise that even the madwomen do not escape male domination; they escape one specific, intolerable exercise of women's wrongs by assuming an idealized, poetic form of pure femininity as the male culture had construed it:

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[21] Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy", in *Feminisms*, 8.

absolutely irrational, absolutely emotional, and, once the single act is accomplished, absolutely passive.[22]

Once she is deemed insane, Grace's autonomy, such as it was, is placed in the hands of the masculine authorities of law, medicine, and media. Showalter comments that, "Mirroring the patriarchal character of the Victorian age, the asylum became increasingly like the family, ruled by the father, and subject to his values and his law".[23] A schism appears between the empowering feminist concept of the hysteric as a voice of rebellion, and the contradictory reality of hysteria as a confirmation of masculine assumptions of feminine intellectual frailty. Such was the power of the belief, the madwoman could not escape the imposition of presuppositions about her character.

Simon is aware of the impossible logic that binds: "if women are seduced and abandoned they're supposed to go mad, but if they survive, and seduce in their turn, then they were mad to begin with" (349). Yet despite his sagacity, Atwood depicts the overwhelming popular construction of the madwoman in Simon's initial impressions of Grace as "the cornered woman; the penitential dress falling straight down, concealing feet that were surely bare … the long wisps of auburn hair escaping from what appeared at first glance to be a chaplet of white flowers". This illusion is quickly shattered by the reality of Grace – "straighter, taller, more self-possessed" (68) – and Simon is forced to acknowledge his own susceptibility to "imagination and fancy" (69).

Atwood accords with Showalter when she explains that Simon's instinctive response to Grace's madness is indicative of the romantic sensibilities of the period:

> It was really a very attractive thing to the male artist of the period, rescuing the fainting woman, the crazy, fainting woman. Just the image of Ophelia drifting downstream with her flowers. Flowers, singing, hair down, state of derangement.[24]

Indeed, it is this same image of Ophelia that Dr. Bannerling accuses Grace of self-consciously appropriating in her masquerade of insanity,

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[22] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 17.

[23] *Ibid.*, 50.

[24] Atwood quoted in Laura Miller.

"nothing being lacking to the impersonation but Ophelia's wildflowers entwined in her hair" (81). In both references, however, it is the men rather than Grace who tie the flowers to her hair.

Grace cannot escape the construction of her insanity because it extends beyond her own circumstances, encompassing a much deeper association of madness with the feminine. Indeed, feminist scholarship has repeatedly argued that madness, even when experienced by men, is perceived to be feminine. In Showalter's words, "They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind".[25] Situated within this tradition, the possibility that Grace can ever speak with an authoritative and unified voice seems conceptually impossible.

However, if Mary is a double, the discourse of Grace's madness is not attributable to the alien feelings of an alter personality, but rather to a projection of her own repressed self onto the figure of Mary. Again, as with much of this novel, Atwood points to a reading that echoes a prominent thesis within feminist literary theory, in this case, Gilbert and Gubar's seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic.* Studying nineteenth-century women's fiction, Gilbert and Gubar found what they termed "a coherence of theme and imagery" that appeared to unite the texts, including "Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles function as asocial surrogates for docile selves".[26] Doubles, according to this theory, appear in nineteenth-century women's texts as "fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their author's submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable".[27]

In *Alias Grace*, Mary is described as "a fun-loving girl, and very mischievous and bold in her speech" (173). To Grace she gives her opinions on the class system: "They may be silk purses in the daytime, but they're all sows' ears at night" (39). Grace recalls, "it angered her that some people had so much and others so little, as she could not see any divine plan in it" (173). In her secret engagement to her

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[25] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 3-4.
[26] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, 1979, xi.
[27] *Ibid.*, 78.

employer's son, Mary disregards the rules of social hierarchy, for which she never had a great respect, quoting at Grace: "*When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?*" (183) Yet despite her outspoken views and Radical sympathies, Mary is far from the asocial "witch-monster-madwoman" that Gilbert and Gubar speak of.

Of course, despite its setting, *Alias Grace* is not a nineteenth-century novel, and throughout the text, Atwood imposes late twentieth-century understandings onto the discourses of the previous century. Rather than the unconscious identification that Gilbert and Gubar diagnosed in the nineteenth-century female author's depiction of the madwoman, Atwood uses Mary as a self-conscious double. With a broadly metafictional stroke, the reader is forced to question how naïve Grace, the twentieth-century incarnation of a nineteenth-century heroine, actually is. Where in life Mary was a neat and efficient servant, speaking her liberal views only to Grace, after death she becomes "the monster woman … who seeks the power of self-articulation"[28] because this is what Grace needs her to be. Appropriating Mary allows Grace to knowingly articulate her frustrations, and it is perhaps Mary who first suggests the tactic to Grace, when, tellingly, Grace is walking up to the attic wrapped in a sheet. Grace recalls: "she said I looked very comical, just like a madwoman" (175). Where the unconscious double was originally a figure of a divided and repressed self, in *Alias Grace* she is put to use as a self-conscious means of enabling speech within an acceptable – because expected – frame of female hysteria.

By describing hysteria as a feminine discourse, feminists such as Showalter, Felman, Gilbert and Gubar describe a specifically "feminine" voice which is inevitably articulated through madness because it exists outside of the rational patriarchal discourse. Felman argues that "what the narcissistic economy of the masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate, under the label 'madness', is nothing other than *feminine difference*".[29] For Felman, this difference, not coming under masculine law, is a threat to male authority and as such must be diminished by the label "madness", which can then be cured or destroyed.

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[28] *Ibid.*, 79.
[29] Felman, "Women and Madness", 16.

Although many of the feminist writings of the 1970s were implicitly essentialist, many feminists soon began to express concern at the ready acceptance of the madwoman as an image of "natural woman". In a 1984 essay, unequivocally titled "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Like Feminist Literary Theory", Baym argued that "this open, nonlinear, exploded, fragmented, polysemic idea of our speech is congruent with the idea of the hopelessly irrational, disorganized, 'weaker sex' desired by the masculine Other".[30] Further, and demonstrating a postmodern perspective, she suggested that "women or men in western society undertaking to produce what they hope will be viewed as 'serious' writing do so in complicated, culturally mediated ways".[31] Baym negates notions of feminine difference by locating literary construction within cultural rather than gender terms. According to Baym, even so-called private writings, such as the letters and diaries which proliferate in *Alias Grace*, are constructed within cultural confines, and are no more capable of revealing an authentic female voice than any more obviously public document.

Alias Grace post-dates this argument by over a decade, and whilst the naïve reader posited by Ingersoll who would expect "a seamless illusion" has been succeeded, so, presumably, has the theoretical novice for whom Grace's marginal position as criminal, insane and hysterical is indicative of an authentic femininity. Atwood instead creates a character aware of limiting and defining feminine clichés, and Grace, like Zenia, responds by self-consciously enacting them with unsettling conviction in order to work out a space of autonomy within a structure that denies it her. When pushed into marriage with Jamie Walsh – "I made a show of hanging back, though the reality of it was that I did not have many other choices" (524) – Grace has to respond appropriately to his fantasies of her fragility, and tells us: "I turn my eyes up and look solemn, and then kiss him and cry a little" (532). Atwood refuses to romanticise madness and recognises hysteria as the tactic of the powerless.

Discussing with Dr DuPont contemporary theories of prostitution as "a form of insanity [linked] to hysteria" (349), Simon argues that, faced with a choice between "starvation, prostitution, or throwing

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[30] Nina Baym, "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Like Feminist Literary Theory", in *Feminisms*, 283.

[31] *Ibid.*, 279-80.

herself from a bridge", the prostitute's resilience and tenacity should prove her "stronger and saner than her frailer and no longer living sisters" (349). Although, as Foucault argues, the medicalisation of madness and depravity, which relieved the insane from the charges of sinfulness or criminality was considered progressive,[32] Simon begins to recognise that medical discourse could equally falsify what could be better understood in sociological terms. This battle to "own" madness continued into the late twentieth-century, with certain feminists moving to reclaim hysteria as an articulation of feminine difference. The patient who does not recognise any of the claims being made on her part finds little space to articulate madness externally from a defining discourse. Trapped within the so-called weaker sex, Grace's hysterics are a concession calculated to undermine the definitions of her madness; in agreeing to perform, she highlights the artifice of her performance.

Revealing the self

Grace's performance, like, as MacKenzie points out, Scheherazade's entertaining of the Sultan, primarily takes place during her psychoanalysis sessions with Simon, and it is at these meetings that Simon attempts to deconstruct her story and expose the truth. As Simon attempts to piece together the fragments of her narrative, Grace continues to be a patchwork composite of experiences and voices, and in *Alias Grace*, the patchwork is an image of existential despair: a postmodern nightmare of the fragmented and meaningless self.

   The apparent manifestation of multiple personality which Grace displays during hypnosis prompts such a crisis in Reverend Verringer, as he questions:

> what becomes of the soul? We cannot be mere patchworks! It is a horrifying thought, and one that, if true, would make a mockery of all notions of moral responsibility. (471)

In contrast to Verringer's theological response, Simon considers the mysteries of the human brain in terms of untold possibilities; "could you sew and snip, and patch together a genius?" (217) he wonders.

   Analysing the novel, Murray, in contrast to these fragmented visions, sees the quilt as an ultimately essentialist image. Highlighting

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[32] Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, 221-22.

the notion of the Trinity conjured by Grace in her stitching together of cloth from Nancy, Mary, and herself – "And so we will all be together" (534) – Murray points out the essential tenet of the Trinity: "No matter how many parts make up the One, the One remains whole and united". For Murray, what she considers to be the novel's tension between unity and fragmentation is ultimately a disappointment, "a form of indecisiveness"[33] that results in the inconclusive nature of Grace's narrative, which ends with the words: "to know you carry within yourself either a life or a death, but not to know which one" (533). Like so many of Atwood's novels, *Alias Grace* refuses to move its protagonist beyond that final moment of speculation, and by this, could be considered to deny positive progression.

This reading of the novel, however, is refuted by Ingersoll, who argues:

> As a collection, or "patchwork," of texts, Atwood's novel seems far less a "box" than an onion whose leaves the reader peels away, expecting to discover the "heart of the matter," only to find "nothing" in the center. In this way, the "outside" of this postmodern text comprises its "inside".[34]

Ingersoll discusses the novel in terms of a modernist notion of discoverable truth and a postmodernist acceptance of multiple truths. He quotes Atwood talking on this same topic: "I am not one of those who believes that there is no truth to be known; but I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth – somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery – truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us."[35] Atwood and Ingersoll both seem to point to a postmodern understanding of the text, opposing Murray's essentialist reading. However, Atwood does not entirely coincide with Ingersoll. Hers is not an understanding of Grace as the postmodern onion. Whilst the truth may be unknowable, there *is* a truth.

The patchwork quilt, with its corresponding images of creation, development, and construction, works in opposition to the novel's alternative image, the striptease, which refers to the impulse to strip, expose, and deconstruct. Although they contain similarities, these two

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[33] Murray, "Historical Figures", 80-81.

[34] Ingersoll, "Engendering Metafiction", 390.

[35] Atwood quoted in Ingersoll, "Engendering Metafiction", 392.

metaphors imagine the construction of Grace in significantly different ways: where the patchwork envisions a fragmented composition, which is nevertheless united in its pattern and construction, the striptease is an image of layers, which are removed one by one; but unlike the onion to which Ingersoll refers, the striptease presumes to reveal an eventual naked core.

The narrative, whilst ostensibly concerned with the recovery of Grace's memory, begins to conflate the psychoanalytical process of exploration and revelation with an explicitly sexualised desire to physically expose Grace. As the novel moves through a series of revealing sequences, in which layer after layer is peeled back, moving towards an eventual climax in which the reader hopes all will be revealed, Simon's interest in Grace becomes increasingly erotic. His psychoanalytic language betrays a common metaphor of memory recovery as sexual conquest, and Simon repeatedly expresses the wish to "open her up like an oyster" (153), fantasising that "Grace will at last crack open, revealing her hoarded treasures" (357). Grace, however, is a coy and teasing analysand, revealing much but always somehow remaining enshrouded.

Central to the idea of striptease, and proliferating in her plentiful recollections, are countless items of clothing, which are increasingly fetishised in the novel. As Simon notes with frustration, "every button … seems accounted for" (215), "every item of laundry she ever washed" (434). Just as clothes cover and obscure the body, so the abundance of Grace's narrative covers and obscures the actual moment of the murder. Simon "has an uneasy sense that the very plenitude of her recollections may be a sort of distraction, a way of drawing the mind away from some hidden but essential fact, like the dainty flowers planted over a grave" (216). The death imagery is significant to Grace, and connected to both Mary and Nancy, for whom the removal of their clothes led both women to pregnancy and ultimately to their death. Significantly, Grace appropriates the clothes of both these women at certain moments in the text. Arriving at Kinnear's, she wears "a kerchief left to me by Mary" (236), and at the trial, Jamie points in horror: "She has got on Nancy's dress, the ribbons under her bonnet are also Nancy's" (419). In constructing her story, Grace takes on the "madness" of Mary and the illegitimacy of both Mary and Nancy, but these prove to be yet more layers, and like their clothes, can be removed at will.

Desperately peeling away at Grace's story, Simon's frustrated fantasies begin to conflate the practise with the removal of clothes, and he dreams of trying to grasp the end of a scarf or veil, which turns into a woman: a sensation that he finds "unbearably erotic" (226). In his subconscious, the attainment of both memory and body has become a unified goal, and Grace refuses him both. Her narrative is like a "long bandage unrolling" (226), and as it nears its climax, Simon dreams of dissecting a woman's body:

> He must lift off the sheet, then lift off her skin, whoever she is, or was, layer by layer. Strip back her rubbery flesh, peel her open, gut her like a haddock …. But under the sheet there's another sheet, and under that another one. It looks like a white muslin curtain. Then there's a black veil, and then – can it be? – a petticoat. The woman must be down there somewhere; frantically he rummages. But no; the last sheet is a bedsheet, and there's nothing under it … (408)

In this image, Grace is once again the inessential onion, comprised entirely of layers of cloth, and like the dream, her narrative results in a parallel frustrated climax, when it becomes apparent to Simon that there will be no revelation of truth to be discovered.

Whilst it could be understood that Grace derives authority by controlling what she will reveal and conceal, her position is not consistently antagonistic to Simon's desires. Invested in maintaining his interest, Grace offers increasingly salacious hints and details that all correspond to the removal of clothing within the narrative, again effectively performing a striptease to entice Simon into her story. After the murders, Grace recalls regaining consciousness: "lying on my back, on the bed in my own bedchamber; and my cap was off and my hair was all disarranged" (383). Tormented by such partial revelations, Simon's impatience surfaces: "'Did he put his hands inside your clothing?' he says. 'Were you lying down?'" (359) Refusing to be pushed, Grace responds with a threat of silence; a threat to end the performance of revelation that has Simon enthralled.

In Roland Barthes' essay on striptease, he argues that costume works to instantly establish the woman as "an object in disguise": "The end of the striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and hidden clothing, nakedness as a *natural* vesture of woman, which

amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of flesh."[36] The eroticism of the striptease is bound to the voyeurism and distance promoted by costume and its systematic removal. In *Alias Grace,* Simon takes on the role of observer in his attempt to uncover the truth of Grace, but Grace subverts his gaze by offering herself up to him as a spectacle whilst simultaneously refusing to reveal what he wants to see. Simon recognises that Grace's narrative is making a voyeur of him; early in their acquaintance, he admits to himself that "he felt as if he was watching her undress, through a chink in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat" (105). Striptease relies on delayed gratification; the means overshadow the end. Striptease is not, ultimately, about the body, and Barthes suggests that "Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked".[37] The naked body in itself is devoid of the mystery and eroticism that stimulates the fantasy on which the practice is based. Making a connection between the body and the text, Grace, however, performs the perfect striptease, only ever revealing another layer to be removed in a perpetual postponement of the climactic moment of truth.

However, where Simon's subconscious impressions of his and Grace's increasingly sexualised relationship all contain frustrated images of stripping away interminable layers, Grace experiences an equally sexual, but conceptually opposite image. For her, analysis is:

> a feeling like being torn open: not like a body of flesh, it is not painful as such, but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting open of its own accord. And inside the peach there's a stone. (79)

This image of the essentialist peach is the classic opposition to the postmodern onion; whilst experience and culture make up the flesh of the fruit, the inner stone represents a unique and immutable self: a self that Simon is never quite able to reach.

In the end, the key to Grace's secrets lies in her memory, and it is this that Simon is trying to strip down to its core of truth. Hacking, however, relating memories to the soul, or self, argues that "to think

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[36] Roland Barthes, "Striptease", in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, London, 1982, 85.

[37] *Ibid*., 86.

of the soul is not to imply that there is one essence, one spiritual point, from which all voices issue". Hacking describes his investigation as an attempt to "scientize the soul through the study of memory", asking "how do systems of knowledge about kinds of people interact with the people who are known about?".[38] In discussing *Alias Grace*, Atwood speaks of a similar idea. She explains that her interest in Grace's story was heightened by the realisation that many of the accounts were inaccurate:

> Other people were just making the story up from the moment it happened. They were all fictionalizing. They were all projecting their own views onto these various people. It is a real study in how the perception of reality is shaped.[39]

In the novel, each character projects his or her opinions onto Grace, and her subversive response has already been discussed. In the therapeutic relationship, however, this projection, appearing as a transference of emotions, is more complex and particularly potent.

In analysing Grace, Simon undergoes a developing process of responses to his patient. First seen as the barefoot penitent, she is later perceived as "a female animal; something fox-like and alert" (103), and then, Amina, the innocent sleepwalker of Bellini's opera, *La Sonnambula*, "a simple and chaste village girl" (373). Whichever of these possibilities she will eventually prove to be, Simon is desperate to define her:

> It may well be that Grace is a true amnesiac. Or simply contrary. Or simply guilty .… What he wants is certainty, one way or the other; and that is precisely what she's withholding from him. (374-75)

At their meetings, Simon imposes his need for definition onto Grace who, whilst always managing to elude him, nevertheless responds to his needs.

The sexual aspect of this dynamic, although repressed, is recognised by both. Grace's narrative attracts and responds to Simon, and Murray argues that "Grace's storytelling requires the return of

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[38] Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, 6.
[39] Atwood quoted in Laura Miller.

Jordan's desire".[40] Ingersoll also speaks of the novel in terms of desire, quoting Robert Scholes' view of sophisticated narrative in terms of "delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself".[41] Where Grace's narrative arouses Simon, his attendance to it has a reciprocal effect. Grace thinks: "while he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me: or not drawing me, drawing on me – drawing on my skin – not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end" (79). The narrative creates an interactive relationship between orator and auditor, and whilst this need for the other is frequently manifested in subconscious sexual responses, it more broadly involves the creation of a relationship of power.

Speaking of the manner in which a patient may respond to the expectations of the clinician, Hacking points out that:

> We tend to behave in ways that are expected of us, especially by authority figures – doctors, for example …. People classified in a certain way tend to conform or to grow into the ways that they are described.[42]

In *Alias Grace*, Grace recognises Simon's expectations, as she recognises his greed for her story, noting that "he's using a kind voice, kind on the surface but with other desires hidden beneath it" (46). And she responds to Simon's desire: "it gave me joy every time I managed to come up with something that would interest you" (531).

This phenomenon was discussed by Freud, and termed "transference", occurring when "a woman patient shows by unmistakable indications, or openly declares, that she has fallen in love … with the doctor who is analysing her".[43] Freud also warned doctors against a counter-transference, by which they fall in love with the patient. In *Alias Grace*, Simon certainly experiences counter-transference:

> *Murderess, murderess*, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines

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[40] Murray, "Historical Figures", 71.

[41] Ingersoll, "Engendering Metafiction", 393.

[42] Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, 21.

[43] Freud, "Observations on Transference-Love", in the *Freud Reader*, 378.

> himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand. (453)

The eroticism with which Simon infuses his images of Grace is filled with the allure of the exotic.

Significantly however, what becomes apparent from this image, given by Simon towards the end of the book, is that it emanates not from him but from Grace. Right at the beginning of her narrative, Grace contemplates the exotic appeal that surrounds her:

> *Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor. (25)

Despite his belief that he holds the superior role in their power relation, Simon succumbs to Grace's self-conscious projection of his fantasies, until, ultimately, he is responding to her in a reversal of their relational roles.

Grace is, for Simon, a "locked box" (153) to be opened – the Pandora's Box which heads the chapter in which Grace is to be hypnotised. If he works through her memories, he believes he will attain her truth: her soul. The power relationship is thought to be entirely on his side, and analysis is perceived as his attempt to manipulate her memory, which is considered both passive and latent. He thinks to himself: "He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out?" (374). In this traditional view of psychoanalysis, the doctor labours to produce something from his passive patient.

Feminist perspectives of psychoanalysis have worked to disrupt this active/passive dichotomy, and with reference to multiple personality, have argued for an alternative understanding of the patient's role as creator of their multiples, rather than a victim of illness. Using Margot Rivera's work, Hacking outlines an understanding of multiple personality or alter ego as a response to repressive roles assigned to women, suggesting that, "Where in the nineteenth century the alter was naughty, mischievous, or promiscuous, in the late twentieth century she can be a man". Using multiple personality as a tool, a woman can patch together a multifaceted self, uninhibited by gender or cultural restraints.

Hacking, however, warns that "we should not think that the patient discovers some 'true' underlying self but that she has broken through to the freedom to choose, create, and construct her own identity".[44]

Hacking's concept of the self, or the soul, as he terms it, is simultaneously unitary and fragmented, and Atwood comes to a somewhat similar conclusion in *Alias Grace*. Trapped within binding notions of femininity, Grace works within the limited space available to her. She responds to Simon's voyeurism by appearing to allow him to deconstruct her. Asked for her memories (her self/her soul) she offers them in such plenitude as to entirely obscure the core; "The trouble is," Simon thinks:

> the more she remembers, the more she relates, the more difficulty he himself is having. He can't seem to keep track of the pieces. It's as if she's drawing his energy out of him. (338)

Like the striptease artist who maintains arousal by refusing to satisfy, who is never naked whilst continuing to undress, Grace maintains her resistance by appearing to acquiesce.

Atwood adopts a postmodern embodiment of the self constructed through surfaces, masquerade and costume, but subverts this resolution by suggesting that the masquerade conceals a central core. In her narrative, Grace manages to both construct and deconstruct her self simultaneously, and Atwood is able to encompass both essentialist and anti-essentialist readings of her character. As second-wave feminism approaches its conclusion towards the end of the twentieth century, Atwood negotiates a position on feminine subjectivity that remains something of a compromise between essentialism and anti-essentialism. In her last novel of the century, *The Blind Assassin*, she takes a final look at these same issues. But again, in her concluding dialogue with twentieth-century feminism, Atwood refuses to be drawn into any prescribed political positions.

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[44] Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, 78-79.

CHAPTER X

THE BLIND ASSASSIN: THE END OF FEMINISM?

The Blind Assassin functions self-consciously as a milestone in Atwood's canon; her tenth novel, it appeared in 2000, when Atwood was sixty-years old. It was the novel for which she finally won the Man Booker Prize, after having previously been nominated for *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *Alias Grace*. Her eventual success in 2000 might be considered as acknowledgement of previous contributions as much as of this particular achievement. In the same year, Atwood was to be the subject of a collaborative retrospective, written on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday. Nischik's *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* purports to "take stock of the full breadth of … one of the most important literary chroniclers of our time".[1] The tenth novel, bearing some resemblance in this respect to *Cat's Eye*, is equally conscious of the passing of time and the construction of celebrity.

   The Blind Assassin is concerned with the manner in which events are lived, encoded in myth and legend, and passed down to a future generation. It involves a dual aspect: a looking to the future and also a looking to the past. In encapsulating the whole of the twentieth century, the retrospective aspect of the novel implicitly raises questions about the future. The future, it is suggested, must learn from the past, but can only hope to do so if the past is viewed honestly, without nostalgia or bitterness. When the ageing protagonist Iris concludes her narrative, she instructs her granddaughter Sabrina, who is the tale's absent auditor: "Don't prettify me though, whatever else you do: I have no wish to be a decorated skull."[2] Remembrance, monuments, and recollection season the text, which provides a ready platform from which to survey Atwood's development over thirty years of novel writing.

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[1] *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik, New York, 2000, 1.
[2] Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, London, 2000, 637. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

The turn of the new millennium also functioned as a watershed moment for the feminist movement. The millennium provided the clearest demarcation of the much-debated subsidence of the second wave of feminism and subsequent rise of the third. Reference was first made to the third wave in the mid-1980s, and the term was frequently conflated with another new label, "postfeminism". Elizabeth Wright highlights the opposing perceptions of this apparently synonymous concept. Seen positively, postfeminism is "continuously in process, transforming and changing itself",[3] and should be considered as a critical advance on earlier feminist discourses. Alternatively, postfeminism can appear anti-feminist, a view that "assumes that feminism is being sabotaged by the 'post', which indicates that feminism can now be dispensed with, at least in the form of making a special plea for the subjectivity of the feminine subject".[4]

A generation of feminists who had conceived of and developed the feminist renaissance of the 1970s was to see their work dismissed as repressive, essentialist, and elitist by certain younger women. Rene Denfeld's 1995 text, *The New Victorians*, argues this point:

> The fact is that feminism has changed – dramatically. While there are some feminists still in touch with most women's concerns, the movement for the most part has taken a radical change in direction. It has become bogged down in an extremist moral and spiritual crusade that has little to do with women's lives. It has climbed out on a limb of academic theory that is all but inaccessible to the uninitiated.[5]

The subtitle of Denfeld's book, "A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order", points to the common conceptualisation of the history of feminism into waves, generations, and successive orders which inevitably results in the construction of a matrilineage of ideology. As this lineage progresses, each generation passes judgement on those who went before.

Atwood's tenth novel is grounded in this theme, and works to expose the compulsion to both demonise and deify one's predecessors. Written on the cusp of the third wave, *The Blind Assassin*

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[3] Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism*, 5.
[4] *Ibid*., 8.
[5] Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order*, New York, 1995, 5.

encapsulates, through the eyes of one woman, the social development of the whole of the twentieth century, and concludes in anticipation of the granddaughter who will take the matriarchal dynasty forward into the twenty-first century.

Postfeminism

Before looking at *The Blind Assassin* more closely, it is helpful to consider some of the changes that were taking place within feminism around the time of its inception and publication. Within feminist theory, the question of how to bring the movement into the next millennium was to result in a fundamental shift in ideology, and ultimately, in the declaration of the death of feminism. A number of texts appeared alongside *The New Victorians* that seemed to mark a decisive move away from traditional feminism. Whilst postfeminism has been considered "feminism's 'coming of age,' its maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference",[6] this definition is less common than the largely negative idea of postfeminism disseminated by the popular media.

Accusing the press of waging an anti-feminist campaign, Susan Faludi argues in her 1992 book, *Backlash*, that "the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that 'post-feminism' was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement".[7] This new generation included Naomi Wolf, whose text *Fire With Fire* (1993) argued that "the definition of feminism has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women's individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined in the popular imagination as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements."[8]

This judgement of second-wave feminism as ideologically narrow and proscriptive is common amongst postfeminist thinkers. It appears in the work of Katie Roiphe, whose book, *The Morning After*, like Denfeld's, accuses second-wave feminists of perpetuating the myth of the powerless and victimised woman. Roiphe locates in the feminist

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[6] Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, London, 1992, 1.

[7] Susan Faludi, *Backlash*, London, 1991, 14.

[8] Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*, New York, 1993, 62.

anti-rape movement a covert conservatism: "instead of liberation and libido, the emphasis is on trauma and disease."[9] The new feminism, in contrast, calls for a freedom of desire that has, it claims, been renounced by a generation of stifling political correctness.

Counteracting this narrative of the postfeminist coup are a number of theorists who argue for a developmental rather than an oppositional view of the relationship between second-wave, and what they prefer to call third-wave feminism. In fact, a central tenet of this argument is the distinction between postfeminism and third-wave feminism. Whilst the former is articulated by a media-driven spectacle of anti-feminism, the latter can be better understood as a natural progression of feminist thought towards a politics of diversity. This is the argument that forms the basis of Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's 1997 anthology, *Third Wave Agenda*, which seeks to distance third-wave politics from those of the postfeminists, described by Heywood and Drake as "a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave".[10] In contrast, the defining characteristic of the third wave is perhaps best given by Sarah Gamble: "third wave feminism acknowledges that it stands on the shoulders of other, earlier, feminist movements and so avoids the defensive relationship adopted by Roiphe, Denfeld and others."[11]

In essence, postfeminism adopts an ethic of liberal pluralism in which each individual is free to orchestrate her own equally legitimate choices. Third-wave feminism, however, maintains the discourses of race, class, and gender that feminism has always struggled with: moving towards a politics of diversity, but refusing to entirely surrender definitions of difference to liberal individualism, which, in its emphasis on the individual over the group, undermines the concept of difference as a recognisably coherent and potently inclusive construction.

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[9] Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, Boston, 1993, 12.

[10] *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, eds Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, Minneapolis, 1997, 1.

[11] Sarah Gamble, "Postfeminism", in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble, London, 2001, 54.

The end of feminist history

This question of how best to reconcile the opposing desires for individual autonomy and for mutual recognition informs political theorist Francis Fukuyama's thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*, which provides another useful context from within which to read Atwood's novel. Written in 1992, the book expanded on the arguments first given by Fukuyama in a 1989 article, "The End of History?". In both, he argues for a view of human history as a coherent progressive evolution, the purpose of which is the attainment of liberal democracy. Whilst certain countries are still struggling to achieve this ultimate state, argues Fukuyama, time and experience have demonstrated that "the *ideal* of liberal democracy could not be improved on".[12] *The End of History* argues that liberal democracy not only provides the economic freedom for general prosperity, but also that the equality inherent in liberalism resolves the tensions of the unequal master-slave societies of monarchies and dictatorships, in which one group does not recognise the humanity of the other.

Fukuyama finds no contradiction in the traditional liberal pursuit of individual desires and what is usually considered to be the communitarian ideal of mutual recognition. The arguments against Fukuyama, however, are clear. In his Introduction, he asserts: "liberal principles in economics – the 'free market' – have spread, and have succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity."[13] This belief is intrinsically conservative, founded in globalisation and homogenisation: a fact that he readily admits when he states that "all countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another".[14] Liberal democracy for Fukuyama means individualism, consumerism, globalisation, and homogeneity. In the moment of its attainment, all needs for the protection and definition of group identities are swept away as the individual is assured equality within society.

The liberal individualism of Fukuyama's thinking ties his theory to the politics of postfeminism, and both ideologies are informed by a belief in the existence of a "post-political" moment. However, Fukuyama's metanarrative of history is antithetical to postmodernism, and so postfeminism is caught between the postmodern instincts that

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[12] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, 1992, xi.

[13] *Ibid*., xiii.

[14] *Ibid*., xiv-xv.

propelled its split from second-wave feminism, and its connection with the liberal individualism of the "end of history" thesis.

Faludi, however, warns that the corresponding individualism of postfeminism cannot assure equality. She states:

> We're "post-feminist" now, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care. It is an indifference that may, finally, deal the most devastating blow to women's rights.[15]

Thus a postfeminism that chooses to embrace the same principles as Fukuyama's end of history liberalism must abandon the collective identity fostered by second-wave feminism and accept that the end of history inevitable equates with the end of feminism.

Fukuyama's thesis, coming towards the end of the century, provides a pertinent cultural backdrop to Atwood's tenth novel, and articulates many of the anxieties of her text. The sense of an ending is crucial to *The Blind Assassin*, and as the direction that twenty-first century feminism will take becomes a choice between connection and individualism, this choice also proves critical to the novel.

A more postmodern feminism?
The alleged diversity of postfeminism has a very apparent connection with postmodernism, and in this aspect, seems to point to feminism's eventual reconciliation with anti-essentialism. Feminism of course had been moving more closely towards postmodernism for many years before the advent of postfeminism. Linda Nicholson's 1990 text, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, makes no mention of postfeminism as a category, but it concentrates on the progression of feminist theory towards more postmodern ideas of epistemology and subjectivity. In the introduction, Nicholson states that "postmodernism offers feminism … a wariness toward generalizations which transcend the boundaries of culture and region". Arguing that feminism has too frequently been drawn to essentialism, she attributes this to "the attempts by many feminist theorists to locate 'the cause' of women's oppression".[16] This search inevitably requires an acceptance of an

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[15] Faludi, *Backlash*, 95.
[16] *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, New York, 1990, 5.

Enlightenment world-view or meta-theory that is increasingly undermined by postmodernism.

Postmodernism focuses on the context of the individual, and eschews generalisations that might, even if unwittingly, subsume the individual's reality in order to promote a doctrine of equality or anti-repressive politics. This postmodern idea echoes in postfeminism's embrace of the personal over the political. Rebecca Walker argues that "For many of us, it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories".[17] Postfeminism, on the other hand, creates a space for the desires and contradictions of the individual, regardless of how those choices fit into a feminist manifesto. Its opponents however, argue that despite this rhetoric of diversity, postfeminism can be better understood as a multitude of individualities rather than an expansion of a narrow united body.

Feminism as a project was born of ideas of a female identity and a metahistory of female suppression by men, and as such, belongs to an Enlightenment tradition. But in these subsequent investigations into the factors that constitute sexual difference, and further discourses of numerous other differences, feminism undermines universalising theories. This contradiction at the heart of feminism is discussed by Ann Brooks in *Postfeminisms*. For Brooks, postfeminism is the consequence of the realisation of the latter of these feminist impulses, which "challenges feminism's tendency to view both subjectivity and women's experience as 'unitary,' monovocal, and characterised by a unified discourse".[18] Postfeminism, it seems, is naturally aligned with postmodernism, and if considered as the eventual direction of second-wave feminism, then it would appear that the ongoing debate about the nature of woman has resolved in favour of anti-essentialism.

Myth and metaphor

Atwood approaches the question of essentialism in this novel through an examination of art and myth. In *The Blind Assassin*, the female is constructed in every instance: through legend, through desire, through costume, and through celebrity. This construction recalls a familiar

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[17] *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker, New York, 1995, xxxi-xxxii.

[18] Brooks, *Postfeminisms*, 24.

theme of masquerade, but it also, in its emphasis on repetitive patterns of feminine construction, recurring throughout ages and across cultures, hints at a possible immutable essence of femininity that is disruptive to well-established feminist politics.

What rapidly becomes apparent when reading *The Blind Assassin* is the overtly realistic context in which the novel is set. Atwood draws on Canadian social history in a manner that exceeds her only previous concerted attempt to do so in *Alias Grace*. But this historical realism barely disguises a subtext constructed entirely of myth and metaphor. Indeed, this anti-realist subtext functions as another layer in a novel composed of many interwoven strands, and to this end, the carpets constructed by the blind assassins hold metaphorical similarities to the textual patchwork quilts of *Alias Grace*.

The most obvious example of this juxtaposition of fantasy and reality appears, of course, in the tales of *Sakiel-Norn*. Ostensibly told to Laura, Iris' younger sister, by her lover Alex Thomas, these science fiction tales carry thinly disguised polemics on society and political relations. Atwood highlights this connection by relating the fantastic tales of the aristocratic *Snilfards* and their relations with the *Ygnirod* serfs, who would occasionally "stage a revolt, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed" (21), and then disrupting the narrative with a real newspaper report of "Union riots, brutal violence and Communist-inspired bloodshed" (134). The unnamed narrator interrupts the storytelling: "I suppose this is your Bolshevism coming out", and her lover replies, "On the contrary. The culture I describe is based on ancient Mesopotamia. It's in the code of Hammurabi, the laws of the Hittites and so forth" (21). This comment is typical of Atwood; as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, all actions can be traced back to earlier practices. Watching a war report on the evening news in 1999, Iris recalls countless other wars:

> Endless mothers, carrying endless limp children, their faces splotched with blood; endless bewildered old men. They cart the young men off and murder them, intending to forestall revenge, as the Greeks did at Troy. Hitler's excuse too for killing Jewish babies, as I recall. (582)

In the twentieth century, in Ancient Greece, and in Alex's science fiction, each scenario is a recycling of the past.

With old age, Iris comes to recognise her part in such repetitions, and marvels at the enthusiasms of youth and nature: "They never seem

to get tired of it: plants have no memories, that's why. They can't remember how many times they've done all this before" (577). Northrop Frye discussed a connected idea in his essay "The Koine of Myth", in which he charted the repetition of mythical themes within literature. Describing the locations of the originally synonymous *story* and *history* along an axis extending from "true" history to "impossible" fantasy, Frye disrupts the notion of true and untrue by demonstrating the continuance of literary device and mythical structure along the full length of the axis. According to Frye, "at the end of the spectrum is fantastic romance, like the works of science fiction where the history and geography have both been invented. There is no reachable extreme here either."[19] In her novel, Atwood uses similar ideas of repetition and the recurrence of themes in seemingly incongruous media; science fiction and documented social history are connected by the novel as alternative means of expressing similar truths.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the various interludes into science fiction force the reader to readdress accepted norms of textual reliability, and also to consider the truths encoded in myth and legend. This becomes particularly vital when reading the histories of the women within the novel. Each woman is so entirely encoded that a significant amount of deconstruction is necessary to achieve any sense of a true self, should one be thought to exist. Just as Alex's fantastic tales of intrigue and betrayal comment on Canada's political reality in the Depression era, so the novel's numerous allusions to mythical and fantastic women can be presumed to connect with a female reality.

As the novel's narrator, it is significantly named Iris who is most susceptible to the construction of female mythical allusions. The first figure to be created in this way is her grandmother Adelia, a fairy godmother who would, had she lived, have helped the unworldly Iris to capture a prince. With time, Iris comes to acknowledge Adelia's impotence within her financially-motivated marriage:

> In reality the chances of Adelia having had a lover were nil. The town was too small, its morals were too provincial, she had too far to fall. She wasn't a fool. Also she had no money of her own. (75)

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[19] Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham, Charlottesville, 1990, 4.

Iris eventually admits that she "used to romanticize Adelia" (74), but she fails to recognise the extent to which her tale romanticises all the women in her life.

The frustrated romantic ambitions of Adelia permeate Iris and Laura, shaping their development:

> Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up in her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't. As she was dead by then, we couldn't argue. (78)

This same need to speak to the dead, to address the legacy they leave behind, is felt in Iris' recollections of her mother. Where Adelia was a fairy godmother, Iris' mother is shy and virtuous and wins the love of a rich man. Over time, her mother's morality weighs heavily on Iris, who has "no chance to throw it back at her (as would have been the normal course of affairs with a mother and a daughter – if she'd lived, as I'd grown older)" (117). These two women represent different things to Iris throughout her life; Adelia's sophistication and her mother's self-sacrifice both embody ideals that Iris will fail to attain. It is only with time and experience that Iris comes to recognise that these elusive qualities were aspects of each woman's imprisonment within their marriages and their social spheres.

In old age, Iris muses:

> What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves – our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies. Now that I've been one myself, I know. (116)

And these fabrications extend beyond mothers. Iris' sister-in-law, Winifred, is another construction, this time an evil villainess of almost comic book proportions: a wicked witch preying on young and helpless Iris. Like Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, she is a vampire or a zombie, "mummified" (534), perfecting "her body-snatching routine" (58) on young girls: first eighteen-year old Iris, then her daughter Aimee, and later her granddaughter Sabrina.

From this network of fairy-tale characters, Iris weaves a gothic environment in which to create the history of her and her sister. Of all

the novel's characters, these two undergo the most persistent constructions and reconstructions. As children, they are princesses trapped in the tower of Avilion, "a merchant's palace" with "a stumpy Gothic turret" (72), and in Laura's imagination, they are the two stone angels on the Chase family monument:

> The first angel is standing, her head bowed to the side in an attitude of mourning, one hand placed tenderly on the shoulder of the second one. The second kneels, leaning against the other's thigh, gazing straight ahead, cradling a sheaf of lilies. (55)

This image of the two girls, much to Iris' frustration, is to colour the perception of their relationship throughout their lives; Iris will continue to be the self-sacrificing protector, and Laura will be the sensitive, ethereal beauty. Haunted by their mother's dying exhortation to look after Laura, and the housekeeper Reenie's admonishments for Laura's injuries, Iris demands "Was I my sister's keeper?" (521), yet nevertheless, she will marry Richard to secure Laura's future. In their attendance to Alex, Iris recalls:

> We were Mary and Martha .… I was to be Martha, keeping busy with the household chores in the background; she was to be Mary, laying pure devotion at Alex's feet. (264)

Asked about this relationship in an interview, Atwood explained:

> Marthas always feel hard done by. It's all very well for you to go lolly-gagging after God. Who's fixing the dinner?[20]

The intense mixture of loyalty and resentment that connects the sisters is mediated here through yet another literary allusion.

Myths in *The Blind Assassin* work as stereotypes or patterns of feminine behaviour that, in their repetition, invoke a false authority and entrap women within certain models or images. This is an idea that de Beauvoir discussed in *The Second Sex*, in which she argued that "the myth of woman, sublimating an immutable aspect of the

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[20] Atwood quoted in James Loader, *Times Europe*, 20 November 2000: <http://www.time.com/time/europe/webonly/europe/2000/11/atwood> (accessed 11.04.2003).

human condition – namely, the 'division' of humanity into two classes of individuals – is a static myth".[21] According to de Beauvoir, myth functions to make women the other, and to cement the image of "the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless",[22] and so denies them their status as free-thinking subjects. The longevity of mythical structures makes them appear politically neutral, whereas they are better understood as the products of masculine fantasy and imagination.

In *The Blind Assassin*, however, it is Iris who creates and recreates the stereotypes she applies to the women of her narrative. Iris is, of course, a product of both a masculine culture and of a strictly enforced patriarchal family, but despite this, Atwood also recognises an unmediated impulse within women to apply mythic patterns to themselves and to other women. Iris ponders, "who wouldn't want to have a mythical being for a mother, instead of the shop-soiled real kind? Given the chance" (531). Myths are of many kinds, and the feminine myths of an omnipotent mother are no less potent and alluring than masculine myths of the sacrificing and silent wife.

When Laura seeks to communicate to her sister the secret of her love for Alex and her abuse at the hands of Richard, she does so through another mythic female figure, outlined in a school Latin translation that she leaves to Iris: "Iris flew down, and hovering over Dido, she said: … I release you from your body" (609). Laura becomes Dido who takes her own life after being deserted by Aeneas. Atwood uses this signal in three ways: Laura appropriates the mythic pattern retrospectively because it appears to fit her own desertion by Alex; the novel also suggests that the myth influences Laura, who is instinctively drawn to the theme of betrayal and sacrifice; further, the myth also works predictively, because it is Iris who will release Laura and enable her suicide. Dido's self-destructive response to Aeneas' betrayal influences and shapes Laura's own actions: the mythic pattern demonstrates a real and significant power, and the line between myth and history is again blurred.

This overlap of fiction and reality is particularly obvious in the motif of the silenced woman, which permeates the novel. In the tale of the blind assassin, the tongues of young handmaids are removed before they are sacrificed to the gods: "This was not mutilation, said

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[21] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 282.
[22] *Ibid*., 283.

the priests, but an improvement." The girl, dressed in veils and flowers, undergoes the sacrificial ceremony, "tongueless, and swollen with words she could never pronounce", and the narrator comments: "Nowadays you might say she looked like a pampered society bride" (37). This bride, of course, is Iris – sacrificed to Richard in silence, as she recalls: "I did not say much. I smiled and agreed" (296). It is also her mother who, when proposed to, "did not reply .… This meant yes" (86). The silenced girl is also, crucially, Laura, who is raped by Richard and cannot tell anyone.

Again, Atwood demonstrates that nothing is new, and here she reworks the classical tale of Philomela, raped by her sister Procne's husband, Tereus. To silence her, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue, but she alerts her sister by weaving the scene into a tapestry. In *The Blind Assassin*, Richard silences Laura with blackmail, but Laura also manages to communicate. Iris recalls: "I found the message, although it was not in words .… Richard's face had been painted grey .… The hands were red" (551). This repetition has a dual consequence: it both expands Laura's experience beyond her own situation, adding weight to it, and it also diminishes her individuality, extending what was intensely personal and unique into mythic and therefore general proportions.

Atwood's tenth novel, which, more than any of her others, emphasises intertextuality and the reconstitution of myth, attempts to negotiate a path between the inescapable prevalence of mythic patterns and the desire to assert a unique individual experience that cannot be assimilated by myth. Bound in all directions by myth, Iris recognises that she must necessarily work within mythic patterns if she is to create her own narrative. This accounts for the proliferation of mythic allusions instigated by Iris. By wilfully inhabiting myth, Iris refuses to be its passive object. Again, this is similar to the choice made by Zenia in *the Robber Bride*: the choice to enthusiastically inhabit the role of sexual object, and so find parodic power in an impotent situation.

The many narrative patterns that occur in *The Blind Assassin* – fairytale, biblical, and classical, not to mention Alex's science fiction and Iris' romance and detective fiction – all shape the two sisters who in life are little more than characters in the plots of others. Iris recognises this quality in a photograph of Laura, in which:

> The face looks deaf: it has that vacant, posed imperviousness of all well-brought-up girls of the time. A tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on. (57)

The description, however, is equally applicable to Iris' own situation. Neither sister exists as a speaking subject, that is, until Iris comes to relate her own history. Like Grace in *Alias Grace*, it is through the construction and manipulation of her own story that Iris is able to seize control of her own subjectivity, and she does so, necessarily, by subverting the traditionally mythic images of the Eternal Feminine to her own ends.

Personal or political?

This system of connections, with the past, with the future, with history, and with myth, which the female characters of *The Blind Assassin* find themselves part of, is an important aspect of the feminism debate. One of the points on which postfeminism turns is the rejection of second-wave feminism's call for women to unite. One of the criticisms that second-wave feminists level at postfeminism is that it promotes individualism over connection and association. Braithwaite documents a common belief that postfeminism is "ultimately only self-indulgent navel-gazing on reclaiming personal experiences and female pleasures, usually to the exclusion of any political understanding or activism".[23] Denfeld, however, argues that feminism has alienated a generation of young women who do not recognise their needs and concerns in its policies. She says:

> We are not apathetic but we are often resistant to organizing …we value our individuality. While linked through common concerns, notions of sisterhood seldom appeal to women of my generation. Efforts to unify all women under one ideology seem pointless.[24]

This split can be traced back to the essentialism debate. By more easily incorporating postmodern and post-structuralist principles, postfeminism is more likely to demonstrate a wariness of the humanist notion of a unified identity. In opposition to the postfeminist position

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[23] Ann Braithwaite, "The Personal, The Political, Third-Wave and Postfeminisms", *Feminist Theory*, III/3 (2002), 336.
[24] Denfeld, *The New Victorians*, 263-64

is a feminism that continues to value a coherent and stable idea of gender difference, from which political statements can be made about the experience of being a woman. With all categories, including "woman", in question, it is unsurprising that postfeminism rejects a movement that organises its members under a single definitive banner.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood finds both connection and alienation in the association of women. Throughout the novel, Iris is characterised by a lack of individuation that stems from her too-close association with her sister. Where Laura favours the letter L, Iris recalls: "I never had a favourite letter that began my name – *I is for Iris* – because *I* was everybody's letter" (110). Iris sees Laura wearing an old dress of hers, and recalls, "seeing her from behind gave me a peculiar sensation, as if I were watching myself" (477). This doubleness haunts Iris throughout her childhood, and persists into adulthood, colouring her relationships. The picnic at which the sisters meet Alex is captured by a photographer: "one of the pictures was of Alex Thomas, with the two of us – me to the left of him, Laura to the right, like bookends" (234). When Iris marries, Laura follows, and both sisters are forced into sexual relations with Richard: "I suppose when he married me he figured he'd got a bargain – two for the price of one" (617).

In the end, the need to be free of Laura and to assert her self outside of the role of Laura's protector moves Iris to tell her sister of her affair with Alex: "My fingers itched with spite. I knew what had happened next. I'd pushed her off" (595). Following Laura's death, Iris seeks to reconnect with her sister, explaining: "Laura was my left hand and I was hers. We wrote the book together" (627). However, this reconciliation is only possible when Iris is finally free to claim her own subjectivity through the writing of her book, which closes with the words: "What is it that I'll want from you? .… Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me" (637). This late plea to her granddaughter is a request to be remembered as an individual. By reclaiming her story from Laura, Iris refuses to subsume her identity in that of her sister.

Transcendence and the ageing body

Another important feminist theme that Atwood explores in *The Blind Assassin* is that of the body. Throughout the novel, she plays with the concept of the body as text. In one sense, the body is lived in the

novel: it ages and decays with intentioned realism. But alternatively, the body literally becomes the text as Iris' heart and her narrative fuse in the urgency to reach the climax before the end:

> *The end*, a warm safe haven. A place to rest. But I haven't reached it yet, and I'm old and tired and on foot, and limping. (607)

In this novel, the simple metaphor of life as a story, with a beginning, middle and end, is reversed so that the story is also life. Iris imagines herself as "some vaporous novelistic heroine who's been forgotten in the pages of her own book and left to yellow and mildew and crumble away like the book itself" (578). The physical and the textual combine, as she comments, "[My bones] ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain" (70). This recalls Cixous' terse statement in "The Laugh of the Medusa": "Text: my body."[25] In *The Blind Assassin*, time, narrative, and the body become connected, each measuring out the limits of the other. Contemplating the persistence of time, Iris says, "It hasn't escaped me that the object that keeps me alive is the same one that will kill me" (103). Time in the novel is marked by the progression of her narrative, and as it moves towards its conclusion, the reader instinctively knows from the first pages that Iris will not die until her narrative is complete – her body and her text are inseparable.

Atwood's protagonists have aged in tandem with their creator. Early heroines were childless (*The Edible Woman*'s Marian), contemplating pregnancy (the narrator of *Surfacing*), and struggling to come to terms with difficult mothers (Joan in *Lady Oracle*). By the 1980s, these daughters had themselves become mothers of young children (*Life Before Man*'s Elizabeth and *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Offred), and later, of grown-up children (Roz and Charis in *The Robber Bride*). By 2000, Atwood completes the female life cycle with the creation of her first grandmother narrator. This developing perspective can be perceived elsewhere in other women writers. Whilst Germaine Greer's 1970 text, *The Female Eunuch*, can be seen to enter into dialogue with the same concerns that propelled *The Edible Woman*, in 1991, Greer – born the same year as Atwood –

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[25] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 252.

turned her attention to an older demographic with her book *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause*.

It is only as the writers of the early 1970s have aged that the later period of a woman's life has come to be circumscribed within a contemporary feminist discourse. With *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood describes the experience of an older woman desperately trying to leave something of tangible essence behind her as she comes to the realisation of the fragility of the body through which she has so far experienced the world. At one point, Iris considers: "It seems I will not after all keep on living forever, merely getting smaller and greyer and dustier, like the Sybil in her bottle" (52). Using another mythic metaphor, but this time denying her connection with the mythic tradition, Iris' old age forces her to consider what monument she will leave behind when her body finally fails her.

Essentialism has always been tied to the limits of the body, and in *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood charts the decline of her protagonist through the disintegration and collapse of her body. Where once the distinctive ambivalence towards the female body in Atwood's work was directed at the fecundity of youth, in the image of pregnant Clara in *The Edible Woman* as "a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead" (115), it now illuminates the ravages of the ageing process. In *The Blind Assassin*, the ageing process is already well advanced as the novel opens; Iris' wrist is "a brittle radius covered slackly with porridge and string" and beneath her thinning hair "are glimpses of scalp, the greyish pink of mice feet" (45-46). As the story advances, so does this deterioration, and decay seems to permeate Iris entirely, as she confesses: "I can't overcome the notion that my body smells like cat food" (548). Finally, the race to complete her narrative is a race against her failing heart: "I think of my heart as my companion on an endless forced march, the two of us roped together, unwilling conspirators" (103). By depicting the postmodern metaphor of the body as text with literalism, Atwood, like Cixous, manages to unite the anti-essential metaphor with the physical essentialism of the body, embodying the text as much as she textualizes the body.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood uses the same idea of immanence and transcendence that de Beauvoir examined in *The Second Sex*. While the male, de Beauvoir argued, is able to transcend his body through intellect and invention, "the female, to a greater extent than

the male, is the prey of the species".[26] De Beauvoir, however, believed that: "there is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future".[27] In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood considers how the female may defy the tradition of feminine immanence and attain her own transcendence. The need to do so is increasingly important for Iris, who asks, "why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves?" and answers, "at the very least we want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down" (118). In death, the body is finally transcended, and as she approaches this moment, Iris comes to recognise her need to give meaning and purpose to life, beyond the fact of reproduction, by leaving some legacy.

In the course of this quest for transcendence the underlying transience of various human institutions becomes increasingly apparent. The fictional autobiography, which spans the twentieth century, documents the collapse of a number of seemingly indestructible social structures, which Atwood parallels with the disintegration of Iris' immanent body, emphasising their fragility. The traditional patriarchal family is evidently in decline, and the publication of Laura's book, symbolising a refusal of female silence and submission, is part of this process. It prompts Richard's suicide, and seems to suggest that such traditional patriarchal power structures will inevitably self-destruct. Part of this same process sees the daughter of a former servant becoming Iris' friend and protector, disrupting class barriers, as the imperial and governmental systems that form the background of the narrative slowly disintegrate. The structural damage is widespread, and the novel obliquely charts the rise and fall of Hitler's power, of the Soviet Union, and of Franco's regime. Atwood concedes de Beauvoir's analysis of the body's immanence, but in documenting an era of unprecedented change and revolution, she also proves sceptical of the durability of many of the means by which man has sought transcendence.

The end of feminism?
The other idea that these collapsing regimes recall is Fukuyama's belief in the end of history. With the structure of *The Blind Assassin* –

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[26] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 97.
[27] *Ibid*., 28-29.

framing the century – Atwood seems to acknowledge a completed cycle, prompting speculation as to what will follow. For Fukuyama, this is the moment of liberal democracy; for feminism, it is potentially the moment of its own collapse. To Iris, watching news footage of a young woman setting fire to herself in ill-defined protest, the actions of the young are strange and inexplicable. She muses:

> Is it what they do to show that girls too have courage, that they can do more than weep and moan, that they too can face death with panache …. Admirable enough, if you admire obsession. Courageous enough too. But completely useless. (528)

In the violent protest of the girl, Iris sees a deluded attempt to escape the feminine myth of the weeping woman by entering into the masculine myth of the self-sacrificing hero, whilst failing to recognise that neither choice can provide an escape from the confines of mythic pattern.

The same danger of entrapment within politically unworkable alternatives is present in the postfeminist choice to embrace liberal individualism and too soon abandon the safeguards of collectivism. According to Michelle Sidler, writing in the *Third Wave Agenda*, third-wave feminism must not assume that liberal progress abolishes the need for feminism, but in an increasingly ruthless and individualistic economy, should rather seek to "broaden [its] concerns to include issues previously viewed as gender neutral".[28] In advocating a broadening rather than a diminishing of feminism, Sidler believes that the third wave could encapsulate social change rather than be pushed out by it. Her argument warns that after the end of history, the need for feminism may increase rather than decrease.

Lacking this third-wave solution, postfeminism occupies a contradictory position within end of history thinking. Its postmodernist leanings, evidenced by the emphasis on plurality and contextualism, do not fit well with Fukuyama's metahistory. However, the emphasis on individualism, on post-theoretical politics, and the belief that postfeminism naturally evolves at the resolution of feminism's arguments with Marxism, socialism, essentialism, etcetera, all point to the same conclusion reached in *The End of History*: "all of

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[28] Michelle Sidler, "Living in McJobdom: Third Wave Feminism and Class Inequity", in *Third Wave Agenda*, 31.

the really big questions had been settled."[29] *The Blind Assassin*, however, proves uncertain of this assertion. Torn between individualism and connection, Iris' growing obsession with legacy and memorial brings her back to the big question at the heart of feminist inquiry: what constitutes the essential self?

The Blind Assassin turns on this final question. Iris' preoccupation with Laura's death and its continuing effects is equally a contemplation of her own fate, for Laura is a constituent or aspect of her sister. Iris' narrative investigates Laura's legacy and seeks within it for some semblance of the woman she knew. The myth that Iris created brings Laura immortality, "It's only the book that makes her memorable now" (57), however, it also consumes and ultimately annihilates her, creating a Laura that Iris does not recognise. Despite the role thrust upon her by the book, in reality, Iris recalls, Laura "had no thought of playing the doomed romantic heroine" (509). The transcendent self is prey to the historical narrative by which it is transcribed, whilst the body is simply the "meat dust" of the tomb which contains "Laura, as much as she is anywhere. Her essence" (56).

If a person is comprised entirely of the narratives by which they are known, those narratives contain no essential self; if an essential self does exist, it inhabits the body, and is therefore immanent. Transcendence seems to inescapably equate with anti-essentialism. Learning from Laura, Iris combats this stark equation by recognising the influence of her ageing body on her text, not just in its hurried completion, but also in its tone and desires:

> Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities .… Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected .… They are our younger selves as they recede from us, glow, turn mythical. (381)

The immanent body achieves transcendence by being inscribed in the text, and the text is subsequently anchored in the body. As in *The Edible Woman*, Atwood refuses to privilege one over the other, and seeks instead an inclusive compromise. In the conflict that surrounds the attempts at this compromise lie the big questions that resuscitate feminism.

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[29] Fukuyama, *The End of History*, xii.

Glimpsing the uncertainties of the new century, Iris realises that the promise of a stable identity will not convince her granddaughter as her grandmother was convinced. In her own lifetime, Iris has progressed from single defining images of the Eternal Feminine, to myths that contain multiple possibilities. In her imagination she becomes:

> Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Granny's house via the underworld. Except that I myself am Granny, and I contain my own bad wolf. (449)

By authoring the myth herself, Iris creates a space within it, one that defies confinement and definition, in which multiple interpretations are available. It is this possibility of self-creation that "the uninvited black-sheep godmother" (536) will pass on to Sabrina. Iris writes to her: "since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you're no longer who you think you are either .… You're free to invent yourself at will" (627). The eventual triumph is not to escape mythologies, but to author their creation.

For Fukuyama, it is in the potential for self-creation that history continues. In his 2002 text, *Our Posthuman Future*, he warns that "the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a 'posthuman' stage of history".[30] Science, he argues, in contradiction of his earlier work, is the factor that will prevent history from ending. For Atwood, the admission is timely. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris had been prevented from reinventing Aimee in defiance of Richard because: "legally, she was his daughter; I had no way of proving otherwise, they hadn't invented all those genes and so forth, not yet" (618). For Sabrina, there lies the possibility of truth, which will bring freedom, as Iris promises her: "there's not a speck of Griffen in you at all: your hands are clean" (627).

At the end of this long novel, Atwood returns to biology to find her conclusion. This comes at a time when interest in the biological sciences is widely prevalent, as demonstrated by Fukuyama's own move towards the topic, and it brings new challenges for feminism. Atwood, like Fukuyama, sees potential freedoms in genetic science.

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[30] Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, London, 2003, 7.

Considering evolution, Fukuyama concedes the view that "there are no fixed human characteristics, except for a general capability to choose what we want to be, to modify ourselves in accordance with our desires".[31] His argument however, rests on the idea that it is possible to modify human beings beyond a point at which they can be considered human; this assumes, of course, that there is an essential quality to be understood by the term "human nature".

Atwood only touches on this dilemma in her tenth novel, and does so inconclusively. Whilst Iris offers Sabrina freedom and self-definition, it is unclear whether she offers a psychological distance from the Griffen family, or a distinction based on essentialist readings of biology. For feminists, biotechnology raises old questions about essential human nature that are still to be answered, and just as science means that history cannot end, so it requires that feminist investigations must continue. If this tenth novel was Atwood's own "end of history" gesture, then it proves significant that she also envisions a future in terms of biology with her eleventh novel, *Oryx and Crake*, which contemplates a genetically modified future.

Eventually, it is the simple desire to pass something on that characterises *The Blind Assassin*, and Iris' final hope is for connection: to be claimed by another and to belong. She fantasises the return of her estranged granddaughter:

> I'll invite you in. You'll enter .… *Grandmother*, you will say; and through that one word I will no longer be disowned. (636)

The novel seeks to find new freedoms within old patterns. Although Iris commands her right to tell her own story and to disentangle it from that of her sister, in its eventual emphasis on a matrilineal progression and the need to be recognised and claimed by a female tradition, the novel points to the earliest of feminist ideas, whilst, in the theme of the biological family and genetic truths, hinting at some of the difficulties to come.

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[31] *Ibid.*, 6.

ORYX AND CRAKE: A POSTFEMINIST FUTURE

Published in 2003, *Oryx and Crake* is Atwood's third twenty-first century fiction publication, and is only prevented from being her first novel of the new millennium by *The Blind Assassin*, which appeared in 2000.[1] But in theme and focus, it is *Oryx and Crake* that more consciously embraces the possibilities of a twenty-first century world, whereas *The Blind Assassin*, in contrast, very deliberately looks backwards, reflecting on the gains and losses of the previous century. *The Blind Assassin* concludes with the death of its elderly narrator, and as Iris passes away, Atwood seems to deliberately terminate the development of her progressively ageing twentieth-century heroines, who first appeared in 1969 in the form of Marian in *The Edible Woman*.

As if to underline this wilful cessation of what has come to be regarded as an Atwood trope – "her use of first-person narrative to explore female imagination, consciousness and creativity",[2] as Showalter describes it – Atwood's eleventh novel is her first to employ a primary male protagonist. If *The Blind Assassin* can be understood to trace the development and decline of second-wave feminism and to anticipate the possible rise of a third wave, *Oryx and Crake* depicts a much more negative scenario for feminism, signalled by the loss of the female voice, in which Atwood's protagonists inhabit a future that is not only postfeminist, but posthuman.

Early critics, early connections
Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian example of speculative fiction, and Atwood has described the novel as "a

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[1] Here I am following the common convention of designating the year 2000 as the first year of the twenty-first century, although it might be more accurately described as the last year of the twentieth century.
[2] Elaine Showalter, "The Snowman Cometh", *London Review of Books*, 24 July 2003, 35.

bookend" to *The Handmaid's Tale*.[3] Consequently, it is largely from this perspective that it has been discussed by critics and reviewers. Robert Potts opens his profile and review for *The Guardian* by repeating Atwood's description of *Oryx and Crake* as speculative fiction rather than science fiction, and notes that "it is a distinction she has also made about her earlier dystopian book, *The Handmaid's Tale*".[4] Lisa Appignanesi, writing for *The Independent*, also prefaces her review with a preliminary discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, stating:

> Now, five major novels later, including the Booker-winning *The Blind Assassin* (which contains its own pastiche dystopia) Atwood has gone back to the future. It's a future which has changed as much as our present has. Once again, it's prescient. And it's scary.[5]

Appignanesi's reference to *The Blind Assassin* is also taken up and further developed by Ingersoll, who is one of the few early critics of the novel to consider it in terms of a text other than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Referring to Atwood's own comments on the shared generic conventions of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, he argues that:

> Her encouragement of readers to connect these two examples of what she likes to term "speculative fiction" seems to provide a kind of *carte blanche* to read *Oryx and Crake* not only in connection with *The Handmaid's Tale* but in the context of her other ventures into SF, most notably in the novel-within-a-novel of *The Blind Assassin*.[6]

Ingersoll goes on to list a number of other canonical texts that *Oryx and Crake* might be aligned with, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Aldous

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[3] Atwood quoted in Earl G. Ingersoll, "Survival in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Oryx and Crake*", *Extrapolation*, XLV/2 (Summer 2004), 162.

[4] Robert Potts, "Light in the Wilderness" *The Guardian*, 16 April 2003, 20.

[5] Lisa Appignanesi, "*Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood", *The Independent*, 26 April 2003: <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article116675.ece> (accessed 14 .06.2006).

[6] Ingersoll, "Survival", 162.

Huxley's *Brave New World*, thereby placing the novel within a tradition of dystopian speculative fiction.

However, whilst Atwood may have quite deliberately signalled the natural sympathy between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* to her readers, she has also attempted to carefully distinguish between the two texts. In a 2004 essay, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context", she admits to their common genesis in her formative reading of science fiction and fantasy, which prompted her interest in the genre, but she argues that "Although lumped together by commentators who have spotted what they have in common … they are in fact dissimilar". She terms *The Handmaid's Tale* "a classic dystopia" in the spirit of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *Oryx and Crake*, "an adventure romance".[7] This latter definition is justified by the novel's lack of a social overview (which Atwood considers imperative for a classic dystopia), and because, with the protagonist Snowman/Jimmy's attempt to re-enter the Watson-Crick Institute, the novel follows the generic pattern of the hero embarking on a quest.

Each of these discussions and debates move to place Atwood's eleventh novel within a generic lineage, and each, by focusing on this issue, disregards the feminist analysis that has previously been so persistent in readings of Atwood's work. Potts' profile of the author, written to coincide with the publication of *Oryx and Crake*, delivers Atwood's own formula when he states:

> None of the novels is programmatically political or feminist. Even *The Edible Woman* is actually proto-feminist, written before the subjects it described, eating disorders among them, were widely politicised.[8]

This careful avoidance of any overt feminist appropriation of Atwood's novel somewhat coincides with Ingersoll's approach.

In a brief paragraph in which he considers the construction of the main female character, Oryx, Ingersoll describes her as "another chilling reminder of the reader's world",[9] signifying the corrupting pervasiveness of pornography, paedophilia and prostitution. Citing

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[7] Margaret Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context", *PMLA*, CIXX/3 (May 2004), 516-17.

[8] Potts, "Light in the Wilderness", 20.

[9] Ingersoll, "Survival", 168.

Showalter's article in the *London Review of Books*, in which she makes a very similar statement – "The elusive Oryx is the vehicle in the novel for Atwood's indignation at child slavery, prostitution, sex tourism and other extreme forms of female victimisation"[10] – Ingersoll accuses Showalter of "project[ing] her own feminist views on Atwood".[11] In apparent contrast, Ingersoll prefers to view the novel as "the production of a late-Modernist author who received the warning of 9/11 that civilisation itself is vulnerable not only to 'natural' eco-catastrophes but also to terrorists".[12] Disregarding Atwood's long-established reputation as a genre-subverting and politically prescient author, her twenty-first century critics appear to have assumed that her most recent focus on science, technology, terrorism and global capitalism, has signalled a paradigm shift in her concerns, moving her away from her feminist or female-centred sympathies; a shift that is presumed to be emphasised by her appropriation of a masculine narrative voice.

Indeed, Showalter's review is one of the few that makes any significant mention of the feminist aspect of *Oryx and Crake*, although this element of her discussion is far less prominent than Ingersoll would have it appear. Showalter concludes that "Overall, the politics of *Oryx and Crake* are consistent with Atwood's pacifism, feminism, environmentalism and anti-globalism, although she is much more forgiving of Americans and men – especially American men – than in her earlier books". Yet despite identifying a definite continuance of concern, Showalter also sees the novel as "a breakthrough", primarily basing this assertion on its inclusion of a male protagonist, its fast pace and its success as an "intellectually gripping sci-fi mystery". These welcome developments, she concludes, come at a time when "Atwood's themes were becoming predictable, and her politics losing their ability to shock".[13]

Twenty-first century politics

Oryx and Crake is a political examination of a society that has seemingly abandoned culpable politics in favour of an unbounded

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[10] Showalter, "The Snowman Cometh", 35.
[11] Ingersoll, "Survival", 175.
[12] *Ibid*., 172.
[13] Showalter, "The Snowman Cometh", 35.

consumerism. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, it examines the choices of the individual caught within a corrupt political structure. And like Offred, the isolated protagonist of that earlier novel for whom it was necessary to imagine a listener "even when there is no one",[14] Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* is equally alone: "Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past."[15]

One significant difference that exists between *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, is the absence of an alternative normality with which to juxtapose the abnormal dystopia. Whereas Offred could look backwards, reflecting on a period in which she and her husband lived in a manner clearly recognisable to many of Atwood's readers as their own, the social reality of the period in which Jimmy grows up has already moved crucially beyond the limits of contemporary Western society.

Life in the Compounds contains myriad residual references to twentieth-century America, which work to orientate the reader within Jimmy's world. However, Atwood's vision of the scientific and economic developments of the future ensures that Jimmy's past, whilst relatively normal when compared to his post-apocalyptic present, remains nevertheless a dystopian scenario of globalisation's endgame. Consequently, *Oryx and Crake* is a more claustrophobic novel than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Just as there can be no future reader for Jimmy as there potentially can be for Offred, so Jimmy's past is conceptually bound. Whereas Offred can at least recall a time before the rise of religious totalitarianism, Jimmy instead is unable to provide the reader with a depiction of a world in which scientific advancement and global capitalism are tempered by social and ethical responsibility.

Where Jimmy's experience fails to portray an alternative, acceptable vision of society, this absence is supplied by his mother, Sharon, who, in an increasingly genetically modified environment, struggles to maintain a division between the artificial and the real. Within the privileged gated communities of the Compounds, company employees and their families "could walk around without fear … go

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[14] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 49.
[15] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, London, 2003, 41. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

for a bike ride, sit at a sidewalk café, buy an ice cream cone", but Jimmy's parents dispute the value of these freedoms:

> Jimmy's mother said it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back, but Jimmy's father said why knock it? You could walk around without fear, couldn't you? (27)

Sharon, like Offred's mother in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a disillusioned campaigner for an alternative vision of society.

In a novel more specifically couched in terms of feminist ideologies, Offred's mother feels betrayed by a younger generation of women who are rejecting early second-wave feminist principles. In *Oryx and Crake*, Sharon's politics are directed towards economic inequalities rather than gender division, towards "Making life better for people – not just people with money". Attacking the scientific ethics of her husband's company, she argues:

> … there's research and there's research. What you're doing – this pig brain thing. You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's … sacrilegious.

Jimmy's father counters her accusation with the rationalist assertion: "It's just proteins, you know that! There's nothing sacred about cells and tissue" (57). Although Jimmy's mother is not envisioned as a feminist in the way Offred's mother is, her politics are rooted in an essentialist belief in truth, justice and morality that is sympathetic to a feminist ethical position.

The need to maintain discourses of equality and essential human worth has been at the heart of the most recent feminist interactions with genetics. Although this field has always been restricted, some feminist ethicists have begun to engage with the scientific debate surrounding gene therapy, for example. Annette Patterson and Martha Satz argue that "feminist thought has much to contribute to the problems and dilemmas of genetic counseling", and they locate this capacity within a longstanding feminist aim to incorporate the needs of the other. In consequence of this practice, they suggest, "feminist thought has become accustomed to reformulating itself in response to the claims of racial, ethnic, and class concerns exerted by various contingents of women".

In a similar manner to these traditionally disenfranchised groups, disability activists argue that gene therapy has become entangled with "inequitable power relations that manifest themselves as influences upon women's reproductive decisions".[16] This view concurs with Donna Haraway's assertion in 1991 that "Women know very well that knowledge from the natural sciences has been used in the interests of our domination, and not our liberation, birth control propagandists notwithstanding".[17] By these arguments, the genetic sciences that permeate the plot of Atwood's novel take their place within a history of natural science that has always held peculiar dangers for women.

In attempting to counteract the possibilities for coercion and manipulation that exist within the field of genetics, Patterson and Satz advocate the adoption of a feminist standpoint epistemology. They explain that "Standpoint epistemology contends that knowledge claims are always socially situated and that failure by dominant groups to interrogate beliefs arising from their social situation leaves them in an epistemologically disadvantaged position, that is, one that distorts".[18] In *Oryx and Crake*, the pharmaceutical companies dominate the economic culture, and their refusal to comprehend oppositional perspectives such as those held by Crake's father and Jimmy's mother, eventually contributes to their cataclysmic destruction at the hands of Crake. It is through these overlapping discourses of power and ethics that Sharon's politics interact quite clearly with feminist concerns.

In both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, the mother-figure functions as the ethical conscience of the text, either by refusing to abandon second-wave feminism, or by articulating an oppositional discourse of truth and equality. In the world of *Oryx and Crake*, in which all of the furniture "was called *reproduction*" (26) and in which even the reality TV programmes "look like simulations" (83), Sharon maintains her sense of the real, of immutable right and wrong, and refuses to be seduced by economic comforts and a ruthlessly maintained social stability for a privileged few. However, despite the

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[16] Annette Patterson and Martha Satz, "Genetic Counselling and the Disabled: Feminism Examines the Stance of Those Who Stand at the Gate", in *Genetics: Science, Ethics and Public Policy*, ed. Thomas A. Shannon, Lanham: MD, 2005, 35.

[17] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 8.

[18] Patterson, "Genetic Counselling", 35-36.

admirable aspect of the stand these two women take, particularly Sharon, for whom the prevailing hegemony is evidently corrupt and dangerous, Atwood nevertheless complicates her reader's responses to their actions.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a parallel is made between the feminist burning of pornography and the rightwing government's blanket policy of destroying all printed material considered seditious. In *Oryx and Crake*, Sharon's political convictions push her to the margins of her society, until she becomes a terrorist. Involved in the anti-globalisation movement, she demonstrates with a group who "bombed the Lincoln Memorial, killing five Japanese schoolkids that were part of a Tour of Democracy" (181). Sharon turns to violent resistance in the face of overwhelming governmental and commercial power structures, and her choices are not so much interrogated by the text, as left open for contemplation by the reader.

The multinational corporation, the "Happicuppa" coffee group, which the resistance movement is targeting, uses genetically modified crops to flood the market, causing environmental devastation, widespread unemployment and starvation-level third world poverty. In the ensuing protests, violence escalates on both sides:

> Happicuppa personnel were car-bombed or kidnapped or shot by snipers or beaten to death by mobs; and, on the other side, peasants were massacred by the army …. But the soldiers and dead peasants all looked much the same wherever they were.

Watching the coverage on television, Jimmy maintains a dispassionate detachment, and Crake's conclusion that "there aren't any sides, as such" (179) is seemingly supported by the inability to visually distinguish between the various dead. Distanced from the media-projected conflict, both geographically and emotionally, the boys watch the violence unfold without engagement.

Atwood juxtaposes the inertia of those, like Jimmy, who passively consume mass brutality via the media, and activists such as Jimmy's mother, who take responsibility for their political beliefs, but in doing so, succumb to reciprocal violence. Atwood recalls that she paused writing *Oryx and Crake* for a few weeks in 2001 as a consequence of witnessing the New York bombings of September 11th. She notes:

"It's deeply unsettling when you're writing about a fictional catastrophe and then a real one happens."[19] With such events evidently in mind, it seems clear that ideological terrorism is not something that Atwood has written about without caution. In the novel, Sharon's choices result eventually in her execution, and as the fate of dissenters in a culture which ostensibly promotes freedom of choice is made clear, *Oryx and Crake* points to the practical and moral difficulties of remaining political in an increasingly apolitical, consumerist society.

"All sex is real": feminism and pornography

In *The Blind Assassin* Atwood's description of a generational progression reflected the ideological struggles that were taking place within feminism towards the end of the twentieth century. Themes of continuance and change, memorial and inheritance characterise the novel, which concludes with Iris' hope that her granddaughter Sabrina will read her story and lay claim to her memory. In a text that relentlessly points to the inevitability of its conclusion, to the end of history and the running out of time, the young woman who will resurrect her grandmother's narrative and supply it with meaning takes on an almost messianic role in the text, promising saviour through understanding, connection and communication.

In contrast to this affirmative vision, by the end of the novel, female political protest is depicted instead in the form of an unnamed "slim young woman, dressed in gauzy flammable robes"[20] setting fire to herself. This same image has been used by the Canadian author Carol Shields as the pivotal moment of her 2002 novel, *Unless.* Shields describes how "a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress) … poured gasoline over her veil and gown and set herself alight".[21] For both novelists, this image suggests that the female political voice at the turn of the millennium, despite the advances of second-wave feminism, is increasingly marginalised and consequently more vulnerable to acts of desperate extremism. The image of the burning girl haunts the end of *The Blind Assassin*, which nevertheless concludes in hopeful anticipation. With *Oryx and Crake*,

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[19] Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*", January 2003: <http://www.random house.com/features/atwood/essay.html> (accessed 12.06.2006).
[20] Atwood, *Blind Assassin*, 528.
[21] Carol Shields, *Unless*, London, 2003, 314.

however, Atwood relinquishes the hope for a future generation of unified women, and moves instead to describe a postfeminist, posthuman world.

One of the strongest and most persistent charges that has been made against postfeminism is the accusation of its political indifference. Although this has been much disputed, the most recent popular feminist texts such as Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* continue to describe the postfeminist conflation of sexual commodification with personal liberation. In an interview, Levy states:

> When it comes to raunch culture, a lot of people say: "Well, we're living in a post-feminist age, women have won the [sex] war, and so it's OK for all this to happen. It doesn't actually threaten women's social position." But when did we win the war? We don't have equal pay for equal work, we don't have equal representation in government ... so when exactly did we win?[22]

Levy points to the persistent popular assertion that soft-core pornography is "sexy for men, liberating for women"[23] as symptomatic of a depoliticised and commoditised sexual culture that subsumes complexity and variety to a mass-produced, pornographic aesthetic. By this argument, postfeminism can be understood, not as a development of feminist politics for the twenty-first century, but rather as a relinquishing of feminism to capitalist notions of desire, consumption, and self-fulfilment. Opposing arguments to this view are documented in the previous chapter, however, following the persistent understanding of postfeminism as a depoliticised and dehistoricised feminist backlash, it is clear that in Atwood's near-future dystopian society, postfeminism is consistent with what has effectively become a post-political state.

Oryx and Crake documents an advanced capitalist society in which all political and economic constraints have been removed from an insatiable consumerism based largely on advances in the genetic

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[22] Ariel Levy quoted in Kira Cochrane, "Thongs, Implants and the Death of Real Passion", *The Guardian* (Features Pages), 21 June 2006, 6.

[23] Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Is Raunch Culture the New Women's Liberation?*, New York, 2005, 12.

sciences. At one point in the novel, Jimmy contemplates the philosophical choices implicit in the collective decision to pursue the physical over the intellectual or spiritual:

> When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel …. It had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays. Sublimation, all of it; nothing but sublimation, according to the body. Why not cut to the chase?
>
> But the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance. (85)

In Atwood's body-orientated consumer society, only the most debased forms of expression persist, and it is in the dialogue with pornography that *Oryx and Crake* most explicitly engages with ongoing discourses that inhabit the intersection between second-wave feminism, consumer society, and postfeminism.

The politics of pornography were previously addressed by Atwood in *Bodily Harm.* In the 1981 novel, the protagonist Rennie leads a sexually liberated lifestyle in which she and her partner play out mutually consensual sadomasochistic sexual fantasies. Commissioned to write a magazine article on "pornography as art form", Rennie is asked to counter the feminist anti-pornography writings of the period, which her editor describes as "kind of heavy and humourless".[24] After watching some hard-core pornography, however, Rennie starts to doubt her previously sophisticated liberal attitude to all forms of sexual expression and begins to make links between threats to her own body and the violences done to the women on the screen. She becomes more mistrustful of men as she senses her own role as merely "raw material" for an industry that disregards her subjectivity.[25]

The "humourless" feminists, the ones who, in the words of Rennie's editor, "would crack the nuts of any guy"[26] who tried to articulate a pro-pornography stance, are best epitomised by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. These two feminist theorists wrote

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[24] Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 207.

[25] *Ibid*., 212.

[26] *Ibid*., 207.

a number of Human Rights ordinances for implementation in various cities in the United States, which were later declared unconstitutional. They defined pornography as "the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women whether in pictures or words" and exemplified this definition as including instances in which "women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped …".[27]

A number of feminists opposed Dworkin and McKinnon's legislation for being too broad, too conservative, or for failing to clearly define what does and does not constitute pornography. In the Introduction to an anthology on feminism and pornography, Drucilla Cornell questions what prohibition might mean "in the light of the importance of women's sexual freedom",[28] and it is this question of freedom that has in recent years preoccupied self-identified postfeminists. The insistence on prohibition and censorship that characterises the anti-pornography position of Dworkin and McKinnon recalls Roiphe's attack on second-wave feminist politics, quoted in the previous chapter, that "instead of liberation and libido, the emphasis is on trauma and disease".[29]

Over the past decades, the feminist debate on pornography has effectively polarised around the responses to such accusations. From one perspective, pornography is understood to be inimically abusive of women. McKinnon asserts this view when she states: "Protecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse *as* speech, at the same time that both pornography and its protection have deprived women *of* speech, especially speech against sexual abuse."[30] McKinnon argues that the age-old argument between those who would censor pornographic images or texts and those who demand freedom of artistic expression is an argument between men that disregards the silenced women who unwillingly occupy the space of contention.

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[27] Andrea Dworkin, "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality", in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Oxford, 2000, 29.

[28] *Feminism and Pornography*, 5.

[29] Roiphe, *The Morning After*, 12.

[30] Catherine A. McKinnon, "Only Words", in *Feminism and Pornography*, 97.

Alternatively, many theorists assert that in a liberated, postfeminist society, women are no longer victims, but are now free to construct and explore the lineaments of their own sexual gratification. In a 1998 discussion of female celebrities who choose to pose naked for men's magazines, postfeminist Elizabeth Wurtzel argues that "the one statement a girl can make to declare her strength, her surefootedness, her autonomy – her self as a *self* – is to somehow be bad". Wurtzel's argument is clearly informed by postmodernist ideas of irony and self-conscious parody. She speaks of these soft-core pornographic images as "the latest mask, a game to play, a chance to dress [up]", whilst at the same time arguing that the female desire to be "bad" is often "about genuine anger, disturbance … female resentment and rage".[31] For Wurtzel, these images are an artificial yet provocative and empowering tool for rejecting socially-regulated notions of female moral goodness. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie's editor also argues that the humourless feminists "have missed the element of playfulness" in pornography.[32] However, as Rennie's reaction to the pornographic images she is shown is, unexpectedly, one of overwhelming fear and loathing, the assertion of its harmlessness is largely undermined by Atwood at this point.

Over twenty years later, Atwood returns to the subject of pornography in *Oryx and Crake*. Whereas Rennie's encounter with pornography in *Bodily Harm* led her to wonder "what if this is normal?",[33] in *Oryx and Crake*, violence and pornography have been entirely normalised within popular culture. From their bedrooms, the teenaged Jimmy and Crake watch live-streamed websites such as hedsoff.com ("executions in Asia"), alibooboo.com ("lipstick-wearers being stoned to death") and "electrocutions and lethal injections" on deathrowlive.com (82-83). These alternate with the viewing of hardcore pornography sites such as "Tart of the Day", "Superswallowers" and also "HottTotts", where they first see Oryx.

Throughout the novel, Atwood presents the interaction with such material from the narrative perspective of Jimmy, for whom the casual consumption of explicit sexual images is unremarkable. The morally-neutral depiction of an unregulated, mass-produced and highly

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[31] Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, London, 1999, 3.

[32] Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 207.

[33] *Ibid*., 210.

commercial sex industry is then countered in the novel by the introduction of Oryx. In the figure of Oryx, however, Atwood does not simply employ the common narrative technique of personalising what was initially impersonal by giving the indistinguishable masses a single representative voice. Instead, Oryx points to the creation of one of Atwood's most ambiguous characters to date. Intimately connected to the sex industry, Oryx's ambiguity reflects something of the multiplicity of feminist responses to this area. At once liberal and conservative, both relativist and highly morally essentialist, the figure of Oryx articulates significant tensions surrounding the notions of sexual liberation, free will, exploitation, commercialism, race, exoticism and ethnicity that congregate around the theme of pornography. Through Oryx, Atwood refuses to construct a simple argument or opinion on the pornography debate, but instead highlights some of the frequently contradictory problems that it encapsulates.

Representing Oryx

Although the inclusion of a male primary protagonist might be considered to signal a change of direction for Atwood, the character of Oryx also perpetuates a number of connections with earlier novels. Specifically, Oryx has much in common with *The Robber Bride*'s Zenia and Grace from *Alias Grace*. Both characters are strongly associated with sexuality; Zenia the sexual predator can be read as a postfeminist incarnation of female self-determination, whilst Grace's storytelling performs an erotic narrative striptease, playing with exposure and desire. But of all Atwood's characters, Oryx has the most explicitly sexual history, and, like these two recent protagonists, Oryx is an enigma. Constructed from disparate scraps of information, the proliferation of details about her life and her past only serve to perversely further obscure her from the reader. Towards the end of the novel, Jimmy reflects: "Sometimes he suspected her of improvising, just to humour him; sometimes he felt that her entire past – everything she'd told him – was his own invention" (316). The more we learn about Oryx, the less real she becomes.

Oryx is first glimpsed on a pornographic website for paedophiles, where the footage is recorded in "countries where life was cheap and kids were plentiful, and where you could buy anything you wanted". In this early encounter, she is about eight years old and nameless, "just

another little girl on a porno site". Long inured to such images, the teenaged Jimmy is nevertheless captivated by Oryx: "None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy – they'd always struck him as digital clones – but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start" (90). In an attempt to affirm Oryx's perceived reality, Jimmy downloads her digital image, immediately pointing to the disparity that will continue to exist between the real Oryx and the image of her sustained by Jimmy.

A rough chronology is given of Oryx's history, which includes being sold by her parents, child labour, extortion, pornographic films, people smuggling, sex slavery and prostitution. In the culmination of these abuses, Oryx's story is overwhelming. Through its repeated and persistent violations, it continually threatens the bounds of credibility, whilst at the same time refusing to allow disbelief in crimes that evidently take place every day. When Jimmy shows Oryx his downloaded image of her, pointing to her striking eyes as confirmation of her identity, she replies: "A lot of girls have eyes …. A lot of girls did those things" (91). In refusing to acknowledge or take possession of the image, Oryx opens up her history, merging it with that of countless other young girls trapped by poverty and abuse. Unwilling to accept the impersonal reality of these innumerable sufferings, Jimmy prefers to romanticise the narrative of Oryx's history, crystallising various collected images into the figure of a single woman who can be rescued.

Atwood examines in some detail this element of ambiguous desire evident in Jimmy's response to Oryx's narrative. When Oryx questions Jimmy's wish to hear her confess the horrors of her past, he can only reply: "Because I need you to" (92). Like Grace in *Alias Grace*, who understands that her husband deeply desires her penitence and shame so that he might forgive her, so Jimmy displays an unconscious desire to cast Oryx in the role of debased victim. He tells her, "It's all right … none of it was your fault", but Oryx repeatedly frustrates such reassurances by innocently replying: "none of what, Jimmy?" (114).

Much of Jimmy's obsession with Oryx is bound up in her exotic appeal. In *Orientalism*, Said describes the European fascination with "the spectacle of the Orient" and the exotic strangeness that has been described in grotesque and frequently sexual detail by writers such as

Flaubert. Said states: "The Orient is *watched*, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behaviour issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached …."[34] Said describes how tales of the exotic Orient have long been crafted for European consumption. This pleasurably distanced voyeurism is equally characteristic of Jimmy's first experience of Oryx, glimpsed on a "sex-kiddie site" (90) where sex tourists are filmed "doing things they'd be put in jail for back in their home countries" (89). Despite the fact that these western men are certainly participants in these acts, the sense of otherness is maintained by the unspecified eastern location and the young Asian girls being abused. Brought more immediately into the vicinity of this exotic elsewhere by technology, Jimmy nevertheless consumes the spectacle as a detached western observer. Atwood's text, however, contains its pitfalls, and in the pornographic experiences of Oryx, described in relatively explicit detail, combined with her recollections of the "distant, foreign place" (115) from which she originates, eastern Oryx's narrative perpetually threatens to also turn Atwood's typically affluent western reader into a voyeur, making him or her complicit in Jimmy's morbid fascinations.

Oryx's representation in *Oryx and Crake* contains significant problems for a feminist reader of the text. Mohanty, who has written on the tendency of Western feminists to generalise notions of the essential third- world woman, speaks of the frequency with which this label is located "in terms of the underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and 'overpopulation' of particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries".[35] To these can be added, variously, stereotypes of sexual promiscuity, compliancy and docility. Oryx fits uncomfortably into a number of these defining categories. Born into an unknown Asian country – "A village in Indonesia, or else Myanmar? …. Vietnam? …. Cambodia?" – Oryx's early childhood is characterised by overwhelming poverty: "This village was a place where everyone was poor and there were many children." Poor and

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[34] Said, *Orientalism*, 102-103.
[35] Chandra Talpade Monhanty, Introduction, in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, Bloomington, 1991, 5-6.

illiterate, she is sold by her parents and thereby enters the sex trade. Oryx at this point seems to be entirely a victim of her third world status.

The other side to this victim status is Oryx's exotic attraction. Captivated by her enigmatic beauty, Jimmy's recollections imbue her with a near-mystical appeal:

> Oryx was so delicate …. She had a triangular face – big eyes, a small jaw – a hymenoptera face, a mantid face, the face of a Siamese cat. Skin of the palest yellow, smooth and translucent.

Jimmy fetishises Oryx, both for her beauty, and for her alien otherness. His ambiguous description imbues her with feline and insect characteristics, suggestive of the Oriental mystery of the famously haughty Thai cats, and also hinting at the predatory appetites of the praying mantis. Despite her account of rural poverty and urban slavery, Jimmy continues to romanticise Oryx, concluding that "a woman of such beauty, slightness, and one-time poverty" (115) could never have scrubbed floors.

Once again, to recount Said's thesis, the Orientalism or the exoticism of the eastern subject is constructed externally by the western observer. That is to say, terming Oryx "exotic" is not so much a description of her character, as it is informative of Jimmy and his desires. As Huggan explains: "the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange …."[36] Despite the centring of Oryx's history in the novel, the fact nevertheless remains that her voice is only heard via Jimmy's intermediary recollections.

Power is the dominant referent in Oryx's narrative. Charged with replicating the same sexual activities performed by those earlier paedophiles, Jimmy defends himself: "I don't do them against your will", but Oryx only asks, "What is my will?" (141). Oryx describes a mutual arrangement whereby, as a child, she exchanged sex for English language instruction. As Crake's employee, first engaged as a

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[36] Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic*, 13.

Student Services prostitute, Oryx enters into a similarly reciprocal compact with first Crake, and then Jimmy. In her pliancy and sexual availability, the line between free will and necessary compliance becomes blurred. When he first encounters Oryx on a much-frequented website, Jimmy glimpses his own passive but nevertheless present contribution to her subjection: "Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable" (91). However, despite this early recognition of his implicitly dominant position as a white wealthy male, and despite his suspicions that Crake may be paying her to seduce him, thereby perpetuating her prostitution, Jimmy continues to pursue his desires for the elusive and exotic Oryx.

Oryx, like Zenia and Grace, is incessantly self-inventing:

> *Enter Oryx as a young girl on a kiddie-porn site, flowers in her hair, whipped cream on her chin;* or, *Enter Oryx as a teenage news item, sprung from a pervert's garage;* or, *Enter Oryx, stark naked and pedagogical in the Crakers' inner sanctum;* or, *Enter Oryx, towel around her hair, emerging from the shower;* or, *Enter Oryx, in a pewter-grey silk pantsuit and demure half-high heels, carrying a briefcase, the image of a professional   Compound globewise saleswoman?* (308-307)

These myriad masks seem to point to a postfeminist agency: a postmodernist feminist rejection of authenticity and stable categories. Faced with too many coincidental incarnations, Jimmy is later forced to ask himself: "Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?" (308). This postmodern multiplicity seemingly signals freedom, but cannot disguise the fact that each of Oryx's identities is defined and limited by capitalist power structures: either as a sex worker or as the employee of a multinational corporation. Embracing the marketplace, she takes her position in a global economy and recognises, unlike romantic Jimmy, that "Everything has a price" (139).

By the end of the novel, Oryx has been reinvented yet again, this time as a goddess figure to be worshipped by Crake's posthuman creations. This reincarnation is orchestrated by Jimmy who invents a kind of catechism for the Crakers:

> *Crake made the bones of the children of Crake out of the coral in the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself.* (96)

The figure of the goddess has always run through second wave feminism, particularly in, for example, texts such as Daly's *Beyond God the Father*. In 1972, a period when ecofeminism and spiritual feminism were particularly strong and when Atwood published *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator of that novel was drawn towards the image of the goddess who would counter the masculine rationalist gods, and learns to pray the invocation "Our father, Our mother".[37] Atwood at that time concluded that the desire to retreat into the feminine wilderness was a reprehensible abdication of social responsibility, but the image of the goddess remained as a positive image of balance: part of what Atwood describes as "some kind of harmony with the world".[38]

In *Oryx and Crake*, a new religion begins to evolve, which constructs the world in terms of "The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake" (96). In an early interview, given in 1975, Atwood stated:

> I don't believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies because I think, in a way, everybody needs one. It is just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you.[39]

Oryx and Crake eventually asserts the human need to construct mythologies. Despite "Crake's precautions, his insistence on keeping these people pure, free of all contaminations of that kind" (360), the Crakers begin to construct icons and prayer rituals. This new mythology worships both a god and a goddess, but is still evidently bound by a gendered division of masculine sky-mind and feminine earth-body. Just as Atwood clearly suggests that such cultural expressions as art and religion are somehow hard-wired into humanity, so the ready division of gender roles between the newly beatified Oryx and Crake seems to imply that this split is somehow immutable, that a binary system of gender division is an essential

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[37] Atwood, *Surfacing*, 183.

[38] Atwood quoted in Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", 16.

[39] Atwood quoted in Gibson, "Thinking About Skiing", 32.

human characteristic. And this notion of human essence is ultimately the key question being addressed by the novel.

Life after man
Despite the generic sympathies that *Oryx and Crake* shares with *The Handmaid's Tale* (and in part with *The Blind Assassin*), suggesting perhaps the emergence of a distinctive genre preoccupation in Atwood's canon, *Oryx and Crake* also bears a significant but largely unremarked connection to *Life Before Man*. In the examination of genetic science and neo-Darwinist theories, Atwood returns in the twenty-first century to ground first trod in her 1979 novel. And whereas *Life Before Man* was considered anomalous to the postmodernist-feminist perspective of Atwood criticism in the early 1980s, in the early twenty-first century it once again fails to integrate within a body of criticism that seems keen to disregard Atwood's long standing and well-established feminist associations in order to more fully explore the gender-neutral aspects of her posthuman dystopia.

"Life after man", to borrow the title of a *New Scientist* interview with Atwood on the publication of *Oryx and Crake*, is the preoccupation of Atwood in 2003, just as "life before man" was her concern in 1979. In both novels, she is influenced by contemporary preoccupations with evolutionary theories of socio-biology and genetic science. In both novels, this thematic concern functions as the backdrop to a triangular sexual relationship, thereby juxtaposing the impersonal imperatives of biological necessity with the irrationalism of human emotions such as love and jealousy.

With this 2003 tale of genetic engineering and biotechnology, Atwood displays a characteristic sensitivity and responsiveness to cultural shifts and contemporary issues. Just as with *The Handmaid's Tale* she had been able to declare "There's nothing in it that we as a species haven't done",[40] so she can later say:

> *Oryx and Crake* is not science fiction. It is fact within fiction .… The goat spider is real, the multiple organ pig is real …[41]

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[40] Box 96:11, Margaret Atwood Collection.
[41] Atwood quoted in Eleanor Case and Maggie McDonald, "Life After Man", *New Scientist*, 3 May 2003, 40-42.

Atwood may insist that her interest in the biological sciences is long-standing,[42] but once again her literary intervention proves timely. With retrospect, *Life Before Man*, the most notably scientifically engaged of Atwood's other works, can be seen to anticipate a popular shift towards a cultural discourse of genetics and biotechnology that feminism was reluctant to pursue. When writing the novel, Atwood was working against the grain of feminist ideology with what now appears to have been a canny perceptiveness.

With *Oryx and Crake*, her investigation also comes on the crest of an intellectual wave of interest in the biosciences. It is this renewed preoccupation that led Gillian Beer to preface her 2000 text, *Darwin's Plots*, with the words: "Darwin has grown younger in recent years."[43] Yet despite this ominous diagnosis, there are few feminist literary theorists working in this field. Popular science texts, however, such as Steven Pinker's *The Blank State: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002) and Matt Ridley's *Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience and What Makes Us Human* (2003) proliferate, and Fukuyama has made a marked and significant shift from his earlier liberal thesis in *The End of History* to the scientifically-orientated future scenario of his 2002 text, *Our Posthuman Future*. Yet at the same time, although feminist theorists have largely ignored this cultural preoccupation to date, biotechnology cannot be said to have failed to infiltrate feminism altogether. An important satellite field of feminist bioethics is currently burgeoning, quite apart from the traditionally literary-based feminisms.[44]

One noteworthy exception to the mainstream feminist disregard for evolutionary and genetic science is Haraway, whose highly influential 1991 text, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* interacted very early on with the topic of biotechnology. Haraway proposed a radical union of science and nature that would undermine the mind-body divide. She argued that "part of remaking ourselves as socialist-feminist human

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[42] Case, "Life After Man", 42.

[43] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Elliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, 2000, xvii.

[44] See, for example, *Biopolitics: A Feminist and Ecological Reader on Biotechnology*, eds Vandana Shiva and Ingunn Moser, London, 1995; *Feminism and Bioethics: Beyond Reproduction*, ed. Susan M. Wolf, Oxford, 1996; Laura M. Purdy, *Reproducing Persons: Issues in Feminist Bioethics*, New York, 1996.

beings is remaking the sciences which construct the category of 'nature' and empower its definitions in technology".[45] This question of nature and the essence of the natural is particularly significant at this time, and what Atwood touches on in *Oryx and Crake* is a profound popular unease surrounding the question of human nature in the face of previously inconceivable developments in the genetic sciences.

In *Our Posthuman Future*, published within a year of *Oryx and Crake*, Fukuyama puts forward the argument that, as a consequence of millions of years of evolution, "there are no fixed human characteristics, except for a general capability to choose what we want to be, to modify ourselves in accordance with our desires". However, he then qualifies this assertion by declaring his belief that "human nature exists, is a meaningful concept, and has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species".[46] Fukuyama moves to state an essentialist belief in human nature in the face of what he concedes to be strong anti-essentialist evidence for its non-existence.

This same argument runs throughout *Oryx and Crake*, as the essence of humanity is debated:

> Monkey brains, had been Crake's opinion. Monkey paws, monkey curiosity, the desire to take apart, turn inside out … all hooked up to monkey brains, an advanced model of monkey brains, but monkey brains all the same. (99)

Fukuyama, in contrast, emphasises cultural influence over biological determinism, arguing that "human beings are by nature cultural animals, which means that they can learn from experience and pass on that learning to their descendents through nongenetic means".[47] Crake dismisses the value of cultural production, tracing art and romance back through a biological imperative to procreate. Like Dawkins, writing in *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, Crake believes "We're hormone robots anyway, only we're faulty ones" (166). It is this mechanistic view of humanity, much supported by the sociobiologists of the 1970s, that encourages Crake to presume to correct the robot's flaws.

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[45] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 43.

[46] Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 6-7.

[47] *Ibid*., 13.

Fukuyama links his argument with his earlier polemic, *The End of History*, through a discussion of why people in the twenty-first century are so wary of the concept of human nature. For Fukuyama, the blame lies with the great social engineering attempts of the twentieth century: fascism and communism. The belief that human beings are infinitely plastic, and can be endlessly moulded by ideological principle has, he argues, been disproved: "at a certain point, deeply rooted natural instincts and patterns of behaviour reassert themselves." Fukuyama puts forward a conservative liberal view that has significant implications for socialist feminism:

> Many socialist regimes abolished private property, weakened the family, and demanded that people be altruistic to mankind in general rather than to a narrower circle of friends and family. But evolution did not shape human beings in this fashion.[48]

Fukuyama's argument is inherently contradictory. He asserts that human nature cannot be genetically modified to extinction, yet at the same time, he cites evidence for the implausibility of socialism in social Darwinist terms of genetic selfishness.

Similarly, Crake also rationalises gender difference to genetic codes. Musing on sexuality, he questions: "how much needless despair has been caused by a series of biological mismatches, a misalignment of the hormones and pheromones?" (166). In an attempt to remove aggressive social impulses, Crake strips his creations of family, art, culture, economic role, education, class and race. Gender remains, but deprived of its cultural expression, it is reduced to biological function. Surveying a mating ritual, Jimmy notes:

> There's no more jealousy, no more wife-butchers, no more husband poisoners. It's admirably good-natured: no pushing and shoving, more like the Gods cavorting with willing nymphs on some golden-age Grecian frieze.
> Why then does he feel so dejected, so bereft? (168-69)

Bereft of human relations, Jimmy returns in his imagination to the highly fetishised capitalist incarnation of Oryx. However, in the

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[48] *Ibid.*, 14.

mechanical production and consumption of the pornography with which Oryx is associated, with all its connotations of art and economics, of sexism and racism, of domination and oppression – all of the things Crake has worked to expel – intimate human relations are also lost.

Throughout *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood asks wherein humanity lies. This is, in many ways, simply a broadening of the earliest feminist investigations into gender and essentialism. If human beings are more than biology, then we must look to the value that we place on socio-cultural traits. A world that has given up its ethics and its politics to capitalist principles of "survival of the fittest" relinquishes justice, emotion, and empathy. Working in tandem with this economic Darwinism is the genetic reductionism of the hyper-rationalist Crake. In opposition to both of these perspectives is Jimmy, who despite his many faults, is at least capable of feeling love and remorse.

Oryx and Crake ends with Jimmy forced to choose between the attractive but somehow inhuman Crakers, who are just beginning to develop their own society, and the "real" humans, who are "thin, battered-looking" (373), tired and worn: suggestive of an exhausted civilisation. Atwood concludes her second near-future dystopia as she has concluded other novels: on a note of ambiguous indecision. This indecision forces the reader to question his or her own ideas of humanity, making the text a dynamic space of introspective ethical choices. In her refusal to offer a clear vision of a positive resolution, Atwood affirms her text as dystopia.

Finally, it is clear that the utopian or dystopian work has a peculiar capacity to inscribe a potential cultural development on a purely speculative level. Frye explains: "the utopia is a *speculative* myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one's social ideas, not to be a theory connecting social facts together."[49] Equally, the dystopia enables the novelist to safely examine repressive or in some way negative scenarios before they possibly happen, and in so doing provides an "acting out" of a potential cultural development on a more fully imagined, individual and emotional level than would otherwise be available to theorists.

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[49] Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", 25.

With Atwood's exploration of possible outcomes of the biotechnology revolution in *Oryx and Crake*, she creates an imaginative forum from which feminist theorists are able to enter into and interrogate the politics of the biosciences, opening them up to feminist dialogue and to alternative feminist areas of thought. At the same time, *Oryx and Crake* displays many of the tensions and sympathies that Atwood has demonstrated towards theories of feminism throughout her previous ten novels. In particular, the spectre of essentialism, which has always been at the heart of both second-wave feminism and Atwood's own politics, is inevitably raised in a novel that deals with, among other things, what it means to be "human". In *Oryx and Crake*, questions of genetic predisposition and cultural experience are examined more explicitly than in any other Atwood novel, and once again, feminist discourse proves to be a valuable and constructive backdrop to Atwood's writing.

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