

NEW CULTURAL MODELS IN WOMEN'S  
FANTASY LITERATURE

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SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF  
PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, DEPARTMENT  
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

OCTOBER 1991

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This thesis examines the way in which modern women writers use non-realistic literary forms in order to create new role models of and for women. The work of six authors are analysed in detail - Angela Carter, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Kate Wilhelm. I argue that they share a discontent with the conventions of classic realism, which they all regard as perpetuating ideologically-generated stereotypes of women. Accordingly, they move away from mimetic modes in order to formulate a discourse which will challenge conventional representations of the 'feminine', arriving at a new conception of the female subject.

I argue that although these writers represent a range of feminist responses to the dominant order, they all arrive at a similar conviction that such an order is male-dominated. All exhibit an awareness of the work of feminist critics, creating texts which consciously interact with feminist theory.

I then discuss how these authors use their art to examine the their own situation as women who write. All draw the attention to the existence of a tradition of female censorship, whereby the creative woman has experienced, in an intensified form, the repression experienced by all women in a culture which privileges the male over the female. All these writers exhibit a desire to escape such a tradition, progressing towards the formulation of a utopian female subject who is free to be fully creative - a project they represent metaphorically in the form of a quest.

Finally, I examine how these authors question linguistic and narrative conventions. Using self-conscious forms and techniques characteristic of

postmodernism, their texts are often overtly experimental, rendering 'truth' a matter of individual interpretation. In this way, I argue, the patriarchal order itself is reconstructed as a fiction which is capable of being rewritten.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Bryan Burns. Without his valuable advice and encouragement, it is possible that this thesis might never have been completed.

## CONTENTS

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <u>INTRODUCTION</u>                                     | 1-37        |
| <br><u>PART ONE: APPROACHES TO PATRIARCHY</u>           |             |
| Introduction  | 38-44       |
| Chapter One   | 45-83       |
| Chapter Two   | 84-138      |
| Chapter Three   | 139-182     |
| <br><u>PART TWO: THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE</u>         |             |
| Introduction  | 183-192     |
| Chapter Four  | 193-229     |
| Chapter Five  | 230-275     |
| <br><u>PART THREE: TECHNIQUES OF A FEMALE TRADITION</u> |             |
| Introduction  | 276-283     |
| Chapter Six   | 284-324     |
| Chapter Seven   | 325-370     |
| <br><u>CONCLUSION</u>                                   | <br>371-381 |
| <br><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>                                 | <br>382-389 |

## INTRODUCTION

Eroticism and fantasy blew into my life with the force of a typhoon, erasing all limitations and turning the known order of things upside down.<sup>1</sup>

out of the lie of no  
rises a truth of yes  
(only herself and who  
illimitably is)<sup>2</sup>

In her introduction to her study of feminism and science fiction, *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, Sarah Lefanu writes that:

The freedom that SF offers from the constraints of realism has an obvious appeal...Its glorious eclecticism...offers a means of exploring the myriad ways in which we are constructed as women.

Further, science fiction offers women new ways of writing.<sup>3</sup>

Her comment can also stand as an introduction to this thesis, whose purpose is to show how non-realistic literary forms enable women to create new, positive images of and for themselves. Such a potentially revolutionary and subversive act is only made possible by a rejection of mimeticism, which, as such theorists as Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes have demonstrated<sup>4</sup>, participates in the dissemination of the dominant ideology. While I do not wish to claim that it is only women who benefit from the abandonment of mimetic conventions, or to deny that many male writers use experimental literary forms with the equally strong intention of instigating both personal and social change, in this thesis I am primarily concerned with those who perceive such a project in feminist terms.

The comparison of my aims with those of Lefanu needs some qualification,

though, for however apt the above quotation may be, we differ in our definition of the term 'science fiction'. Lefanu herself acknowledges that this term is problematic, quoting early on in her book an observation made by the editors of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that "'science fiction" is a label applied to a publishing category and its application is subject to the whims of editors and publishers'.<sup>6</sup> She uses the term in a rather broader sense than I do, for, while I have found her work of particular use in my own research, I would hesitate to categorise the novels we both discuss specifically as science fiction. Instead, I prefer to make what I find a useful distinction between science fiction and the majority of the primary texts around which this thesis is based.

As Rosemary Jackson explains, referring to Tzvetan Todorov's diagrammatical representation of the different varieties of fantasy,<sup>6</sup> science fiction can be placed in the category of 'pure marvellous', which is characterised by its 'passive relation to history' and 'a minimal functional narrative, whose narrator is omniscient and has absolute authority. It is a form which discourages reader participation'.<sup>7</sup> Thus science fiction purports to be 'true' by attempting to be a mimetic representation of future society.

In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Christine Brooke-Rose also emphasises this point, comparing the presentation of information in science fiction and mimetic fiction. Using criteria formulated by the French theorist Philippe Hamon, Brooke-Rose finds that science fiction and realism share the same features in almost every particular.<sup>8</sup> She comments that 'it is clear that traditional SF at least does take over wholesale and unmodified most of the techniques of RF'.<sup>9</sup> However, Brooke-Rose finds this link with realism an encouraging one, as she sees each genre revitalising the other, claiming that 'in the 'merging' of a certain type of SF with 'serious fiction'...SF reveals its close connections with the mainstream realistic novel in the 'good' sense of the great tradition, undergoing

similarly painful and revolutionary transformations'.<sup>10</sup> As Lefanu, among others, has observed, science fiction does have positive aspects, only one of which is that it 'offers a freedom to women writers, in terms of style as well as content, that is not available in mainstream fiction'.<sup>11</sup>

None of the authors discussed in this thesis stays totally within the parameters defined by Todorov and Jackson (parameters Lefanu criticises as 'unnecessarily restrictive'),<sup>12</sup> although it is interesting to note that those whose work conforms most closely to the generic requirements of science fiction are also those who are most conservative in terms both of their feminist politics and their willingness to experiment with literary form. Ursula Le Guin's earlier novels and Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* series, for example, are self-contained and authoritative representations of the 'future' which the reader is given very little opportunity to question. However, although the other authors I discuss - Angela Carter, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm and Margaret Atwood - may make occasional forays into science fiction, on the whole their work bears more similarity to what Todorov defines as the 'fantastic marvellous' or the 'fantastic uncanny',<sup>13</sup> which, as Rosemary Jackson explains,

confound elements of both the marvellous and the mimetic...pull[ing] the reader from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange...The narrator is no clearer than the protagonist about what is going on, nor about interpretation; the status of what is being seen and recorded as 'real' is constantly in question. This instability of narrative is at the centre of the fantastic as a mode.<sup>14</sup>

In an echo of the above quotation from Jackson, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* applies the term 'magic realism' to 'novels and stories [which] have a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fairy-story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or



kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence'.<sup>15</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, I have appropriated a critical term which is more normally applied to a branch of twentieth-century Latin American literature typified by the work of such Latin American authors as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende.

Although *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* also defines the work of such contemporary British authors as Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie and Emma Tennant as being representative of 'magical realism', I include only one author out of that list - Angela Carter - in my discussion. However, I have adopted the term because it seems to me accurately to sum up the approach of the authors discussed in this thesis, all of whom alternate between the 'magic' of fantasy and mundane 'reality' in order to create a mode in which an audience's preconceptions are teased and subverted. Whereas science fiction narratives, even those written by women, are fixed in a kind of pseudo-realism, magical realist texts are multi-faceted, often contradictory, representations of the impossible.

It is this very narrative fluidity, which rejects not only the subject matter, but also the techniques, of realism, which gives women unprecedented opportunities to become the authors of new feminist cultural role models, for the most striking characteristic of this kind of fiction is its *immediacy*. The pull towards closure and what Catherine Belsey identifies as 'the reinstatement of order'<sup>16</sup> in the classic realist text mean that it is generally based around a completed event in the past; while science fiction, sharing an equal desire for resolution, is sited in the future. However, the magical realist narrative, with its often flagrant disregard for chronological conventions, is always situated in the shifting perspectives of the present.

This makes it an extremely liberating literary form at all levels of

participation for groups that have been pushed to the margins of the dominant order on the grounds of race, culture, gender or sexuality. Magical realism, as a mode in which anything is possible, enables their escape from the closed form of the mimetic text which exhibits a tendency to freeze the figures of author, reader and character into static representations within an order which is presented as fixed, unchanging, and, above all, 'natural'. As Barthes argues, realism 'effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that we are perceiving reality without intervention'.<sup>17</sup> In an attempt to convince its audience that it is portraying the way the world *really* is, rather than merely a subjective *interpretation* of it, the author is required to efface him or herself from the text in order to render the narrative transparent, so that the reader may better perceive the action as an apparently undistorted representation of 'reality'.

Belsey argues that classic realism thus 'constitutes an ideological practice in addressing itself to readers as subject, interpellating them in order that they freely accept their subjectivity and their subjection'. It achieves this, she claims, by setting up 'a model of intersubjective communication, or shared understanding of a text which represents the world', and which acts as the 'guarantee not only of the truth of the text but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects'.<sup>18</sup> The crux of Belsey's argument is that, in its endorsement of the prevailing ideology, classic realism actively perpetuates that ideology's power over its audience. It is now not enough to say, as Jackson does, that mimetic discourse bears a passive relation to history, for according to Belsey, it also bears a great deal of responsibility for the formation of that history.

The authors included in this thesis exemplify this point, for they all express concern at the way in which the social marginalisation of women is

reflected at the level of the text, where women are all too often enshrined as the images of what men would *like* them to be, rather than as they *are*. Hélène Cixous' description of woman's cultural situation under patriarchy is an accurate summation of the female position in many a realist novel.

*Once upon a time...once...and once again.*

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women, Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable; all mystery emanates from them. It is men who like to play dolls. As we have known since Pygmalion, Their old dream; to be god the mother, The best mother, the second mother, the one who gives the second birth.

She sleeps, she is intact, eternal, absolutely powerless. He has no doubt that she has been waiting for him forever...

This dream is so satisfying! Whose is it? What desire gets something out of it?

He leans over her...Cut. The tale is finished, Curtain, Once awake (him or her), it would be an entirely different story.<sup>19</sup>

The extended metaphor around which this passage is constructed is deliberately drawn from fairy tale, making it ironically clear that realism creates its own, very pervasive, fantasies. Sleeping Beauty is patriarchy's ideal woman - asleep, she lacks any will of her own, and is the blank page on which men can trace the image of their desire. The nature of the mimetic text ensures an acceptance that women should behave like their fictional representations, and that in fact such representations are what 'real women' are actually *like*. Because, in the words of Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 'women's experience is subordinate to the categories and codes through which it is articulated',<sup>20</sup> women are literally 'authored' into socially prescribed roles which glorify passivity and submission as ideals, and simultaneously condemn the concept of female autonomy. In an essay entitled 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', Joanna Russ comments that the woman who reads mainstream literature will find

not women but images of women; modest maidens, wicked temptresses, pretty schoolwags, beautiful bitches, faithful wives, and so on. They exist only in relation to the protagonist (who is male). Moreover, look at them carefully and you will see that they do not really exist at all - at their best they are depictions of the social roles women are supposed to play and often do play, but they are the public roles and not the private women; at their worst they are gorgeous, Clouduckooland fantasies about what men want, or hate, or fear.<sup>21</sup>

While it can be argued that fiction presents the reader with nothing *but* images - of men as well as women - thus placing everyone in the same relation to the text, this does not diminish the impact of Russ' statement. Circumstances of production from within patriarchy dictate that male readers enjoy a much more privileged relation to the mainstream text than is permitted to women, for it is almost inevitably created with male concerns in mind. As Tania Modleski says,

female protagonists and female popular fiction cannot claim for themselves the kind of status male heroes and male texts so often claim... We need not list here the dreary catalogue of devices used in the male text to disable the female and thus assert masculine superiority (the grapefruit mashed in one woman's face by one "tragic hero"). At the end of a majority of popular narratives the woman is disfigured, dead, or at the very least, domesticated. And *her* downfall is anything *but* tragic.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, since the majority of texts aggrandise masculine traits, the male act of reading is primarily one of *identification*. Because this is commonly achieved at the expense of the female, the experience of a woman reading the same text is one of *alienation*. Modleski argues that even novels produced specifically for a female market communicate 'a sense of the insufficiency of female selfhood', thus perpetuating that sense of estrangement. The reader of a Harlequin Romance, for example, 'finds herself, in "hysterical" fashion, desiring the subversion of the heroine's attempts at self-assertion'.<sup>23</sup> The only way in which women can relate to their fictional representations is by conforming to the stereotype; rejecting those needs and desires that do not feature within the

narrative, and becoming instead what a phallogentric culture wants, or imagines, them to be.

As Joanna Russ comments, science fiction is open to the same criticism, for it, too, is guilty of trapping female characters within ideologically-generated stereotypes which masquerade as authentic representations. Although science fiction places no limitations upon the exercise of the writer's imagination, Russ argues that the majority of its exponents venture no further into the realms of speculation than 'present-day, white, middle-class suburbia....[where] men make more money than women...men have the better jobs (the book's heroine is the equivalent of a consumer-research guinea pig); and...children are raised at home by their mothers.'<sup>24</sup> Even male critics such as Peter Nicholls admit that 'one of the more shameful facets of genre sf is the stereotyped and patronizing roles which are usually though not invariably assigned to women'.<sup>25</sup> Although Nicholls claims that science fiction is 'becoming less sexist',<sup>26</sup> many male writers of modern science fiction show this to be a moot point, demonstrating a disturbing tendency to produce fiction which keeps women in their (subordinate) place. Although their novels may ostensibly be set in the future, they actually merely reproduce the prejudices and injustices of contemporary society. Indeed, masculinist science fiction's treatment of women, assigning them marginal roles within narratives, and belittling or ignoring the contributions of women authors to the genre as a whole, is frequently more reminiscent of the attitudes and assumptions of nineteenth than twentieth-century literature.

A story which is frequently cited as an extreme example of sexism in science fiction is Lester del Rey's 'Helen O'Loy', published in 1938, in which a man builds a robot who is his idea of the perfect woman. Helen has no will of her own, but, true to her programming, entirely devotes herself to satisfying her creator's needs and wishes, eventually choosing to sacrifice her immortality

in order to die with him. As Beverly Friend says, this story is 'another blatant statement of woman as mere appendage to man - a walking, talking doll who performs better as an android than she could possibly do as a woman'.<sup>27</sup> In an era which is supposed to have seen the consolidation of feminism, however, such 'walking, talking dolls' are still alive and well.

Between 1979 and 1980, for example, the popular American writer of science fiction and fantasy, Piers Anthony, published his *Tarot* trilogy, in which the two major female characters, Aramanth and Mary, neatly fall into the categories of *femme fatale* and *girl-next-door*. Aramanth, possessing 'a marvellous body and a willing nature' (p.574),<sup>28</sup> is described not only as 'a creature for whom man's lust had been designed' (p.575), but a woman 'who would make a good wife - for the right man' (p.574). Although Anthony undoubtedly does not intend such portrayals to be taken seriously, it is difficult to excuse not only his explicit description of Aramanth's rape, but the fact that she then falls in love with her rapist - while the hero, predictably enough, marries the much more amenable, but no less beautiful, Mary.

The same unpleasant conflation of rape with romance occurs in Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Friday*, published in 1982, in which the eponymous heroine, rather like Helen O'Loy, is an artificially-created being. It is true that, where Helen O'Loy is a housewife, the character of Friday at least pays lip-service to the concept of women's liberation; although, as a professional secret-service agent and assassin, she reveals Heinlein's concept of the liberated woman to be somewhat warped. Importantly, however, she nevertheless retains many of the characteristics of patriarchy's 'perfect' woman: a good body and a willingness to please. Nor do her enhanced speed, strength and vision prevent her from the indignity of rape, an episode which Heinlein, like Anthony, describes in detail. In a disturbing echo of the misogynistic adage that rape is what women 'really

want', Friday explains that a woman in such a situation can 'either detach the mind or wait for it to be over', or she can 'treat rape as an opportunity to gain an edge over her captors'. She describes herself as achieving her escape by working on her 'method acting...reluctant, have to be forced, then gradually your passion overcomes you, you must can't help yourself. Any man will believe that routine, they are suckers for it' (p.17).<sup>29</sup> Later in the novel, however, she is reunited with one of her rapists and settles down with him in cosy domesticity, happily giving up her former career in order to write cookery books.

If authors like Anthony and Heinlein were writing their narratives in or around the 1930's, they could perhaps be at least partially excused on the same grounds as Eric S. Rabkin's conditional justification of 'Helen O'Loy'. He says that, although 'as a portrayal of woman, Helen is clearly indefensible', to 'reject the story as a whole' on those grounds alone would be 'wasteful', since 'the story would not have struck its contemporary audience as exploitative in part because that audience, both male and female, largely held traditional values unconsciously'.<sup>30</sup> However, what the male writers of the *Tarot* trilogy and *Friday* obviously intend to be read as a light-hearted skit on male/female relationships is shockingly reactionary when one considers that both books post-date the advent of feminism, which has fought to politicise such female concerns as the fear of male violence and the right to work outside the home.

In inviting their readers to laugh at what are actually serious issues for women, Anthony and Heinlein not only engage in the wholesale reproduction of traditional sexist attitudes, but also refuse to recognise the infiltration of feminist writers and ideas into the science-fiction market. Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in 1969, and Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* in 1975, both novels which challenge the conventional representation of women in science fiction; and, indeed, in literature in general. However, it is depressing

to consider that, for all the efforts of Le Guin, Russ, and every other author - male and female - who is attempting to overthrow traditional andocentric stereotypes, novels such as the *Tarot* trilogy and *Friday* continue to be published without, it seems, attracting either comment or outrage. Given such examples, it may seem easy to concur with Russ' blunt assertion in 'Images of Women in Science Fiction' that although there are still 'plenty of images of women in science fiction', 'there are hardly any women'.<sup>31</sup>

I do not totally agree with Joanna Russ in this respect, believing that, in spite of the offensive sexism exhibited by Heinlein and Anthony, the science fiction genre is undergoing a transformation which has been initiated largely, although not solely, by women. Both Heinlein and Anthony began writing in the 60's, a period in which the great majority of science fiction was written for men by men. Women's participation in the genre was minimal and went largely unrecognised, due to the fact that many of them adopted ambiguously-gendered pen-names or male pseudonyms in order to improve their chance of publication, and were thus automatically assumed to be men. Even Le Guin admits to having published a short story in *Playboy* in 1968 as 'U. Le Guin'.<sup>32</sup> Although I would argue that science fiction is still popularly perceived as a male-dominated genre, women's increasing involvement, both as readers and writers, pose a genuine challenge to the kind of novels written by Heinlein and Anthony, who remain entrenched in an inflexibly phallogocentric world-view.

While it is true that women do not necessarily have to be feminists to write science fiction,<sup>33</sup> there are also, in the words of Nicci Gerrard, an increasing number who wish to exploit science fiction's potential to act as 'a ready-made laboratory in which feminists may explore possibilities, issue warnings and play with ideas about how society could be restructured'.<sup>34</sup> Authors such as C.J. Cherryh, Melissa Scott and Mary Gentle, for example, are



popular and successful writers of narratives which feature strong and inspiring female characters who are (at least) the equal of their male counterparts.

However, given that, as Jen Green and Sarah Lefanu say, science fiction is a genre which 'still bears the heavy imprimatur of male approval',<sup>36</sup> the female struggle for representation in science fiction can also be seen as an exaggerated paradigm of women's fight to participate in the production of mainstream literature. This is the basis on which I have brought the authors included in this thesis together, for they all show an awareness of that area of possible comparison, playing with science fiction forms in unconventional ways in order to foreground the position of women and their concerns within literature as a whole. They communicate a strikingly similar sense of alienation from the cultural as well as the literary mainstream, and their adoption of literary modes which are conventionally considered to be 'marginal', such as magical realism, science fiction and fantasy, is intended to underline their belief in their marginalisation both as women and as writers.

In order fully to understand the sense of alienation which influences not only these authors' choice of themes, but also the very mode in which they write, it is necessary to place them in their cultural context. Margaret Atwood is Canadian, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm and Ursula Le Guin are American, and Doris Lessing and Angela Carter are British; and it can be argued that the form and content of their fiction is not influenced by gender alone, but also by their various national identities.

With regard to Atwood, Le Guin, Wilhelm and Russ, a tradition of alienation and rootlessness is already part of their cultural heritage. Both America and Canada were founded, relatively recently, by peoples who, although they displaced an indigenous population (a prevalent concern in the fiction of Atwood, Le Guin and Wilhelm), were themselves also displaced. While the rootlessness of the

American cultural psyche has its origins in immigration, in Canada it is rooted in the experience of colonialism. Canadian literature, as Lorna Ivine says, 'dramatically reflects colonial positions toward dominating countries like England, France, and the United States'.<sup>26</sup>

This is illustrated by Margaret Atwood, who, of all the authors in this thesis, is the most overt in her articulation of what Stephen Slemon terms a 'post-colonial discourse'.<sup>27</sup> In narratives such as *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*, as well as in her critique of Canadian literature and culture, *Survival*, she makes it clear that she believes that there is no such thing as a coherent Canadian identity. Already indelibly influenced by the older and larger cultures of Britain and France, Canada is now subjected to the cultural infiltration of the United States. In other words, to be a Canadian is to be automatically in a state of dispossession; the inheritor of an amalgam of culturally-derived subject positions, all of them alien.

However, in spite of the fact that Le Guin, Wilhelm and Russ are themselves writing from within the country which Atwood identifies as a powerful and intrusive culture, their images of alienation are no less powerful and strident than hers. Although America may appear from outside to be a unified hegemony which is more alienating than alienated, its literature shows this not to be the case. Leslie Fiedler speaks of the American writer as 'exhausted' by the effort of 'finding a language, learning to talk in a land where there...[is] no continuing literary language'. Lacking a 'real tradition', 'he [sic] is forever *beginning*, saying for the first time'.<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that a great deal of American literature is based upon an ambivalent attitude towards tradition. In the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote novels in which he turned to Europe for a cultural identity, while in *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville attempted to transplant classical epic concerns into an American

context. In the twentieth century, Kerouac celebrates the very rootlessness and lack of coherent national and individual identity which Faulkner bemoans. Le Guin, Wilhelm and Russ, therefore, are not unique among American writers in expressing a sense of alienation and cultural discontent, any more than is Atwood in Canada.

That alienation is a central theme in the writing of the British authors included in this thesis may be more surprising, in spite of the fact that Britain, too, is a culture which contains immigrants, and which has sought to assimilate groups with different traditions and national identities into the mainstream, often by force. Lessing and Carter, however, are both *English*, which might indicate an ability to identify themselves with the mainstream in a way that Scottish, Welsh or Irish artists are not necessarily capable of doing. While a sense of alienation, as I have argued, is an inescapable part of the American or Canadian heritage, the cultural experience of an English writer is rather different, for England's experience of colonisation, invasion and cultural infiltration has been long since superceded by a belief in a coherent national identity, even if it has all too often been founded on the oppression (or repression) of others.

With regard to Doris Lessing, it can be argued that she is a rather unusual case. Born in Persia and brought up in Rhodesia, she may be considered to be a child of colonialism, which gives her a perspective upon the experience of powerless peoples and groups in a way which makes her comparable to such writers as Le Guin and Atwood. A major theme of the *Children of Violence* series, for example, is the effect of colonialism upon Africa, and her *Canopus in Argos: Archives* novels explore the problem of oppression from a world-wide perspective. Nevertheless, an important difference between Lessing and the American and Canadian authors in this thesis exists, however, for unlike them, she does not

implicate herself in her own argument. Instead of confronting the problem of alienation and oppression from the inside, Lessing consistently retains a detached and stable subject position outside the issue, from which she proposes solutions which in themselves are reminiscent of the mixture of benevolence and totalitarianism which motivated the British colonial enterprise.

Although Angela Carter does not share either Lessing's didacticism or her personal experience of colonialism, she too presents her readers with disturbing portrayals of alienated and isolated individuals and groups. *The Passion of New Eve*, for example, recalls Atwood's *Surfacing* in its portrayal of America as a repressive and casually destructive force which, having forgotten its own history, has no respect for the traditions of others. Her eclectic and consistently irreverent approach conceals the fact that she, just as much as any of the other authors included in this thesis, is engaged in a serious exploration of the cultural space in which she lives. So, for example, she draws on European folk and fairy-tale narratives for the short stories included in *The Bloody Chamber* in order to expose a hidden tradition of female exploitation and oppression which is taken for granted in the normal transmission of such tales. Acting from very similar motivations, American writers such as Le Guin and Wilhelm incorporate narratives and motifs from North American Indian folklore, in an attempt to revivify a culture which is in danger of being overrun and forgotten.

However, the fact cannot be ignored that although these writers may be articulating a tradition of alienation which already exists within their particular national consciousness, they can nevertheless be regarded as rather privileged participants within the cultural mainstream. Appearing to have overcome whatever disadvantages may have been conferred upon them by the fact of their gender, they are not only writers, but critics, teachers, public

speakers and winners of literary awards. Nor are any of them immigrants, or members of a racial minority within their country; so why do they persist in the production of work which is comparable to that written on behalf of the politically and culturally dispossessed of South America?

This question can only be answered by arguing that the authors in this thesis have an identification with their gender which goes beyond all national boundaries or identities. Whether American, Canadian or British, they share a similar sense of being disadvantaged members of a cultural order which is predominantly patriarchal - defined by Adrienne Rich as 'the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, these authors' belief in their oppression functions on two levels. Firstly, they express a general awareness of being construed as inferior members of the dominant order simply because they are women, an experience which is familiar to every female member of society, regardless of race, class or ability. Secondly - and, in this context, more importantly - they articulate a belief that, as women who *write*, they are subject to a very specific form of censorship which attempts to deny women a voice in order to to relegate them to the stereotyped role of man's silent and passive Other.

Nicci Gerrard, for example, describes how the 'unofficial theme' of the PEN International Congress of 1986 was 'the under-representation of women - out of 117 panelists, only one in seven was a woman; among the thirty-two writers who read from their work, only eight were women.....In Margaret Atwood's words, the 14 per cent female presence was 'about as good as the *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, which starts in the twelfth century'.<sup>40</sup> Atwood's comment expresses a

belief which is shared by Le Guin, Russ, Wilhelm, Lessing and Carter: that the advent of feminism and the increased acceptance of women writers does not change the fact that they are the inheritors of a literary legacy which is implicitly inimical to women. It is my contention in this thesis that it is the desire both to publicise and defy that legacy which is the overriding motivation behind their work. Like the Latin American magical realists, these authors share a common preoccupation with their literary and social origins, and use their texts to explore the cultural space that is their inheritance.

The tradition of nineteenth-century realism reinforced the prevailing patriarchal ideology which largely confined women to marriage and the domestic sphere. In spite of the fact that this period saw women writers consolidating a dominance of the novel form that began in the previous century with the growth of popularity of the Gothic romance, the literature they wrote was so frequently trivialised that many, such as George Eliot and the Brontë sisters, published their work under male pseudonyms. Charlotte Brontë, for example, said that she and her sisters decided to be published under the names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell because 'we did not like to declare ourselves women...because we had the vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice'.<sup>41</sup> Charlotte was speaking from experience - when she sent some of her poetry, under her own name, to the poet Robert Southey, she gained only the admonition that 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be'.<sup>42</sup>

The woman artist, therefore, paid a price for breaking nineteenth-century prohibitions against female intellectual autonomy. If her gender was known, she was dismissed for not being a 'real' woman, nor were her books 'real' literature. On the other hand, her use of a male pseudonym meant that she only gained a voice and a chance of approval by denying her female identity, thus, as Gilbert

and Gubar comment, being forced into 'an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she..[was] trying to surmount'.<sup>43</sup>

Gilbert and Gubar argue that even the advent of the dominant literary mode of the early twentieth century, modernism, did little to change the situation of women, whether inside or outside the text. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* descriptively defines modernism as 'the ruffling of the realistic surface of literature by underlying forces',<sup>44</sup> and it can be argued that such a freedom from the confines of realism offered women writers the opportunity to challenge the dominant ideology in narratives which were no longer constrained by the dominant order's definition of 'reality'. Revealingly, however, the entry's list of modernism's 'major writers' completely ignores female contributions to the movement, showing modernism to be a mode which was almost as effective as excluding the voices of women as nineteenth-century realism.

This may not, however, be so suprising when one considers the fact that modernism evolved out of the *male* experience of alienation following the social, physical and psychic devastation of the First World War; an experience which, as Elaine Showalter argues, led a great many traumatised men to take on the 'female' role of hysteric. She quotes Susan Gilbert's statement that 'paradoxically, in fact, the war to which so many men had gone in hope of becoming heroes, ended up emasculating them...confining them as closely as any Victorian woman had been confined'.<sup>45</sup> Such an enforced identification with women, however, led not to sympathy, but hostility. As Showalter says, 'men's quarrels with the feminine element in their own psyches became externalised as quarrels with women, and hysteria expressed itself in part as fear or anger towards the neurotic woman'.<sup>46</sup> Andreas Huyssen, too, speaks of a 'powerful masculinist and misogynist current within the trajectory of modernism, a current which time and time again openly states its contempt for women'.<sup>47</sup>

This overt hostility towards the female subject was only intensified by the rise of the Suffragist movement and women's increasingly strident demands for the rights of equal participation in education, politics and the arts. Gilbert and Gubar argue that such feminist activity initiated a literary backlash which adversely affected male representation of women in literature. Many male authors reacted with hostility to the expansion of women's political and literary activities, creating female characters who were either grotesquely domineering and life-threatening, or exaggeratedly passive and vulnerable to masculine victimisation. D.H. Lawrence, for example, can be seen to be creating female characters which reflect his own prejudices against what he called 'cocksure women'.<sup>49</sup> Gilbert and Gubar argue persuasively that a novel like *Women In Love* represents 'a world inhabited by murderous women'<sup>49</sup> where Gudrun, representing 'the corrosiveness of female desire'<sup>50</sup> effectively 'unmans' Gerald Crich. It may be an accurate representation of male paranoia, but that is where the similarity to life ends. In the early twentieth century, therefore, as in the nineteenth, literature was the site of the enactment of both 'men's hostility toward what they perceived as threatening female autonomy and women's anxiety about what they saw as the fragility or even the fictionality of such autonomy'.<sup>51</sup>

Although a revolutionary new literary mode as far as male artists were concerned, modernism actually did little to change women's relation to literature and its production, still consigning them to the passive role of acting as the inspiration for the male intellectual activity of writing. The female figure as the 'angel or monster' of Victorian fiction did not die out, but was merely replaced with an 'objectification...of the primordial female otherness which may have been the real source of male anxieties about New Women'.<sup>52</sup> In this era, state Gilbert and Gubar, 'male writers from Pater to Wilde to Yeats, along with



many of their descendents, linked a new perception of what they saw as the archaic power of the feminine with the reactive urgency of the modern aesthetic they were themselves defining'.<sup>52</sup>

In spite of the fact that, just as in the nineteenth century, many women defied such powerful cultural censorship in order to write, they still frequently expressed a sense of being pressured and excluded on the grounds of gender. No author dramatises the dilemma of the woman writer of the period more forcefully than Virginia Woolf, whose experimentation with literary forms was conducted, as Elaine Showalter says, under an awareness of having 'inherited a female tradition a century old'. However, it can be argued that Woolf was eventually claimed by the very inheritance which so 'obsessed' her, for 'by the end of her life she had gone back full circle, back to the melancholy, guilt-ridden, suicidal women...whom she had studied and pitied'.<sup>54</sup> Towards the end of her life, Woolf professed to experiencing a feeling of 'growing detachment from the hierarchy, the patriarchy',<sup>55</sup> and the advent of the Second World War only exacerbated her depression and sense of despair: 'we live without a future...with our noses pressed to a closed door', she wrote shortly before her death in 1941.<sup>56</sup>

From the late 60's onwards, authors such as Barth and Vonnegut replaced the modernist concept of the Death of the Author with the 'postmodernist' concept of the Death of the Self. Postmodernism carried modernism's experience of alienation to a deeper and more intense level: as Alex Callinicos says, 'where Modernism experiences fragmentation as loss...prophets of the postmodern celebrate it'.<sup>57</sup> The deliberate incoherence of the mode conveys the belief that there is no longer any hope for the integration of the subject, who is fragmented and dispersed beyond any hope (or wish) of recovery. However, feminist critics such as Sabina Lovibond<sup>58</sup> and Patricia Waugh (whose argument

in her book *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* has had a great influence on my own approach to the issue in this thesis) argue that postmodernists, like modernists, largely assumed the alienated subject to be of the male gender. Consequently, in spite of the development and spread of feminist political awareness, women writers found themselves in a situation no less problematic than before.

Patricia Waugh makes some extremely useful observations on the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, saying that although postmodernism is usually 'presented as an art of the marginal and oppositional and as such would seem at last to offer women the possibility of identity and inclusion',<sup>59</sup> this is not the case, for both modernism and postmodernism have been predominantly male concerns. While writers such as Barth and Vonnegut expressed their belief in the loss of the universal liberal subject, women were beginning to realise that they had never enjoyed the privileges of a unified subject position in the first place - a fact which profoundly influenced their relationship to the postmodernist movement. Waugh comments that

if women have traditionally been positioned in terms of 'otherness', then the desire to become subjects (which dominates the first phase of post-1960s feminism) is likely to be stronger than the desire to deconstruct, decentre, or fragment subjectivity (which dominates post-1960s postmodernist practice and post-structuralist theory). They have not yet *experienced* this 'whole' or 'unitary' or essential' subjectivity.<sup>60</sup>

While Waugh admits that later feminist writing, having constructed the subject, takes on many of the characteristics of postmodernist literature by espousing the concept of *deconstruction*, she maintains that that it retains fundamental differences, having rejected the 'impersonality' of masculine postmodernism in favour of an 'adherence to a fundamentally humanist concern with the subject in relationship'.<sup>61</sup>

Waugh's theories enable a parallel to be drawn between feminist postmodernist literature and magical realism, for Gerald Martin's view of Latin American literature's relation to modernism is similar to that expressed by Waugh concerning postmodernism and feminist writing. Martin, while acknowledging modernism's influence on the growth of the magical realist movement - Joyce, for example, exercised a profound influence on writers such as Jorge Luis Borges - provocatively asserts that 'European modernism...has no programme, no system, no theory, beyond the 'spirit of the age'...at most some general concepts of temporal fracture, structural complication, interior monologue and stream of consciousness'.<sup>62</sup> It therefore differs fundamentally from the Latin American, as well as the female, experience, for which the phenomenon of marginalisation is far more than the 'spirit of the age' - it is an inescapable part of such groups' cultural inheritance, and thus has to be *lived*.

As the comparison between Borges and Joyce makes clear, there has already been much mingling of the modes of modernism, postmodernism and magical realism, for all are similarly committed to the overthrow of the omniscient narrator and to the decentring of the self. The narrative techniques which characterise modernist and postmodernist literature, such as temporal discontinuity, stream-of-consciousness discourse, and the mingling of narrative voices and points of view, are also characteristic of magical realism. However, whereas modernism hesitates on the verge of the revelation it both desires and dreads (Rosemary Jackson describes the modernist author as 'waiting, interminably, for an impossible epiphany'),<sup>63</sup> and postmodernism intends to reduce the world of perceived reality itself to the status of a fiction, magical realism retains a sense of social conscience which assumes the existence of a world beyond the text which is capable of improvement. The characteristics and techniques of magical realism may be influenced by more mainstream modes, but

as Martin argues, it does not lose its awareness of being based upon the actual experiences of those who exist upon the cultural periphery, and whose vision is therefore fragmented and partial:

A Latin American writer, regardless of his or her politics, is always pulled in two directions and thereby learns to balance different realities and different orders of experience and thus to find their way into history as well as myth. Thus the real heart of what has been called Magical Realism...is the juxtaposition and fusion, on equal terms, of the literate and preliterate worlds, future and past, modern and traditional, the city and the country...It requires the application of indirect discourse and the treatment of folk beliefs, superstitions and myths with absolute literalness.<sup>64</sup>

The group of authors discussed in this thesis are united in their intention to amalgamate elements of postmodernism, magical realism and science fiction for specifically feminist ends, escaping from committing themselves to any single mode by a playful and irreverent mingling of narrative techniques and strategies. However, they approach such a project in a critical spirit, for their synthesis of these modes is also an interrogation of their innate phallogocentric bias. Sharing the sense of *angst* which characterises postmodernism, they utilise self-reflexive postmodernist forms and techniques which subvert the conventional relationship between fiction and reality. As Nicci Gerrard argues, literary postmodernism, as 'a fragmented movement in which cultural plurality and ideological contradictions co-mingle....seems especially promising when applied to feminism, which welcomes plurality and diversity'.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, however, these writers, sharing the political concern displayed by magical realism, reject the postmodernist tendency to retreat into what Gerrard describes as 'the uncommitted and self-referential realm of parody and pastiche'.<sup>66</sup> Finally, science fiction's ability to create space for speculation enables these writers to introduce a utopian element into their work, imagining the future establishment of a changed social order, or even a totally new reality, which

would enable women to escape patriarchal dominance.

The authors discussed here illustrate a range of different positions in relation to the maintenance of such a balance. Joanna Russ is probably the most overtly 'postmodernist', creating texts which are confused and frequently incoherent expressions of rage from a dispersed female consciousness, and in which the promise of utopia, although pervasively present, is persistently vague and uncertain. At the other end of the spectrum lies the work of Lessing and Le Guin, whose strong delinations of futuristic societies in such books as *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Shikasta* lead to their classification as science fiction.

Ultimately, however, even Lessing and Le Guin prove difficult to categorise, for they, like the other authors in this thesis, shift modes both in and between texts. Le Guin, for example, known as a science fiction writer, in fact creates narratives which mingle representations of future societies with mythic narratives derived from Native American culture, politics with philosophy. In recently-published novels such as *Always Coming Home*, the thoroughness with which she disperses the subject of the enunciation brings the postmodernist elements of her approach to the fore, although she retains her utopian ideals and her political awareness.

Like the Argentinian writer Luisa Valenzuela, who has said that she 'needed the perspective of exile to unlock my imagination',<sup>67</sup> these authors strive to turn their consciousness of oppression into a culturally revitalising practice. Their experience of marginalisation and alienation puts them in touch with the suppressed and hidden voices of society which are assigned principally to the discredited areas of folk art and belief<sup>68</sup> - by making these the source of their narratives, they are not only giving them a voice at last, but overturning the phallogcentrically-determined boundaries between 'reality' and 'fantasy' in the

process. Like the authors of magical realism, they make a journey into what Gerald Martin calls the 'interior'<sup>69</sup> - a metaphorical cultural space which is uniquely theirs, and which will enable them to define and redefine their role as women, as authors, and as inhabitants of a particular country or society.

The texts discussed within this thesis demonstrate more than just a disregard for the literary conventions - they are attempting to rewrite women's entire cultural history, a process which cannot be carried out within the constrictions of the mainstream. Hence the inherent dynamism of this kind of feminist narrative, which shows women, not as they are, or as they will be, but in the very midst of the process of being redefined. A common theme in all these works is that of rediscovery; of resurrecting aspects of female selfhood that have been suppressed within a phallogentric society. A recurrent figure is that of the creative woman who is struggling to find a voice with which to communicate the genuine nature of her experience - Anna Wulf in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*; Joan Foster in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*; Eve/Evelyn in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*; Joanna in Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*. All these characters have a significance that extends far beyond their role in the narrative; they stand for all women who are attempting to construct images of themselves outside the familiar, all-pervasive, iconography mimeticism offers as 'reality'.

The overriding emphasis in the novels dealt with here is on the struggle towards revolutionary new female subject positions - a process which entails the rediscovery of archetypes, or the creation of radically new images of woman. I will try to show that these authors are not just striving towards a political re-evaluation of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society, but also a much wider cultural reconstruction. It is this preoccupation which constitutes much of the fantastic element within these narratives, as their authors attempt

to formulate a new feminist mythology and methodology which redefines the most fundamental basis of female selfhood.

In spite of the fact that the majority of these authors are extremely sceptical of traditional myth, regarding it as another patriarchal narrative form which traps women into ideologically-derived stereotypes, this urge is often expressed by the adoption of a narrative pattern that is itself characteristic of myth - that of the quest. Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, for example, records the metamorphosis of an embattled female psyche into a transcendent archetypal being, within a narrative that is an ironic exploration of the validity of the resurrection of the myth-making subconscious. Carter, in accordance with her statement that myth is 'consolatory nonsense....Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods,'<sup>70</sup> destroys the patriarchal principle in *The Passion of New Eve*. However, she nevertheless puts in its place Eve/Evelyn, the scientifically-created man/woman, demonstrating that, although she may reject familiar archetypes as meaningless stereotypes, she nonetheless fashions new ones from the ashes of the old. Like Atwood and Carter, the other authors in this thesis all turn mythic motifs upside-down in order to create new images of radical female transformation.

The creation of such revolutionary female figures necessitates a search for a narrative that will adequately contain these revitalised images. The authors of the texts discussed in this thesis share a common preoccupation with language and its limitations, using an approach reminiscent of postmodernism in order to reject the narrative limitations of mimeticism, with its demands for an ordered hierarchy of discourse, and discarding linguistic conventions by exploring concepts for which there are no words within a phallogocentric system of representation. This, however, is more than the word-games typical of postmodernism, for these writers, arguing that the structure of discourse

defines in a fundamental fashion how the individual perceives herself and her place within society, express a conviction that a redefinition of language is a vital issue for women.

Indeed, it can be argued that the experience of liberation transcribed by such authors is not validated until it can be accurately expressed and communicated to others. While theorists like Lacan and Freud have claimed that the individual is created through the process of the acquisition of language, it is an argument that, with its equation of language with the drives of male sexuality, accords the privileged place within discourse to men. Feminist authors are not just resurrecting personal female archetypes, but are rewriting a substantial amount of masculinist theory along the way. I wish to show how they are using their fiction as a means of highlighting the phallogentric theoretical processes that perpetually construct women in terms of silence and lack - in doing so, such authors purposely foreground their own efforts towards a new system of signification that will give them a voice at last.

Another thing which links these six authors as a group is the fact that, in spite of their differing nationalities, they share a feminist legacy which grew out of post-war Europe and America. An indication of the influence of the feminist movement upon their work is the fact that they all began publishing between 1950 and 1969, the period in which feminism began to make an impact on society, both politically and intellectually. It is also interesting to note that the growth of these novelists' reputations through the 60's, 70's and even the 80's reflects the development of feminist social and literary criticism. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was published in 1949, the year before Lessing's first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, appeared, and was the forerunner of a flood of feminist critical works - such books as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Eva Figes' *Patriarchial*



*Attitudes* (1970), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972) laid the theoretical foundations of feminism. Even though modern feminist critics such as Maggie Humm, writing in 1986, might regard these pioneering theorists as 'only tentatively or partially feminists'<sup>71</sup> by modern standards, it cannot be denied that their writing 'represents an enormous breakthrough in describing women's oppression in literary form'.<sup>72</sup>

Humm goes on to make the observation that 'the distinguishing feature of post-war feminist criticism as established by these writers [de Beauvoir, Millett, Friedan, et al.] was its hybrid mixture of cultural and literary criticism'<sup>73</sup> - a comment which brings us back to the writers whose works form the basis of this thesis. The three modes on which they draw are all characterised by the ease with which they are able to use materials from a variety of sources. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi, for example, speak of postmodernism's 'acceptance of the inevitability of a plurality of perspectives and the dissolution of various older polarities (popular/elite forms, subject/object) and boundaries (for instance between disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, history and psychoanalysis)'.<sup>74</sup> Tom Moylan, meanwhile, quotes the science fiction writer Samuel Delany's belief in a "web of influence" which affects a genre like science fiction in such a complex way that one cannot trace a direct line of development from one work to the next but rather must be aware of the multiplicity of influences that come from within or without that generic tradition to expand its possibilities'.<sup>75</sup> The same can be said of magical realism, which freely borrows from the discourses and iconography of both the past (religion, mythology and literature), and the present (psychoanalysis, linguistics - and of course, most significantly in terms of this discussion, feminist theory).

The authors in this thesis all transpose this pluralism into their own

work. Le Guin finds inspiration from her father's discipline of anthropology for *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), a detailed fictional creation of a world of androgynes, and from political theory for *The Dispossessed* (1974), an analysis of the relative values of communism and capitalism within a futuristic setting. Angela Carter's fiction is constructed from a kaleidoscopic, frequently bizarre, range of materials, from Grimm's fairy tales (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1984), to Hollywood iconography (the enigmatic movie star Tristessa in *The Passion of New Eve*, 1977), while Joanna Russ owes an obvious debt to modernism for her literary technique in such novels as *The Female Man* (1975) and *The Adventures of Alyx* (1983), whose content is an amalgam of lesbian sociology and imagery drawn from prewar American sci-fi and fantasy.

My argument is that, in their adoption of such flexible and eclectic modes, these authors engage in a dynamic interaction with feminist theory, transcribing intellectual and political ideas within their fictional realm, and shown in the process of their working out. What these authors take from feminist dialectic with the one hand, therefore, they give back with the other, for they not only mirror the myriad concerns and changing faces of a feminist movement which has developed in conjunction with their individual careers, but contribute to that very process from which they draw their inspiration. Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*, for example, published in 1962, is often regarded as significant a work of feminist cultural analysis as any of the non-fictional theoretical works produced by de Beauvoir, Freidan or Greer.<sup>76</sup> In their role as *female* authors, writers such as Lessing reflect the willingness of feminist theory to draw on a wide variety of sources to expose and discredit what Maggie Humm terms 'myths of the feminine',<sup>77</sup> which empower the cultural forces of patriarchal oppression. And many of them, when they are not writing fiction, are theorists themselves - Angela Carter, Joanna Russ, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula Le Guin have all

published a considerable amount of literary theory. As a body of literature, the works discussed in this thesis are extremely self-aware, written by women who are consciously attempting to change the cultural position of women - and especially women artists - within contemporary society.

In listing the grounds upon which these authors can be compared, however, I am not attempting to give a false impression of unity, for, as this thesis intends to show, there are many areas of their literary practice where comparison is problematic, for each author's work is motivated by a different feminist intent. In fact, considered in terms of their feminism, these authors seem to form a somewhat disparate group, since they hold often widely differing, even incompatible, views on the question of gender. However, this diversity is one of the reasons behind my selection of these particular writers, for together, they span the register of feminist response - from the extreme gynocentricism of Joanna Russ to Le Guin's androgynous ideal.

It is my belief that, as many feminist critics have already argued, the widely different ideological viewpoints contained within the blanket term 'feminist theory' in themselves constitute an ideology - a refusal to adopt the rigid singlemindedness they conceive of as being characteristic of patriarchal discourse. In *Feminist Criticism*, Maggie Humm justifies such a view, explaining that:

The definition of ideology, tautologically, contains the notion of contradiction. This is because ideology is what we construct to explain our experience, and the experience of others, to ourselves. Ideology is our way of coping with the contradictions of experience. Inevitably the ideology of women critics is likely to encompass more contradictions than the ideology of men since women are provided with many more confusing images of themselves than are men. But when one turns to feminist psychoanalysis one learns that the instability of the feminine which Freud reveals as his great fear in *Female Sexuality* can be a source of woman's power.<sup>7\*</sup>

The American critic Natalie M. Rosinsky reiterates the Anglo-American point of view, with its emphasis on ideology as a social phenomenon, stating that 'feminism is not one cohesive viewpoint but rather an ideological framework which contains a range of views'.<sup>79</sup> For many of the French feminists, however, such as Hélène Cixous, this potential for plurality stems from a more fundamental source only hinted at by Humm - the diffuse and multiple nature of female sexuality: 'There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in *common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes - any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another'.<sup>80</sup> This movement away from absolutism is, of course, another point of contact with the fantastic, which, as Rosemary Jackson explains 'dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning or absolute 'reality'...It tends towards the non-conceptual, or pre-conceptual'.<sup>81</sup>

It would be a mistake, therefore, to attempt to impose a completely unified reading upon the authors studied here. While their fiction springs from a common compulsion towards cultural redefinition, their methods and intentions in doing so are frequently dissimilar. A feminist reading, in my view, must accept that these authors' works have to be considered in the light of the fact that they emphasise the value of the particular and the personal<sup>82</sup> - which involves the acknowledgement that these narratives are intrinsically open-ended and inconclusive, achieving only temporary, individual, resolutions in the struggle towards female self-definition. The emphasis in these texts is always on the fragmentary nature of personal experience - it is notable that the majority of them are written in the first person, which automatically creates the illusion of limiting authorial perception. Whereas realism attempts to create an

atmosphere of familiarity to give the reader a sense of common experience with the author, the works in this thesis use what Todorov would call the technique of 'estrangement' in order to stress the *unfamiliar* aspects of the narrative. While realist fiction is based on the process of recognition, the texts discussed here challenge literary conventions in order to initiate a process of re-evaluation - for each of these authors hope that the women who visit the alternate worlds of their texts will see the world around them with new eyes.

This thesis is divided into three sections, each of which traces a stage in these authors' progress away from a patriarchal order and patriarchal perspectives in order to formulate new, and revitalising, cultural role models for women. The first section, 'Approaches to Patriarchy', serves as an introduction to the works I will be discussing throughout the thesis, while also outlining each writer's feminist motivations. Although I have already mentioned the diversity of feminist stances encompassed by the writers in this thesis, in this section I show that, although their approaches may differ, they all express a sense of dissatisfaction with a dominant order which they identify as being specifically patriarchal.

In the second section, 'The Quest for Independence', I analyse how they go on specifically to examine their own situation as women artists with relation to such a system, viewing themselves as the inheritors of a mixed legacy of literary transgression and destructive self-censorship. This, I argue, leads to their formulation of strategies of escape from such an order; an escape which is effected by radically transforming the very myths by which women in the patriarchal order live their lives. The influence of such myths is seen as being dangerously insidious, for they not only impose ideologically motivated stereotypes upon women from outside, but also infiltrate the individual psyche, ensuring that women themselves regulate their own conformity to patriarchal

culture. The authors in this thesis metaphorically express their desire to escape this situation by appropriating and subverting the mythic convention of the quest, a motif which, in its conventional form, reinforces the very ideological definitions of women as passive and powerless which curtail and confine the efforts at expression of women artists. In this way, these writers seek to formulate a new female subjectivity which is free to be creative without experiencing censorship from either inside or outside the self.

The next stage in such an endeavour is to create a discursive system through which such a concept can be expressed. This is the subject of the third section, 'Techniques of a Female Tradition', which examines the course these authors steer between the tradition of nineteenth-century subjectivity, and a postmodernist fragmentation of that subjectivity. I argue that they attempt to create linguistic and narrative constructions which, although distinctly reminiscent of postmodernist models, nevertheless retain an adherence to the autonomous subject which prevents their texts sliding into self-reflexivity. Although their texts set out to deconstruct the female subject in a patriarchal context, these writers ultimately reconstruct her within a radically changed cultural order within which she is no longer constrained by phallogentric definitions.

## INTRODUCTION - NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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|                 |                      |                         |                    |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| PURE<br>UNCANNY | FANTASTIC<br>UNCANNY | FANTASTIC<br>MARVELLOUS | PURE<br>MARVELLOUS |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|

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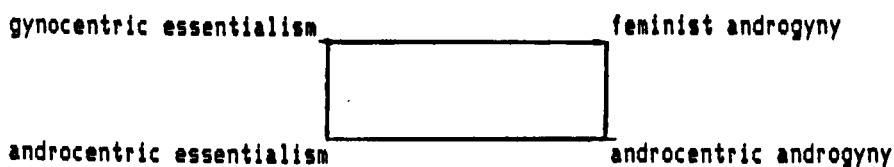
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77. Humm, p.22
78. *ibid.* p.7
79. Natalie M. Rosinsky, *Feminist Futures: Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984), p.ix. In considering the range of feminist stances available to women, I have found her diagrammatical representation particularly useful:



80. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), pp.245-64 (pp.245-6)
81. Jackson, p.41
82. See, for example, Waugh on the subject in *Feminine Fictions*, p.22, where she identifies 'impersonality' with male postmodernism, stating that 'in my view, many twentieth-century women writers (whether consciously feminists or not) have sought alternative conceptions of subjectivity, expressing a definition of self in relationship which does not make identity dependent axiomatically upon the maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other'.

PART ONE  
APPROACHES TO PATRIARCHY

## INTRODUCTION

Until the present, we have heard principally from male witnesses concerning women, witnesses that a court of law would not allow since they would be considered suspect, male witnesses whose testimony is biased. The woman herself has scarcely uttered a word. And it is up to the woman not only to discover this unexplored continent she represents, but also to talk in turn about men in her own capacity as suspect witness.<sup>1</sup>

We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know.<sup>2</sup>

In order to examine the new cultural models that Russ, Atwood, Wilhelm, Le Guin, Carter and Lessing create for themselves, it is necessary to make a preliminary study of their various perceptions of their individual cultural situations. Each writer, as her female characters react with (or, possibly, act for) the men around them, dramatises her individual feminist vision through the medium of her fiction.

In their concern with male/female social and personal interaction, these writers demonstrate that to create new social possibilities for women does not necessarily mean the creation of an escapist form of literature, writing oneself into a feminist utopia where all the problems of being a woman in a male-dominated society magically disappear. In fact, several of the writers discussed in this thesis satirise this very impulse - in Kate Wilhelm's novel *Oh, Susannah!*, for example, the heroine's inspiring vision of a brave new, all-female, world ("Everyone paints and writes poetry and dances. We have no wars, no injustices, no wants. There is perfect equality for all" (p.74))<sup>3</sup> is invalidated by the reader's knowledge that it is just another delusion in her quest for a stable identity. Joanna Russ creates a very similar society in her short story

'When It Changed', which also forms part of the background setting of her novel *The Female Man*. Like Wilhelm, though, Russ ironically undermines her feminist ideal even as she creates it. 'When It Changed' shows the inevitable collapse of the society of Whileaway as soon as men enter it, and in *The Female Man* it exists within a fragmented narrative as an unattainable ideal rather than as a concrete reality, for as Russ is careful to point out:

Whileaway, you may gather, is in the future,  
But not *our* future, (p.7)<sup>4</sup>

Although the hope of a better world is a prevalent theme in the narratives of such authors as Wilhelm, Russ, Le Guin and Lessing, it remains only a promise, for the concept of utopia as a concrete reality is undercut in their work at every opportunity. Consequently, it exists in the narrative only as a shadowy ideal or a remote possibility. For example, Tom Moylan, in a discussion of *The Female Man*, comments that Russ 'uses utopia as a literary practice; she does not assert utopia as a literary object'.<sup>5</sup> It is an observation that could be equally well applied to any of the other authors included in this thesis, for whom the utopian motif is not a serious social prescription, but is manipulated as a symbol that hints at the existence of alternative discourses by which the individual might conceive of herself as a subject outside the restrictions of patriarchal ideology.<sup>6</sup>

It is here that the exceptionally flexible narrative techniques of postmodernism are exploited to the full, for they are able to contain and control multiple, often conflicting, perspectives within the body of a single text, enabling these authors to offer (in the words of Tom Moylan) 'a disruptive, multiplex utopian practice that resists strict linear, systematic,

totalized closure on a single alternative'.<sup>7</sup> While committing themselves to the possibility of change, none of them succumbs to the lure of pure escapism, which would be subject to the restriction of a narrative conclusion. Instead, they take on the much more problematic task of creating a complex, often difficult, narrative which will adequately express the intellectual, physical and cultural conflicts that take place as the individual psyche struggles from one subject position, or version of 'reality', to another, resisting the ever-present threat of closure, which is identified with the linear, logical nature of the classic realist text.

In this section of the thesis, I am concerned with identifying the precise nature of this struggle, because it is here that each author declares the precise nature of her feminist ideology. Although, as a group, these authors do not offer any kind of unified feminist praxis, their narratives are characterised by a common concern with the actual process of feminist conflict. In her essay 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', the French theorist Hélène Cixous has discussed the concept of what Toril Moi, in an analysis of Cixous' work, terms 'patriarchal binary thought'<sup>8</sup> - the concept that Western thought is intrinsically divided within itself, the 'male' half of the equation (rational, active, powerful) always dominating the 'female' half (intuitive, passive, powerless). Cixous herself sums it up as:

Man \_\_\_\_\_  
 Woman

Always the same metaphor; we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection. Thought has always worked through opposition.<sup>9</sup>

The authors in this thesis have a fundamental interest in the man/woman dichotomy and, like Cixous, see this duality as pervasive and inescapable, colouring the thoughts and actions of every individual. For Cixous, too, the concept of conflict is an intrinsic part of her theory - if a cultural split based on the division between the sexes exists, she says, it is inevitable that one half of the division will try to destroy the other, for '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'.<sup>10</sup> In her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', she is even more explicit: 'Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death (one master - one slave, or two nonmasters ≠ two dead) - all that comes from a period in time governed by phallogocentric values'.<sup>11</sup>

The American poet and theorist Adrienne Rich echoes Cixous in her belief that acknowledgement of the existence of the patriarchal system inevitably involves 'tear[ing] open the relationship at the core of all power-relationships, a tangle of lust, violence, possession, fear, conscious longing, unconscious hostility, sentiment, rationalization: the sexual understructure of social and political forms'. For Rich, however, this recognition of the fact that all relationships between men and women are fundamentally based on a struggle for power is the first step towards liberation, for it enables women 'to look around us at the Kingdom of the Fathers and take its measure'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, to understand the nature of patriarchal binary thought, which sees everything in terms of a power struggle which must be won, is to begin to be able to formulate strategies of escape from an all-pervasive representational system in which women are always and inevitably the losers.

The key to an understanding of the feminist ideologies held by the authors

included in this thesis, therefore, lies within their treatment of sexual difference and, more specifically, their presentation of the obvious manifestation of this split within the cultural consciousness - conventional social relationships between men and women. Through the invocation of the utopian ideal, which proposes radically to alter women's relation to power by opening the way to the formulation of discourses other than the patriarchal, these writers explore the nature and extent of that conflict, and attempt, in their different ways, to effect a solution.

This section of the thesis is accordingly divided into three chapters, each of which compares and contrasts the work of authors who hold similar views on the issue of gender, and, taken together, show the widely divergent ways in which it can be approached. The first chapter deals with Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood, whose similarly essentialist philosophy leads them to present personal relationships between the sexes as being extremely problematic, due to fundamental differences that may be impossible to surmount. Margaret Atwood provides the link between the first and second chapter, in which her later novels are compared with those of Kate Wilhelm and Ursula Le Guin. As a group, these authors demonstrate another possible feminist procedure; that of collapsing the subject of gender difference into a wider concern with the problem of oppression as a whole. Chapter Three looks at two authors, Angela Carter and Doris Lessing, who regard patriarchy very differently from the writers discussed in the preceding chapters - as something to be accepted, not resisted, although for very different reasons.



PART ONE INTRODUCTION - NOTES AND  
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3. Kate Wilhelm, *Oh, Susannah!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982)
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6. My use of the term 'discourse' is drawn from the theories of Michel Foucault, which Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987) describes as regarding all discourses as 'ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern' (p.108).
7. Moylan, p.56
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12. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1977), p.56

## CHAPTER ONE

For a free woman, there can be no relationship with men other than war,<sup>1</sup>

you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook  
an open eye<sup>2</sup>

Without doubt, Joanna Russ holds the most extreme feminist views of any of the authors discussed here, and is a writer who blatantly exploits the metaphorical possibilities of the science fiction form for ideological ends. I think Sarah Lefanu neatly sums up Russ' intentions in her comment that 'Russ' feminism is to be found not so much in her utopian creations as in her deconstruction of gender identity, of masculine and feminine behaviour'.<sup>3</sup> I also agree with Lefanu's view that Russ' primary concern in her fiction is not to create alternative societies or strong female role models, but to expose the deficiencies of a social and cultural system based upon patriarchal binary thought. Russ herself has said that science fiction appeals to her because its infinite possibilities mean that 'it is a place where the ancient dualities disappear'.<sup>4</sup>

According to her, the solution to what she terms 'the Dominance/Submission model of the heterosexual institution'<sup>5</sup> is obvious and ostensibly simple: to negate the whole process of patriarchal binary thought, which can only function if the two elements in the equation remain in perpetual opposition: 'I think there is no 'opposite' sex - what a word! Opposite what? The Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine become the poetic fancies of a weakly dimorphic species trying to imitate every other species in a vain search for what is

'natural'.<sup>6</sup> In Russ' view, therefore, dualism is only a concept which is imposed upon men and women from without. However, as this section of the chapter will show, Russ does not believe that the simple overthrow of dualism will achieve unity, arguing that within a phallogentric culture men and women are completely incompatible.

Much of the published criticism of Russ' work shows that the majority of her readers rapidly come to the conclusion that she is proposing that the only solution to patriarchal dualism is to get rid of men altogether, and often condemn it on that basis. It is a tendency most often demonstrated by male critics, but many of Russ' feminist critics also exhibit a profound unease when dealing with her more radical ideas, either apologising for them or glossing them over.<sup>7</sup> I believe that neither approach does justice to the complexity of her argument, which seriously and at length considers the viability of male/female relationships.

It is true, however, that, on the surface at least, Russ' narratives are somewhat unsubtle, characterised by a rather crude, slapstick vitality, which, while it is obviously meant to illustrate her concerns, often in fact disguises them. Her male characters certainly do not tend to fare very well, frequently being beaten up or violently put to death by enraged heroines, who are often trained killers (Alyx in *The Adventures of Alyx*; Janet/Jael in *The Female Man*; Irene in *The Two of Them*; the narrator in *We Who Are About To...*). I think that, while Russ' own comments on her work make it clear that she is not seriously proposing the wholesale murder of the male sex, it is vital for any critique of her work to acknowledge and come to terms with the metaphors of violence which are central to in her fiction, however unpalatable they may be. They certainly serve to emphasise the uncompromising nature of Russ' feminist stance, making it plain that she regards any attempt to reconcile the conflict between men and

women without questioning the whole issue of gender difference a dangerous compromise which would solve nothing. As she says in *On Strike Against God*, 'I do not want a better deal. I do not want to make a deal at all. *I want it all*' (p.18).<sup>6</sup> One of the purposes of this chapter to examine just how far Russ is prepared to go towards this end.

Russ' primary concern is that women are accorded neither voice nor status within the phallogentric order, and thus effectively cease to exist. She emotively illustrates this process of marginalisation in *The Female Man*, where her narrator, Joanna, succinctly sums up the peripheral position of women in a patriarchal society:

You told me ghouls were male,  
 Rodan is male - and asinine,  
 King Kong is male,  
 I could have been a witch, but the Devil is male,  
 Faust is male,  
 The man who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima is male,  
 I was never on the moon,

Then there are the birds, with (as Shaw so nobly puts it) the touching poetry of their loves and nestings in which the males sing so well and beautifully and the females sit on the nest, and the baboons who get torn in half (female) by the others (male), and the chimpanzees with their hierachy (male) written about by professors (male) with their hierachy, who accept (male) and (male) view of (female) (male), (p.135)<sup>7</sup>

Rodan, King Kong and Faust are figures that at first seem to exist in rather unlikely juxtaposition, but in fact they have several things in common: existing of and for a phallogentric society, and embodying that society's views on power and knowledge. Masculine arrogance and desire for dominance, however, lead to the same culturally-biased view being applied to extracultural phenomena. This gives quasi-scientific status to its persistently negative classification of women as 'not-male'; and therefore *inherently* silent, inactive and victimised.

Russ' narrator goes on to reveal the warped nature of this particular line

of reasoning by following it to its ludicrously logical conclusion. On the basis of her own observations, she takes the initial premise that 'women make up only one-tenth of society' (p.203) as an indication that 'most people in the world are male....I think it's a legend that half the population of the world is female; where on earth are they keeping them all?' (p.204). In Russ' view, women within a patriarchal society have no objective reality, existing purely through their status as *object*. Her writing, which is characterised by its extreme bias and constant appeal to personal experience (in other words, it is overwhelmingly subjective) is, paradoxically, an attempt to gain that sense of objectivity which signifies release from the metaphorical power of men's regard.

With its determination to shatter the false divisions imposed upon women by the process of patriarchal binary thought, Russ' work gains much of its impetus from 'the envy and rage of a whole lifetime...the envy of men's freedom, the envy of those who've been battered into choicelessness and silence for those who are entitled to speak and make choices.'<sup>10</sup> Although her rage is vehemently and stridently articulated, her main weapon against patriarchy is humour, which is often achieved through the appropriation and subversion of phallogocentric logic and belief. Sarah Lefanu has commented on the fact that *The Female Man* is 'eminently quotable'' precisely *because* of its humour, which makes it tempting to reproduce huge chunks of the narrative purely for the fun of reading them. However, the laughter in Russ' work is often bitter and ironic, for it exposes humour as one of the main tactics employed by phallogocentric ideology in its struggle to keep women in their 'natural' place: 'Burned any bras lately har har twinkle twinkle A pretty girl like you doesn't need to be liberated twinkle har Don't listen to those hysterical bitches twinkle twinkle twinkle' (*The Female Man*, p.49). As Mary Daly says, 'the cliché, "She lacks a sense of humor" - applied by men to every threatening woman - is one basic "electrode" embedded just

deeply enough into the fearful foreground of women's psyches to be able to conduct female energy against the Self'.<sup>12</sup>

Natalie M. Rosinsky has discussed the humour of *The Female Man* at length, demonstrating the many different levels on which it features within the narrative. She, too, makes the point that

Russ demonstrates the ways in which humor has been used as a weapon against women. As is scathingly evident throughout *The Female Man*, the gravity of women's predicament and our attempts to question or alter our status have been defused by being treated as humorous ploys, while male violence against women has been socially condoned under the guise of goodhumored fun.<sup>13</sup>

This concern is manifested in *The Female Man* primarily through Russ' use of the recurring metaphor of game-playing, which she figuratively portrays as a social structure which enables male and female to interact without stepping out of their strictly prescribed sexual roles. The images and language of play permeate the novel - for example, the conversation of women at a party is satirically transformed by Russ into a game of "Ain't It Awful", in which tentatively-expressed criticisms of the way they are treated by men are ritually nullified by the male chorus 'which gives the game its name': "'You women are lucky you don't have to go out and go to work'" (p.35). Ridiculous though these games may be, Russ shows that women's participation in them is compulsory, not voluntary. She illustrates that all these endless rounds of "His Little Girl" and "Ain't It Awful" in fact have only one function - to vindicate the superiority of 'The Man'. Any woman who refuses to join in therefore represents a threat, and uncovers the hostility that lies underneath the superficial veneer of civility:

SHE: Isn't it just a game?

HE: Yes, of course.

SHE: And if you play the game, it means you like me, doesn't it?

HE: Of course.

SHE: Then if it's just a game and you like me, you can stop playing. Please stop.

HE: No.

SHE: Then I won't play.

HE: Bitch! You want to destroy me, I'll show you. (He plays harder)

SHE: All right, I'm impressed.

HE: You really are sweet and responsive after all. You've kept your femininity. You're not one of those hysterical feminist bitches who wants to be a man and have a penis. *You're a woman.*

SHE: Yes. (She kills herself) (p.94)

Russ' essay, 'Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement', emphasises the point made in such novels as *The Female Man* and *We Who Are About To...*, for it begins with the startling premise that 'Really good women, really "nice" women, really sisterly women, are dead women.'<sup>4</sup> Comments so bluntly expressed reveal the seriousness that undercuts the metaphor of the game (itself playfully and humorously articulated), for it is far more than a meaningless, silly diversion, but a game women can never win. As Russ portrays it, women who refuse to 'play along' with patriarchy are either beaten into submission or, if they refuse to submit, beaten (even if only metaphorically) to death, which can be construed as a pyrrhic victory at best.

Russ has argued elsewhere that participation in the games of patriarchy, which means an acceptance of the passive and subordinate role assigned to women, entails acceding to 'the death of the self': 'If you've been forbidden the use of your own power for your own self, you can give up your power or you can give up your self.'<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Rich says that 'women's primary experience of power...has been triply negative: we have experienced men's power as oppression; we have experienced our own vitality and independence as somehow threatening to men; and, even when behaving with "feminine" passivity, we have been made aware of masculine fantasises of our potential destructiveness'.<sup>6</sup> The mad and tragic figure of Bertha Mason, for example, appears in the text of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* surrounded by the images of destruction with which she is imbued by

Rochester . Describing her as a 'monster' who is both 'cunning and malignant' (p.309),<sup>17</sup> he gives the impression of Bertha as a menace who is only barely controlled. For *Jane Eyre*, however, Bertha's role is quite different, since she serves as a focus for Jane's fears concerning marriage and the surrendering of female autonomy such a rite would entail. Bertha's suicide shows her surrendering to the paradoxes inherent in her situation, for as an act of simultaneous rebellion and defeat, it shows her to be both escaping her marriage and being claimed by it as a victim. Ultimately, the rage which Rochester so fears finds its only outlet in self-destruction.

In narratives such as *Jane Eyre*, therefore, Charlotte Brontë expresses what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe as the nineteenth-century women's 'obsession' with 'their feelings of enclosure in "feminine" roles and patriarchal houses, and...about their passionate desire to flee such roles or houses'.<sup>18</sup> Although it may seem incongruous to compare such an avant-garde writer as Russ to Victorian women writers, she centres her texts around an almost identical concern with what she terms the 'internalized oppression, the voice in the head'<sup>19</sup> which helps to keep women in their place. While some of her characters are natural rebels who strive to overthrow their conditioning, others willingly sacrifice their selves in order to preserve what small stake in the patriarchal system they are permitted to possess.

Russ' concern with women who give in to the self-destructive mechanism of oppression is exemplified by the character of Jeannine in *The Female Man*, who embodies all the characteristics of a stereotypical romantic heroine. Sweet, pretty, passive, and anxious to please men, she is paradoxically convinced that her 'not being able to do things...gives her a right to something' (p.105). Through consistent parody and exaggeration, Russ makes Jeannine an almost grotesque figure, for her passivity causes her to be a sexual and social victim



in some unpleasant ways. Through such figures, Russ deconstructs the whole discourse of romanticism, and shows it to contain subliminal messages that incite and encourage a process of systematic self-annihilation. For example, Joanna, Russ' spokeswoman throughout the novel, comments that 'if Jeannine ever meets a Satanist, she will find herself perfectly at home as his altar at a Black Mass, relieved of personality at last and forever' (p.93). In comparison with the Whileawayan Janet, Jeannine can only seem pitiable, crippled as her personality is by the dictates of a society which worships the male and degrades the female. Romantic conventions condemn women to a life of passivity and second-hand experiences, while presenting such a fate as being both desirable and privileged:

Last year I finally gave up and told my mother I didn't want to be a girl but she said Oh no, being a girl is wonderful. Why? Because you can wear pretty clothes and you don't have to do anything; the man will do it for you. She said that instead of conquering Everest I could conquer the conquerer of Everest and while he had to go climb the mountain, I could stay at home in lazy comfort listening to the radio and eating chocolate. (p.65)

Janet, to whom this speech is addressed, perceives as Jeannine does not the bitter pill of patriarchal oppression beneath the sugar coating of romanticism, wryly responding that 'you can't imbibe someone's success by fucking them' (p.65); but even she cannot find a discourse through which she can satisfactorily articulate her self, for 'what future is there for a female child who aspires to being Humphrey Bogart?' (p.206). It is important to note, however, that at the same time as *The Female Man* highlights the ways in which women are forced to 'play along' with an oppressive system, the metaphor of the game is only the starting point for a deconstructive process which deprives patriarchal rituals of meaning.

The narrator/s of the novel are four women from different, but parallel realities; Jeannine, Joanna, Janet and Jael. While they are four very distinct voices, they are also clearly meant to represent the creative female consciousness forced to fragment itself into several selves in order to initiate multiple coping strategies in a society that is hostile towards women in general, and women artists in particular. The Joanna-voice, as is indicated by the fact that she shares her name with the novel's author, is the narrative's primary narrator, particularly articulate in her position as spokeswoman for an emerging female consciousness, struggling against 'the vanity training, the obedience training, the self-effacement training', and the problem of 'how am I to put this together with my human life, my intellectual life, my solitude, my transcendence, my brains, and my fearful, fearful ambition?' (p.151). Joanna is an 'everywoman' figure with whom Russ' readers can readily identify, whose psyche is split by the pressures of a hostile world which forces every woman to 'fight through the constant male refractoriness of our surroundings' (p.206). This is the source of the other J's - Janet is the woman Joanna dreams of being; Jeannine, the woman men wish her to be; Jael, the anarchic side of her psyche who longs for revenge.

Together, these four central figures show how patriarchy causes women to adopt a wide variety of personae, forcing them to juggle with multiple images of the self. This is an act which Russ construes as being more instinctive than deliberate, portraying it as a forced, painful necessity for survival in the phallogocentric order. The lesson of the four J's is that every woman must create a balance, for her sanity's sake, between what she *is*, what she would *like* to be, and what she is *allowed* by society to be. The science fiction writer Pamela J. Annas, while seeing this experience as being characteristic of all oppressed groups, sums up Russ' presentation of the female psyche in her observation that

'dual vision means seeing the world and yourself through two sets of opposed values...This duality of perception comes, for a member of an oppressed class, through the experience of having one's reality defined not by oneself, but by somebody else'.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Female Man*, however, Russ takes this very experience of oppression and transforms it into a source of feminist power. The four J's not only illustrate how the female psyche is fragmented under the pressures of patriarchy, but function as the means by which Joanna can come to terms with different facets of her personality. Even though she finds such eccentric, anarchic figures like Janet and Jael particularly hard to accept, an acknowledgement of them is portrayed as a constructive and potentially liberating action.

Alienation is a pervasive theme in the novel, for not only is each of the J's an alien in the others' worlds, but she represents the alienation felt by every woman who attempts to be creative within a patriarchal society in which her subordination is implicit. Jeannine and Joanna come from cultures very much like the one shared by Russ and her readers, in which the role of women is circumscribed, and they are shown in the process of trying to understand this and formulate some kind of escape strategy. Janet and Jael, however, enter the text already completely free of patriarchal influence, for they both come from cultures in which the power of The Man has been negated: Janet is a citizen of the all-female utopia Whileaway, while Jael is from a reality where hostilities between men and women have been openly declared, and they are at war. Their position as outsiders is therefore portrayed as being a privileged one because they simply do not understand the rules of the game, and are thus invulnerable to the controlling aspects of social humour. As the narrative shows, this enables them to be wonderfully subversive, both in attitude and action, by

turning the weapon of humour against its primary perpetrators. Janet, in particular, who cannot grasp the concept of patriarchal control simply because it is so far from her own experience, provides Russ with the opportunity to indulge in a slapstick, anarchic type of humour - at men's expense, of course.

Janet slapped him,

It was not meant to hurt, I think; it was a great big stinging theatrical performance, a cue for insults and further fighting, a come-on-get-your-guard contemptuous slap meant to enrage which it jolly well did,

THE MARINE SAID, "YOU STUPID BROAD, I'M GONNA CREAM YOU!"

That poor man,

I didn't see things very well...but I saw him rush her and I saw her flip him, he got up again and again she deflected him, this time into the wall - I think she was worried because she didn't have time to glance behind her and the place was full of people - then he got up again and this time he swung instead and then something very complicated happened - he let out a yell and she was behind him, doing something cool and technical, frowning in concentration,

"Don't pull like that," she said, "You'll break your arm,"

So he pulled...Everything was awfully quiet. The pain had stunned him, I guess.

She said in astonished good-humor: "But why do you fight when you do not know how?"  
(pp.46-7)

For women, at least (I'm not so sure about men), episodes like this are extremely funny, with deeper meaning lying behind the crude humour. Although at its most obvious in *The Female Man*, all of Russ' fiction shamelessly exploits the sheer vicarious pleasure of role reversal, assigning to men the clichéd, subordinate roles that are more commonly assigned to women. Such humour recalls Cixous' 'laugh of the Medusa'<sup>21</sup>, which represents the anarchic glee of breaking down artificial sex distinctions and stereotypes.

It is tempting to pity the men who dare to antagonise Russ' heroines, since they always experience a rather nasty shock when all their illusions of superiority are abruptly shattered. For the vast majority of Russ's male figures the term 'character' is hardly applicable, as they tend to pop up in the text for

the sole purpose of being knocked down. They function as cardboard caricatures of the worst male attitudes and prejudices, and, almost without exception, they are stupid, insensitive, brutal and arrogant, capable of arousing no emotion other than derision. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, to find Russ stating, in a discussion of feminist utopias (which does not exclude Whileaway), that 'inspection of the manless societies usually reveals the intention (or wish) to allow men in...if they can be trusted to behave'.<sup>22</sup> Might it therefore be possible to argue that Russ' fiction is not as blatantly separatist as it superficially appears to be, concealing a serious consideration of the viability of male/female relationships beneath the slapstick surface?

Russ' novel *The Two of Them* foregrounds this preoccupation very strongly, for in it she creates, for once, a sustained, and generally sympathetic, male character, Ernst Neumann. The puns in his name are completely intentional, for Ernst is indeed the personification of the earnest and compassionate 'New Man', whose 'attitude towards the poor, the mad, and the tortured...leaves nothing to be desired' (p.86).<sup>23</sup> He is perfectly willing to be the means by which the novel's heroine, Irene Waskiewicz, escapes the restrictions of her suburban upbringing in 1950's America. Not only does he become her lover, but also recruits her into an association called 'Trans Temp', a secret society of intergalactic super-agents which is known colloquially as 'The Gang'. When they visit the rigidly patriarchal, quasi-Islamic society of Ka'abah, however, Irene meets a twelve-year-old girl, Zubeydah, who, against all the rules of her misogynistic culture, wants to become a poet. Shocked by the fact that the girl's aunt has been locked up for having similar ambitions, and that her mother is constantly drugged to keep her docile, Irene proposes freeing Zubeydah, and, if possible, her mother and her aunt, by kidnapping them and taking them to another, more liberal, planet.

Her experiences on Ka'abah, the abduction of Zubeydah, and the adamant refusal of Zubeydah's mother to accompany them, lead to Irene's questioning of the whole balance of power between men and women. Although Ernst is as intellectually concerned as Irene over the injustice on Ka'abah he cannot share her raw emotional responses to the situation, and is unable to comprehend her growing rage at patriarchal injustice. On the journey back to The Gang's headquarters, Irene gradually works her way towards the realisation that her own society is not as egalitarian as she wishes to believe, having to come to terms with the fact that The Gang is more or less for boys only. She is its only female agent, and the only other women she meets in connection with it are 'in the background doing all the little jobs' (p.120). This inevitably comes to affect her relationship with Ernst, who possesses the ultimate privilege of being a man in a patriarchal society: a privilege that, as a woman, is beyond Irene's reach. As she says to him: "'Who else can I sleep with? Where else can I go? Can I join the U.S. Marines? You've got a dozen possible jobs and a hundred possible women and you can live anywhere!'" (p.142).

In her book *Feminist Criticism*, Maggie Humm discusses precisely this problem in relation to the question of whether men can become feminist critics. After considering a variety of 'feminist' readings by critics such as Fish, Eagleton and Culler, Humm comes to the conclusion that, although a man can 'read...as a feminist', he can never actually be a *feminist* critic 'because he carries with him the possibility of escape - into masculinity and into patriarchy'.<sup>24</sup> Ernst Neumann can be considered in similar terms, for as a sympathetic man trying to understand Irene's point of view he is attempting a 'feminist' reading of patriarchal institutions. However, he is doomed to ultimate failure, because he does not, and cannot, share Irene's peripheral relationship to that system - his 'possibility of escape' forever excludes him from a proper

understanding of her situation. He accuses her of "dwelling...on the personal", and resents her inability - which he interprets as refusal - to tell him "rationally and systematically what is wrong" (p.142).

As the narrative proceeds, and Irene grows ever more incomprehensible to him, Russ shows Ernst reverting to patriarchal type: 'He doesn't think explicitly: *This is not the woman to be my successor* but things flash in his mind, *Are women - and Women don't -* thoughts he knows are treasonous to Irene' (p.123). The deterioration of the relationship is the tragedy which lies at the heart of *The Two of Them*, for it concerns two well-meaning individuals who have a genuine concern for each other, but who find it ultimately impossible to find a workable compromise between points of view which become increasingly incompatible as the gap between them widens.

Quite without meaning to, Ernst traps Irene in a cycle of confusion and self-doubt: 'It occurs to her that in some sense she doesn't really exist, now that Ernst is no longer her ally, that the little beauty she had from him is gone...nobody can blame Ernst for losing patience with a madwoman' (p.147). Ernst's cancellation of all her computer I.D. cards strips away Irene's last illusions of equality, for it demonstrates to her that he has held the power in their relationship all along. Without his approval, she is, literally, 'nobody'. (p.138).

She has never had the numbers of Ernst's I.D.'s,...Yet he must have a record of hers and must have gotten it from Trans Temp at Center, months ago at the very least. Keeping them all the time. Holding her identities in the palm of his hand, Trans Temp guards against the different one, the unstable one, the female one, the Wife-stealer! (p.146)

From then on, Irene's choice is clear. She knows that she is 'far too old for a Daddy' (p.139), and that she must preserve her autonomy at all costs, or

accept Ernst's definition of herself as insane. As Zubeydah in her childish wisdom says, 'The gentlemen always think the ladies have gone mad' (p.147). Irene finally confronts Ernst and kills him, indicating her final and irrevocable rejection of patriarchal codes in her refusal to fight fair; using a gun in what Ernst believes to be unarmed combat.

At this point, Russ demonstrates her own unwillingness to accept the conclusions her narrative has brought her to, manifesting herself within the text as an authorial voice who teases the reader with other possible outcomes which would avoid the need for the murder of a fundamentally sympathetic protagonist - that Irene and Zubeydah escape while Ernst is ill with stomach 'flu; that Zubeydah intercedes in the fight and knocks Ernst over; or that Irene 'only stunned him, that soon he'll get up, facing nothing worse than a temporary embarrassment....that he'll come looking for her, penitent, contrite, having learned his lesson' (p.164). However, Russ is constricted by both the logic of her own reasoning and her choice of form, for as she says, it would only be in a comedy that reconciliation would be possible, and 'Ernst would marry Irene in the end' (p.164). What *The Two of Them* appears to demonstrate is Cixous' concept of patriarchal dualism in action, where the battle for autonomy ultimately destabilises the couple and causes it to explode in violence.

Irene's triumph, however, is not as straightforward as it would superficially appear, because the eradication of the Law of the Father seems initially to change nothing at all. Indeed, Irene regrets what she has done, deciding she 'wants it back, even with Ernst attached to it, even with the lying and being snubbed and being thought mad; there really is nothing else' (p.178). Her life has been structured, controlled, and maintained by the patriarchal system, and once she has stepped outside it she is orphaned and bereft.

It is only in the closing paragraphs of the novel that Russ transforms the



narrative's tragic ending into a vindication of her feminist principles which is strangely both triumphant and tentative. Her approach reproduces the ambivalence of an earlier female science fiction writer, C.L. Moore, whose short stories repeatedly feature alien women who, through their almost inevitable deaths, enact an endlessly recurring tragedy of female defeat. Simultaneously, however, they also function as symbols of female power, for their pervasive presence in Moore's work is an expression of their refusal to allow themselves to remain dead and forgotten. It is a paradox which Moore's narratives only perpetuate, and never resolve.

The circumspection of Moore's heroines, so untypical of Russ, is echoed in the whispers of Zubeydah's Aunt Dunya, 'that mad, dead, haunted woman who could not tell stories, who could not save herself' (p.181). Whatever her actual fate might have been, however, Aunt Dunya is paradoxically transformed into a symbol of hope, and a possible alternative to the Law of the Father. She is 'voiceless', yet she speaks: she is powerless, yet she possesses the ability to 'make something out of nothing' (p.180), bringing the sterile, barren landscape of Irene's dreams to life: 'It has no Word. It has nothing to say. It whispers its crazy nonsense thoughtlessly and hopelessly to nothing at all, but where it passes, throughout the length of that still, grey place, there is the barest shiver, the faintest stir, the dimmest, most imperceptible rustling' (p.181). There is indeed life after patriarchy, however hard it is to envisage, as is indicated by Russ' increasing involvement with the text as she struggles to imagine the barely imaginable.

While accepting the existence of men of good will like Ernst Neumann, therefore, Russ does not ultimately see a feminist future being built out of negotiation, but by confrontation. In *The Female Man* even Whileaway, it turns out, was only made possible by violence; although Janet has been taught that an

all-female society came about because the male population was wiped out by a plague, Jael reveals that they were actually assassinated by the women: "I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain" (p.211). Janet, who disapproves of Jael's murderous society, is thus forced to accept the necessity of active rebellion against the patriarchal system. Liberation is not as simple as the women of Whileaway naïvely imagine. Russ' readers, as well as her critics, might not approve of her extreme feminist stance, but she nevertheless forces them to overcome their squeamish objections to her images of violence, making it imperative that they confront the reality of a male domination that is far more than just political. Once it is admitted that patriarchy damages women both physically and psychologically, confrontational feminist politics must be acknowledged to be vital.

Mary Daly says that the way into 'Paradise beyond the boundaries of "paradise"...requires making breaks in the walls, it means setting free the fair game, breaking the rules of the games, breaking the names of the games'.<sup>25</sup> For both Daly and Russ, violence is an intrinsic part of the process of the escape from patriarchy, and their writings are permeated with the images and language of destruction. In *On Strike Against God*, for example, Russ clearly states her intentions:

What do you do when the club won't let you in, when there's no other, and when you won't (or can't) change. Simple.  
You blow the club up. (p.85)

In such passages, Russ' writing is also distinctly reminiscent of the essays of Hélène Cixous, who is similarly concerned with conveying feminist

ideas through the symbolism and language of anarchy: 'When the "repressed" of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence'.<sup>26</sup> Like Cixous, Russ regards the elimination of patriarchal dualism as imperative because its pervading of both thought and language hinders any attempts at the formulation of a discourse which would contain a new vision of the female self and her future. This is why Russ' metaphors of utopia and rebirth are always only tentative and partial, while her images of feminist conflict are strident and persuasive, embodying her struggles to escape from the representational restrictions of the Law of the Father. She speaks most frequently with the voice of Jael, attempting to shock her readers into the often unpalatable realisation that confrontational feminist politics are the only way in which women can gain a better view of the alternative discourses available to them.

In Russ' writing, sexuality is the main arena in which this dramatic confrontation between the sexes is played out. It is obvious that for Russ, as for the majority of her heroines, political awareness and sexuality are almost always inextricably linked, and an examination of the theme of sexuality in her fiction emphasises her inflexible belief in the necessity of cultural patricide. Russ' openly declared lesbianism is an extension of her feminist politics and is indicative of her separation from male sexuality as well as from male ideology. She continually reiterates the point that she regards heterosexuality as not just unsatisfactory, but as potentially dangerous, because it is a figurative expression of the kind of ideology that reinforces the concept of the couple. Heterosexuality is thus (literally) phallogentric, confirming patriarchal

essentialist assumptions regarding women's *innate* passivity and subordination, as Esther's psychoanalyst in *On Strike Against God* pompously proclaims:

The great reality of normal sexual intercourse (which includes fellatio) lies in its ability to simultaneously allow the male to express his own maleness and the female to possess the male's maleness through her passive receptivity of his penis, thus transcending her own receptivity-oriented passivity (or passivity-oriented receptivity) and for the moment making the two one. And that one is the husband. (p.44)

Heterosexual relationships do exist in Russ' literature, but they almost always pose a threat to the heroine's autonomy, as *The Two Of Them* demonstrates. Irene always finds sexual relationships with men, even Ernst, in some way wanting, because she dares not reveal the full extent of her violent desires for fear of being regarded as not 'normal'. And Ernst's growing suspicion of Irene and her motives is reflected in his sexual attitude towards her - increasingly, their intercourse resembles rape:

She makes a sound that isn't like her upon being entered, a sort of low complaint and shuts her eyes. She says, "I'm not sure..."

She says, "No, wait..."

For once he can't. (p.115)

Through such scenarios, Russ makes it clear that, in her view, power-politics are always going on somewhere in heterosexual relationships, and her heroines who indulge in them, like Irene, are making themselves vulnerable to male oppression.

It is therefore obvious that, in order to escape from that oppression, it is necessary for women to change their sexuality as well as their politics - in *On Strike Against God*, for example, Russ charts her heroine's ideological progression by following the changing patterns of her sexual behaviour. At the

beginning of the narrative, Esther is determined to avoid any confrontation with the patriarchal system because 'it's not worth it, hating, and I am going to be mature and realistic and not care' (p.6). Russ links this attitude to Esther's personal history - in order to prove that she is sexually 'normal' (to herself as much as to anyone else), she gets married. However, she finds sex with a man totally unsatisfactory, something she continues to feel guilty about long after the divorce. It is only when she has accepted and admitted the fact of her lesbianism that she develops a feminist ideology which empowers her to assert her hatred and resentment of a system that has denied her both sexual and political expression.

The only heroines in Russ' fiction who have no problems with heterosexuality are Jael, who gains her sexual satisfaction from a robot designed to look like a beautiful human male, and Alyx, heroine of *The Adventures of Alyx*, who not only indulges in brief encounters with various male companions, but comes home to her husband when her quest is completed. However, it can be argued that, even here, all is not as it seems. Jael's sexual practices are more like masturbation than intercourse, for 'Davy' is only a machine and therefore incapable of any spontaneous response, while Alyx's husband is a shadowy, inconsistent and forever anonymous figure who has no particular bearing on the narrative. While such figures hold out, like Ernst Neuman, superficial hope for the possibility of male/female reconciliation, they in fact only serve to emphasise the impossibility of moderation.

Russ' militant essentialism is echoed to a great extent in the work of Margaret Atwood, who demonstrates a similar awareness of the dangers phallogocentric society and thought pose to women's external and internal lives - Russ' comment that she 'can't imagine a "political" stance that doesn't grow out

of "personal" experience<sup>27</sup> could equally well be applied to Atwood's work. Feminism is not a neutral political force for either of these writers, because it can never be separated from the personal, meaning that a feminist strategy cannot be formulated without confronting what is within as well as contending with the problems that exist without. Although they differ greatly in style - Russ relies on the satirical aside and a surrealist, episodic narrative, while for the most part, Atwood's texts seem to follow a more systematic and detailed linear pattern - the feminist philosophy behind them is strikingly similar. Both foreground the victimisation of women under patriarchy, and both regard men, presented as the creators and perpetuators of that system, with extreme distrust.

However, Atwood, described by Shena Mackay as 'a co-opted rather than a card-carrying member of the North American Women's Movement',<sup>28</sup> approaches the subject from a slightly different, and probably more subtle, angle than Russ. The consequence of Russ' avoidance of sustained characterisation in her work, particularly of men, results in a lack of emotional shading and rather simplistic essentialist assumptions. As Lefanu says, the women in Russ' writing 'are great because they are women, the men oppressive and horrible because they are men'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Lefanu comments further that part of the appeal of Russ' ideology lies in 'the bold simplicity of the parameters', which is able to render a complex issue down to broad black-and-white terms.<sup>30</sup> Russ' ultimate goal of complete separatism is embodied, as I have already discussed, in her presentation of sex and sexuality, which causes her to reach ultimate conclusions regarding the problem of gender which are wildly divergent from Atwood's, whose heterosexuality, as she is aware, makes the whole issue much more problematic. The lesbian feminist can remain apart from men in every area of her life, while the heterosexual has inevitably to compromise between her

politics and her sexuality.

For example, when the heroine of *Cat's Eye*, Atwood's most recent novel, joins a women's discussion group, she is both moved and excited by much of what she hears: 'Things are being said that I have never consciously thought about before. Things are being overthrown' (p.343).<sup>31</sup> However, she also realises that 'I am on shaky ground, in this testifying against men, because I live with one' (p.344), and ironically describes herself as 'hopelessly heterosexual, a mother, quisling and secret wimp' (p.379). Elaine is wary of relationships between women because, she feels, 'women collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape. They pass hard, legitimate judgements, unlike the purblind guesses of men, fogged with romanticism and ignorance and bias and wish. Women know too much, they can neither be deceived or trusted' (p.379). On one level, such comments are intended to be read ironically in the light of what the reader knows of Elaine's childhood friendships; but, on another, Atwood seems to be exploring in all seriousness the dilemmas of the heterosexual feminist who, metaphorically speaking, has a foot in each camp.

While remaining fundamentally motivated by an essentialist philosophy, therefore, Atwood also blurs conventional essentialist definitions. Barbara Hill Rigney sees Atwood's 'principal concern' as 'delineat[ing]...the psychological factors of sexual politics, the behaviour of women in conflict with men'.<sup>32</sup> However, in Rigney's opinion, Atwood's later work shows a more holistic approach to the issue of victimisation, where what men do to women becomes part of a much larger issue which cuts across gender-based concerns. For Atwood, says Rigney, the world is a place where 'no one is exempt from guilt, no one is blameless',<sup>33</sup> a view which obviously contrasts with Russ' much more clear-cut approach.

It is therefore not surprising that, to a much greater extent than Russ,

Atwood exhibits a concern with the way women become implicated in the perpetuation of patriarchal processes. Maxine Hong Kingston is concerned with much the same situation in her novel *The Woman Warrior*, which presents a disturbing account of how women themselves reinforce the misogyny inherent in traditional Chinese society. In the pre-war China of the narrator's mother's experience, if 'worthless' girl babies were not smothered immediately after birth by the midwife, then they were sold by their mothers as slaves when they were old enough to work. The narrator observes that even the Chinese language, in which the 'word for the female I...is 'slave', ensures that women are '[broken] with their own tongues' (p.49).<sup>34</sup> Like Hong Kingston's, Atwood's narratives show the many ways in which women assist in their own degradation, and may even regulate and control the behaviour of others of their sex, thus helping to retain the *status quo*.

The most extreme example of this behaviour in Atwood's fiction occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When women are deprived of their citizen's rights by a religious fundamentalist regime, some women become 'Aunts', aiding the new government in retraining less compliant women for their new scripturally-ordained roles. Their primary function is to instil guilt and self-loathing into their pupils, making them pray 'for emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies' (p.204).<sup>35</sup> In the words of Hélène Cixous, they teach women 'to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of...[men's] virile needs'.<sup>36</sup>

Atwood and Hong Kingston share a similar belief that submission to the established order and guilt over imagined feelings of inadequacy is a habit deeply ingrained in every woman. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* bitterly recalls how her childhood screams of "'I'm not a bad girl!'" were ignored by



her family because 'I might as well have said, "I'm not a girl"' (p.48). It is this implicit equation between femaleness and guilt which makes Gilead's elimination of female autonomy so disturbingly simple in *The Handmaids Tale*, where the narrator describes how the passing of a law making it illegal for women to work is greeted with 'dismay, and a certain shame, as if we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't...What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?' (p.186). In fact, Atwood's narrative is a critique of the very culture which the *The Woman Warrior* portrays as providing a means of escape from the misogynistic traditions of the past. Because women still do not really feel entitled to the liberties they have won through feminism, Atwood implies, they are unwilling, even unable, to fight in their defence.

However, Atwood rejects the role of martyr for her female protagonists, for she has claimed elsewhere that the benefit in acceding to one's role as victim is that 'it will always be somebody else's fault, and you will be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life'.<sup>27</sup> Like Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, for example, who 'feels like a hostage, and, like a hostage, strangely uninvolved in her own fate. Other people are deciding that for her' (p.258),<sup>28</sup> Atwood's heroines are not barn-storming feminist revolutionaries, but women who, initially at least, seek to transform their sense of powerlessness into a virtue. As Atwood says, 'if your goal is to be whole, and you don't see the possibility of doing that and also being human, then you can try being something else...there are great advantages to being a vegetable, you know....Life is very much simplified'.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, Atwood frequently attempts to shock women into a recognition of such collusion with the patriarchal system by creating certain protagonists who, like Jeannine in *The Female Man*, exaggerate the habit of compliance to grotesque proportions. Anna in *Surfacing*, for example, endures a marriage which

is based upon violence and humiliation. However, she does not attempt to conceal this aspect of the relationship from others, confiding her sufferings to the narrator with obvious relish: "He'll get me for it," she said fatalistically. "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him, you know what I mean?...He watches me all the time, he waits for excuses" (p. 122).<sup>40</sup> With her 'fatalistic' attitude, Anna casts herself in the role of victim, displaying her bruises in order to gain a moral superiority which frees her from the necessity of constructive action. Although she is technically free to leave her husband it is clear that she never will, for in spite of the fact that she does not hinder the unnamed narrator's escape, she lacks the courage to take similar responsibility for her own life.

In contrast to such 'feminine' acquiescence, Atwood portrays men as compulsive competitors constantly striving for personal dominance, over women as well as each other. Like Russ, Atwood turns men into objects of humour, parodying the ridiculous situations their competitive compulsions get them into. Women in her novels are perfectly aware of the little competitions which are going on around them all the time, finding them both amusing and ridiculous. However, their participation, as in Russ' fiction, is virtually compulsory, since to refuse to play would be to force yet another, more serious, kind of confrontation. In *Bodily Harm*, for example, Rennie remembers interviewing a man who 'imprints' goslings so that they will follow him about everywhere. Although she 'smirk[s]' because the man seemed to think that being followed to the ends of the earth by a flock of adoring geese was both desirable and romantic', she dutifully writes 'it all down in his own words.' (p.33). While identifying the pettiness of this particular manifestation of male egotism, Rennie nonetheless tacitly condones it by allowing it to form her narrative.

Atwood's male characters refuse to consider any alternative to this endless battle for supremacy, convinced that the female principle, both specifically and in general, will destroy them if they let it. As Jake in *Bodily Harm* says: 'Enough with all the voracious female animalistic desires....You should all be locked in cages' (p.73). He sincerely believes that if men and women were to change places for the day, women would 'all become rapists' (p.73) - an unimaginative belief shared by Joe and Dave in *Surfacing*, who think that feminists are "'teaching random castration, they get off on that, they're roving the streets in savage bands armed with garden shears"' (pp.110-11). Chauvinistic joking apart, the heroine of *Surfacing* comes to an understanding of the seriousness of the struggle being fought within sexual relationships through witnessing the day-to-day battles and petty humiliations Anna suffers within her marriage to Dave. Underneath the self-conscious dramatisation of her martyrdom, she realises, Anna is 'desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war' (pp.153-4).

As the bodies of women 'strewn about ravines or scattered here and there in green garbage bags' (*Bodily Harm*, p.23), demonstrate, the role of victim chosen by Anna is not not always a glamorous one. Through the images of violence and murder which proliferate in her fiction, Atwood concurs with Cixous in her presentation of the male/female relationship as a façade which conceals a life-and-death struggle for power; a struggle which, from the man's point of view, can only end with the confirmation of his masculine authority with the shedding of the woman's (not always figurative) blood. In *Bodily Harm*, the detective novels Rennie reads, in which all the victims are female, 'arranged on a floor or bed like a still life, not quite naked, clothing disheveled to suggest

rape' (p.246), show that images of sex and death are almost interchangeable in the patriarchal mind.

Atwood makes this connection between the two explicit when she describes her characters' reaction to overhearing others having sex. They often find it repugnant; not through any moral objections, but because it sounds like torture. Rennie, for example, hears it as 'unfamiliar, archaic...a woman's voice, wordless and mindless...agony' (p.49). Similarly, the heroine of *Surfacing* hears the moment of female orgasm as 'pure pain, clear as water, an animal's at the moment the trap closes' (p.82). Out of context, sex is recognised as just another act of masculine dominance, where women, as Rennie reflects, have 'darkness thrown into them' (pp.235-6).

Such an experience inevitably carries potentially horrifying implications for every heterosexual relationship, no matter how close or long-standing, for it foregrounds the function of the male/female relationship as a battleground. As Atwood writes in 'Liking Men', 'he's a carnivore, you're a vegetarian. That's what you have to get over' (p.53).<sup>41</sup> Adrienne Rich reaches much the same conclusion in her poem 'Rape', in which the 'cop who is both prowler and father' becomes identified in a woman's mind with her attacker:

...you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the family  
whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,  
his hand types out the details  
and he wants them all  
but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best.<sup>42</sup>

Rich paints a bleak picture of a world in which no man can be trusted, for in spite of the fact that 'he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers', the policeman imitates the rapist's attack in using the woman for sexual gratification.

Atwood emphasises such a male threat to women by equating man with the 'wabeno', a mythic Canadian monster who stands for 'the desire for power through the destruction of others, which in the end is the same as self-destruction.'<sup>43</sup> Many of the male characters she creates have animal characteristics - Joe, in *Survival*, for example, is 'a buffalo...shaggy and blunt-snouted' (p.8), covered in 'teddy-bear fur' (p.41). The heroine believes that when he sleeps with her, he 'unzips his human skin' (p.160), yet he remains in opposition to nature, not in harmony with it. The destructiveness of this particular brand of lycanthropy is further accentuated in *Life Before Man*, where even Nate, unusually sensitive compared to the rest of Atwood's male characters, is transformed by his uncontrollable sexual urges into 'a wolflike monster in tattered clothes,...lurking red-eyed and envious' (pp.133-4)<sup>44</sup> in search of the object of his desires.

In novels such as *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm* and *Life Before Man*, Atwood's female protagonists undergo an inevitable erosion of their confidence in the patterns of the conventional sexual relationship, from which they emerge with a new realisation of the dangers contained in being a victim. Forbidden full expression within a cultural order which is predominantly patriarchal, their forbidden fears surface instead within daydream and fantasy, for the female characters in Atwood's novels frequently indulge in guilty little fantasies about the men in their lives, imagining them to be some sort of pervert or sadist. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian wonders whether her fiancé could be the 'the Underwear Man' (p.118),<sup>45</sup> an obscene phonecaller who poses as a market researcher: 'Maybe it was really Peter. Slipping out from his law office into the nearest phone booth to dial the numbers of housewives in Etobicoke. His protest against something or other...Perhaps this was his true self, the core of his personality' (p.118). When, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster begins to

receive death threats, she finally comes to believe they could be from her husband Arthur. If this is so, she realises, Arthur is 'someone I didn't know at all. And he was right in the bed beside me. I was afraid now, almost afraid to move; what if he woke up, eyes glittering, and reached for me...?' (p.292).<sup>46</sup>

In Atwood's novels, women are confirmed in their choiceness by being deprived of any kind of unified sense of self. According to Atwood, men themselves tend to look at women in pieces, very rarely relating to them as an entire personality. Instead, they focus only on the bits that interest them: an attitude that causes women too to look at themselves from outside. In effect, women become paranoid; their bodies becoming increasingly separated from what goes on inside their heads. Thus, however acute their recognition of their true situation might be, they are unable to turn thought into action, however much they may wish to do so.

Although not written with Atwood's work in mind, it is useful to look at Tania Modleski's study of women's romantic literature, *Loving With a Vengeance*, to see how Atwood shows such a situation being achieved. Modleski discusses how the romantic narrative emphasises 'women's split consciousness'. She cites *Jane Eyre* as an example of the romantic novel's tendency to force self-consciousness upon female characters by placing them under constant male observation, arguing that *Jane Eyre* is 'never being able to relax in Rochester's love, but always watching herself being watched by him so that she can keep him "excellently entertained"'.<sup>47</sup> But in spite of their desire to please, women still find themselves in the wrong, because they thus 'prov(e) themselves to be the "narcissists" they are often accused of being'.<sup>48</sup>

Modleski locates evidence of this incipient schizophrenia within the

popular romance novel; and specifically in this genre's use of tense. The third person has to be used in order to allow the reader to participate in the fantasy by the simple substitution of "I" for "she". But at certain points in the text, significantly whenever the heroine's appearance is described, the use of the third person becomes "apersonal", splitting the consciousness of both reader and character and causing them both to become observers of themselves. Modleski quotes John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* to support this contention: 'The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight'.<sup>49</sup>

Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman*, in particular, demonstrates the effects of this enforced schizophrenia on the female psyche, consciously using precisely the narrative methods described by Modleski. The heroine of the novel, Marian, is a quietly independent person, who nevertheless conforms to the conventions of her culture in her belief that only marriage will really fulfil her life. Marian begins by telling her own story in her own words; but her first-person narration stops abruptly once she becomes engaged, and an impersonal observer replaces her in correspondence with her growing feelings of powerlessness, embodied in her conviction that 'there was nothing for her to do. She was floating, letting the current hold her up, trusting it to take her where she was going' (p.115). Her behaviour becomes increasingly eccentric as she identifies herself more and more closely with comestibles - not only with the animals who are bred or hunted for meat, but even with inanimate foods such as vegetables and fruit. It is obvious to the reader that she is subconsciously fighting the whole idea of marriage, realising that, like all food products, she is just another object created to appease male appetites: her essential personality really does not matter at all. She

only regains her identity (and the text its first-person narration) when she leaves her fiancé.

None of Atwood's other novels employs precisely this clever use of shifting narration, but they all relate the same experience of schizophrenia; a disturbing feeling of viewing one's body from outside, as in a mirror. Unlike Rosemary Jackson, who sees the mirror as 'a different space, where our notions of self undergo radical change...offering[ing] unpredictable ...metamorphosis of self into other',<sup>50</sup> the mirror in Atwood's fiction represents the power of masculine regard which, far from offering an alternative to the female subject, forces her to watch herself acting out the role written for her by patriarchal expectations. Such a process ensures, in the words of Susan Gubar, that woman remains 'an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor'.<sup>51</sup>

For example, after Marian has accepted Peter's proposal of marriage, thus sealing her destiny as a consumer item, 'a tremendous electric blue flash, very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes' (p.83). This episode is a clear example of the Freudian theory of 'the gaze as a phallic activity linked to the anal desire for sadistic mastery of the object',<sup>52</sup> as Marian has now symbolically surrendered her freedom for the institution of marriage. From this point in the narrative, Marian's view of her reflection becomes increasingly distorted and fragmented, for, unable to 'grasp the total effect', she is 'only able to see one thing at a time. What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?' (p.229). Marian's own shredded individualism inexorably dissolves as, with the eager help of her flate-mate Ainsley, Marian finds herself slowly being transformed into a representation of Peter's ideal



woman. When she looks in the mirror, she has a vision of Peter and Ainsley 'by the strength of their separate visions...trying to tear her apart', while she, 'the centre, whatever it was in the glass, the thing that held them together, would soon be quite empty' (p.219).

Cameras, too, are included within the mirror category - an interesting way of emphasising all the worst implications mirrors symbolically hold for women. All the female characters in Atwood's novels feel extremely threatened by cameras, which are used exclusively by men. The protagonist of *Surfacing*, for example, has a horror of being photographed. Describing the camera as 'a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture' (p.136), she recognises an inherent aggression in the male use of the camera. In *Surfacing*, Atwood makes the act of photography a chilling exaggeration of male sexual and cultural attitudes, showing it as allowing men to view the image of the female body in complete isolation without having to deal with the inconvenience of the female personality. Anna's husband, Dave, and Joe, the narrator's boyfriend, are both keen amateur film-makers who are travelling the Canadian backwoods filming whatever catches their attention. This sounds harmless enough until one realizes exactly what *does* catch their eye, for they spend most of their time filming dead things - gutted fish, felled trees, and, on one occasion, a heron brutally killed and strung up by American hunters. Atwood makes clear that Dave and Joe use the camera as a symbolic phallus, re-creating the natural landscape as a defeated, easily contained, entity over which, by virtue of their power to 'rearrange' (p.10), they have complete control, thus enhancing their masculinity.

It is only natural for women to be included in this process, and the heroine's final rebellion is sparked off by Anna's symbolic rape when Dave and Joe force her to strip for the camera. She perceives Anna as being

captured within her photographic image, and imagining 'the invisible images...swimming away into the lake like tadpoles...hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved' (p.166), she enacts her release by destroying the reels of film.

Constantly 'on view', forced to become mere parodies of themselves in order to conform to masculine sexual ideals, it is no wonder that many of the female characters in Atwood's novels manifest schizophrenic symptoms, as their suppressed anger at their cultural fragmentation are covertly expressed within nightmarish fantasies of bodily mutilation. In Rennie's case the threat is real, but her unconscious mind is also aware of the symbolic overtones inherent in her experience of breast cancer. Her worry about 'what they did with the parts' (p.20) foregrounds the fact that the mutilation she is about to undergo at the hands of a male surgeon is not all that different from the fate of those who fall victim to rapists, murderers and photographers. Rennie's mastectomy, too, entails the usurpation of female autonomy by masculine power.

This is a theme which dominates *Surfacing*, in which the narrator is left with the guilt of an abortion which she describes as the ultimate self-mutilation, 'a section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled' (pp.48). An extended metaphor running throughout the novel further emphasises this theme of fragmentation - that of decapitation: the separation of head from body.

No hints or facts, I didn't know when it had happened, I must have been all right then; but after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two...there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (p.108)

The narrator constantly refers to the feeling of a blockage in her neck, 'shutting me into my head' (p.105). In keeping with Atwood's gynocentrism, the head represents male logic: even coinage has 'a man's head chopped off at the neck on the reverse' (p.85). The body, on the other hand, shorn of the sexual associations with which it is imbued within a patriarchal order, signifies the female. In *Surfacing* it is significant, for example, that the narrator's mother dies of a brain tumour: the principal representative of nature and essential femaleness throughout the novel, she sheds her head altogether because she has grown beyond the life of reason and control it represents. Her death, perceived at first by the heroine as tragic and meaningless, is recognisable by the end of the novel as a triumph, signifying a return to psychic unity.

Through such imagery, Atwood draws a deep dividing line between the sexes, which she portrays as being situated on opposing sides of the power/powerless equation. However, the ending of *Surfacing*, in which the narrator watches Joe from the safety of the trees while deciding whether or not to return to him, exhibits Atwood's hopes for an ultimate reconciliation and a sharing of power between men and women. This striving towards consensus and conciliation, however, marks a very problematic area in Atwood's work, for it seems to conflict with the essentialist attitudes she displays in so many of her novels - especially her earlier ones - which are primarily concerned with the exploration of the nature and origins of man's abuse of woman. To then make friends with men is therefore the height of folly, for she presents them at best as rather pitiful creatures trying unsuccessfully to communicate a kind of vague goodwill (e.g., Nate, in *Life Before Man*); and at worst as rapists and murderers. If, as Atwood claims in 'Liking Men', 'all men are rapists' (p.54), how can they be trusted to reform?

The ending of *Surfacing* is therefore marred by paradox, for while it is obvious that the heroine sees Joe as redeemable ('he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him' (p.192)), it seems incongruous, if not downright dangerous, for her to return to him, considering his behaviour throughout the novel.

It is significant, too, that the means of this salvation are never really made clear, since the exact means by which salvation of the masculine principle is attained strays into the realm of mysticism, of which Atwood's prose-poem 'Hand' is a good example:

This is your body I hold between both of my hands, its eyes closed. Now your body has become a hand that is opening, you body is the hand of a blind man, reaching out into a darkness which may in fact be light; for all you know,...This is not a lovers' scenario. This is the journey of the body, its hesitant footsteps as it walks back into its own flesh. I close my own eyes so I can see better where we are going. My hands move forward by knowledge and guess; my hands move you forward. Your eyes are closed but the third eye, the eye of the body, is opening. It floats towards you like a ring of blue fire. Now you see into it and through it. (p.59)<sup>53</sup>

There are obvious parallels here with Russ, whose vision of a female discourse, as in *The Two Of Us*, is similarly vague and enigmatic. It can be argued that Atwood too is baffled by the constrictions of patriarchal dualism; the only difference is that she is attempting a new mode of signification which includes, rather than excludes, men. But while Russ' endings are a logical outcome of the ideology which forms her narrative, Atwood's are not. Russ' tentative endings can be read as attempts to articulate concepts for which no references exist within the phallogocentric system of signification, while Atwood often appears to be merely evading the fact that her conclusions are inconsistent with her argument.

However, Barbara Hill Rigney sees the ending of *Surfacing* marking an

ideological turning point in Atwood's fiction, for in subsequent works, claims Rigney, 'Atwood expand[s] her political view to encompass a world in which both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see 'who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death' (*Handmaid's Tale*, 144)'.<sup>54</sup> While it does not make the ending of *Surfacing* any more satisfactory, Rigney's observation illuminates the way Atwood subsequently alters her feminist ideological stance in order better to accommodate the more general humanist conclusions at which she has already arrived. It is not, therefore, a dramatic change, but merely an alteration of emphasis on issues already present in her work.

Of Atwood's later novels, *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are overtly political, while *Cat's Eye* and the short stories collected in *Bluebeard's Egg* relegate the same preoccupation with oppression and victimisation to the private sphere. From *Bodily Harm* onwards, therefore, Atwood shows a tendency to approach issues of sexual inequality as being representative of much wider political concerns which involve humanity as a whole - concerns which, while present in her earlier literature, increasingly achieve a much more satisfactory synthesis. The next chapter will explore this change in Atwood's presentation of the theme of gender in more detail, comparing it with the similar approaches of Ursula Le Guin and Kate Wilhelm.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other - outside, below, underneath, subservient, I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for, I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to be used as I see fit.<sup>1</sup>

We are here to testify that our traditions are valuable to us, and that we continue to resist obliteration of either our cultures or our personhood.<sup>2</sup>

While the novelists studied in Chapter One clearly site their works within the sphere of gender conflict, it is more difficult to isolate such a theme in other works included within this thesis, for which sexual politics are only a part of larger, more far-reaching, concerns. It is Margaret Atwood who exemplifies the difference between the two approaches, for her later novels retain her former awareness of the power struggle between male and female, but nevertheless increasingly absorb it into a wider strategy which deals with the issue of victimisation and oppression within a more general cultural context. In *The Edible Woman* (1969), for example, there is no question that Marian's struggle is specifically against Peter and his increasing control over her life, while in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) - probably Atwood's most overtly 'political' novel to date - the nameless heroine is contending against an anonymous political system which degrades and confines men as well as women.

In spite of her contention that 'we have now reached, as a culture, the point at which we need a little positive reinforcement for men',<sup>3</sup> so far Atwood has continued to centre her narratives around female protagonists. Indeed, her most recent novel, *Cat's Eye* (1988), may indicate a new direction for Atwood's work in its concentration on relationships between women, in spite of her claim

that 'male characters are more of a challenge, and now that I'm middle-aged and less lazy I'll undoubtedly try a few more of them'.<sup>4</sup> If Atwood were to alter her approach to fit this statement, her fiction would bear an even closer similarity to the works of Kate Wilhelm and Ursula Le Guin, neither of whom has ever displayed any scruples about basing narratives around a hero rather than a heroine; or, at the very least, creating strong, sympathetic male characters in a way that Joanna Russ, from her position as a militant feminist, finds herself unwilling, or unable, to do. While Russ' tendency to take refuge in male stereotypes indicates her ideological inflexibility on the issue of gender, Wilhelm's and Le Guin's willingness to take the male point of view into consideration demonstrates their view that sexual inequality is merely symptomatic of problems within the culture at large.

This attitude is comparable to that displayed by Latin American authors, whose almost inevitable awareness of general social and political oppression tends to make them unwilling to examine feminist issues in isolation. Writers such as Isabel Allende, Luisa Valenzuela, Rosario Ferré and Victoria Ocampo, while passionate in their condemnation of the sexism that exists within Latin American culture - Victoria Ocampo, for example, has spoken of her 'unshakeable conviction that it is necessary to fight to win the place that belongs to half of humanity'<sup>5</sup> - nevertheless frequently demonstrate a greater concern with the subversive power of the writer, male as well as female, within a repressive society. Isabel Allende's avowal that 'all of us who write and who are fortunate enough to be published should assume the commitment of serving the cause of freedom and justice. We have a mission to accomplish at the front lines'<sup>6</sup> is echoed by such male colleagues as Carlos Fuentes, who writes in similar terms of the author's responsibility to 'the silence of the world, to the absent, imprisoned, censored, forgotten words that could not be written - or else

published - because of a tyrant's whim, a society's indifference, or a people's hunger'.<sup>7</sup>

The opinions of Fuentes, as well as of other Latin American writers who feel keenly their cultural and ideological marginalisation, have much in common with those of many feminist writers, who hold an equally strong conviction that they are writing from the periphery. Like Gabriel García Márquez, the author largely responsible for the creation of the concept of the 'labyrinth of solitude'<sup>8</sup> which Gerald Martin believes has become a controlling image within Latin American literature, feminist authors frequently create narratives of isolation and entrapment, expressing a belief which is reminiscent of modernism: that their 'crucial problem', in the words of García Márquez, is 'a lack of conventional means to render...[their] lives believable'.<sup>9</sup>

Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, for example, tells the story of Brave Orchid, a Chinese woman living in America, who believes herself to have 'entered the land of ghosts' (p.139).<sup>10</sup> Because she trusts nothing and nobody in this alien environment, she does not participate in the same frame of reality as the people around her, condemning herself to loneliness and increasing isolation as her children leave home to join an American culture she is unable to comprehend. Hong Kingston's novel echoes other narratives produced by immigrants, exiles and women in expressing the frustrated belief that neither their opinions nor their experiences coincide with those accepted as significant within the cultural mainstream.

What makes Atwood, Wilhelm and Le Guin different from the other writers in this thesis is not their *awareness* of patriarchal oppression and discrimination, for that in itself is not enough to distinguish them as a group, but their *approach*. While Joanna Russ and Atwood in her earlier novels express their sense of marginalisation by concentrating on the solitary anxieties of women within

the phallogocentric order, authors such as Wilhelm and Le Guin dwell on the communal aspect of oppression, making women's voices speak for all those groups who have been relegated to the sidelines by a culture that is perceived, with only slight variations, as male, white, middle-class, technological and autocratic. Like Isabel Allende or Gabriel García Márquez, who blur the boundaries between fact and fantasy for political ends, these writers challenge the received, mainstream version of 'reality' in their search to express viewpoints that are radically different from those promoted by patriarchy.

Chris Weedon, in her analysis of Foucault's theories on discourse, puts forward the opinion that, so far at least, feminism has not yet succeeded in the formulation of a discourse that would pose a serious challenge to dominant patriarchal institutions, for 'in reversing dominant values', it only 'runs parallel to hegemonic discourse and has yet to subvert its power.'<sup>1</sup> Atwood, Le Guin and Wilhelm likewise see limitations in the adoption of an exclusively feminist dialectic, and are thus led to an investigation of their cultural background in order to discover, in the words of Weedon, a wider 'discursive space'<sup>2</sup> which would enable them to resist the dominant ideology from a new historical perspective. It is this which motivates Atwood to draw on the fact that she is from Canada, a country that exists in the cultural and political shadow of the United States, and Le Guin and Wilhelm to find inspiration in the radically different discourses offered to them from within their own country: the history and philosophy of the North American Indians.

It is, however, important to stress that, while Atwood's, Wilhelm's, and Le Guin's approach to the issue of feminism and oppression is similar, it is not the same. As Atwood's work has shifted in emphasis away from the explorations of individual male/female relationships, so an analysis of her feminist views becomes more problematic, as her later novels, beginning with *Surfacing*, appear

ironically to undermine the essentialist assumptions raised by her earlier narratives. Le Guin, on the other hand, has always been vociferous in her support for the principle of feminist androgyny, described by Natalie Rosinsky as the belief that

human potential is not predetermined by physiological gender but is instead "androgynous"; proponents of this "androgynous vision" claim that nurture, rather than nature, is the dominant influence on women's and men's mental as well as physical development. Thus, the traditional divisions of labor into circumscribed "feminine" and broader "masculine" spheres are artificial constructs which reflect social prejudice rather than actual human capabilities. To feminist proponents of androgyny, women's and men's abilities are potentially equal.<sup>13</sup>

This attitude is borne out by much of Le Guin's writing. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, she attempts to envisage an entire social structure based upon the principle of androgyny, while one of the main themes of *The Dispossessed* is the extent to which a society moulds the sexual roles of the people within it. Le Guin uses the two principal female characters of the novel, Vea and Takver, to demonstrate her contention that their gender is of no significance compared to the immense influence of cultural conditioning, for no universal 'female principle' exists to override the widely differing expectations of their respective societies. Instead, their culturally-induced differences are seen to wipe out any similarities between the two assumed upon the grounds of sex - an attitude which puts Le Guin's 'ambiguous utopia'<sup>14</sup> in clear opposition to Russ' Whileaway, in which culture is subordinated to gender, for the whole function of Whileaway is to propound the idea of a woman-centred society based on values that are uniquely female.

Kate Wilhelm's approach is different again, for she consistently refuses to be pinned down to any particular ideological position, experimenting with a variety of different feminist approaches. A fair indication of her attitude is

her refusal to apply terms indicative of closed genre categories such as 'science fiction' or 'fantasy' to her work, preferring instead the far more open-ended term 'speculative fiction'.<sup>15</sup> Like Russ and Atwood, Wilhelm sees the existing culture as inherently self-destructive, but unlike them she does not grant women the privilege of being the sole agents of society's salvation in the restoration of natural principles, nor does she (either explicitly or implicitly) deny men's right or ability to be redeemed in this way.

However, therefore to jump to the conclusion that her work upholds Le Guin's views on the essentially androgynous nature of humanity would be to ignore the many levels upon which Wilhelm's narrative operates. Le Guin, for all her tendency to fall into essentialist attitudes, does not attach gender differentiations to the conflict between nature and nurture, while Wilhelm clearly does. Although awareness of natural forces is not seen as being exclusively confined to women, it is still ultimately depicted as 'female', for the minorities with which the nature theme is associated can all be seen to take on the equivalent of the woman's role within the prevailing culture, as in *Juniper Time*, which sets the situation of its heroine, a woman isolated and victimised by men, against that of the Wasco Indians, whose communal experience of abuse echoes her individual, female, one.

Each author within this chapter, therefore, perceives the nature of oppression slightly differently. Like Allende, Ocampo and Fuentes, however, they share a common belief in the political responsibility of the writer. Atwood, Le Guin and Wilhelm are all clearly motivated by a certainty that their narratives, in their attempt to challenge ingrained cultural assumptions, can effect both social and intellectual change. Atwood thus speaks for them all in her statement which echoes her Latin American contemporaries in its assertion that:

Oppression involves a failure of the imagination; the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill...regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them...The writer, unless he is a mere word processor, 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.<sup>16</sup>

Atwood's emphatic foregrounding of her own cultural and personal situation in her work makes an exploration of her nationality vital to any real understanding of her handling of the themes of oppression and victimisation, for her authorial perspective is constantly informed by her awareness of her origins. In her critique of Canadian literature, *Survival*, she claims that this awareness was at first largely unconscious, for 'several of the patterns I've found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work. Also by my surprise at finding the concerns of that work shared by writers with whom - I found myself concluding - I seemed to participate in a cultural community that had never been defined for me'.<sup>17</sup> Her work dating from 1972, the year in which both *Survival* and *Surfacing* were published, certainly exhibits a greater degree of conscious manipulation of a literary tradition, explicitly connecting it with her principal concerns.

In *Survival*, Atwood sums up the position of the artist in Canadian society thus:

Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it, and I'm not talking about the fact that you may not have taken a trip to the Arctic or Newfoundland, you may not have explored - as the travel folders have it - this Great Land of ours. I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.<sup>18</sup>

As Canada is not 'a self-respecting nation',<sup>19</sup> it is not surprising, then, that its literature reflects that inferiority complex. Indeed, Atwood identifies its dominant theme as that of survival: 'What you might call 'grim' survival as opposed to 'bare' survival'.<sup>20</sup> The central figure in Canadian literature, she claims, is that of the victim, since the country itself is 'a collective victim',<sup>21</sup> feeling threatened both from within and without. Canadian popular culture sees itself locked in a constant battle with 'Nature the Monster' <sup>22</sup>, which is regarded as overwhelming, capricious and threatening; as well as with America, Canada's nearest neighbour - bigger, richer, and, as Atwood notes, intimidatingly powerful.

Canadians and Americans may look alike, but the contents of their heads are quite different. Americans experience themselves, individually, as small toads in the biggest and most powerful puddle in the world. Their sense of power comes from identifying with the puddle. Canadians as individuals may have more power within the puddle, since there are fewer toads in it; it's the puddle that is seen as powerless.<sup>23</sup>

Atwood's feminist views are explicitly linked with her nationalism: specifically in her identification of woman with the land. As Barbara Hill Rigney comments, Atwood presents Canada as 'essentially 'feminine' in a powerfully 'masculine' world'.<sup>24</sup> Her central concern, therefore, is not the cultural plight of women *per se*, but with power in all its forms, and through her work she explores the different choices available to those within the magical circle of power and those outside it, raising implications that extend far beyond the boundaries of either feminism or nationalism. Those who are powerless are denied access to their past, control over their present, and any hope for the future: and that is precisely the situation in which Canada finds herself. The myths and way of life of her indigenous Indian population have long been forgotten; modern settlers exploit her natural resources, seeking only to



conquer, not to understand; and she faces an uncertain future in the shadow of America's encroaching influence.

For Atwood, the way out of such a situation involves an examination of the past, although it is not, as her many critical writings on Canadian culture might suggest, a historical process, but rather a reconsideration of personal experiences and memories. While Atwood is undoubtedly interested in culture as an impersonal historical entity, in her novels she consistently views it from the perspective of a single individual, implying that it is from such fragments, after all, that history is composed. This is clearly shown in *Cat's Eye*, where Atwood draws implicit parallels between her narrator's past and present. Her narrator, Elaine, marvels at the cosmopolitan, impersonal city Toronto has become, describing it as 'New York without the garbage and the muggings, it's supposed to be' (p.14).<sup>25</sup> In subsequent chapters she also remembers her school-days, being 'watched from behind' by 'a large photograph of the King and Queen' (p.79), while learning all about the glories of the British Empire. It is obvious that this new, Yuppie Canada which Elaine so despises, completely devoid of any sense of separate identity, is the direct result of the kind of education to which she was subjected.

Atwood, like many Latin American writers, sets up a resistance to such a situation by engaging in what Gerald Martin describes as 'the redemptive quest for legitimacy and identity and the struggle for liberation'.<sup>26</sup> Martin identifies the image of the labyrinth as central to Latin American literature's presentation of this endeavour, stating that 'in the realm of cultural space as the twentieth century has conceived it, there are fields (language, culture, memory, texts) and paths (utterances, discourses, images, themes); and there are labyrinths or networks fusing and confusing the two (worlds, lives, books), embracing past, present and future, the collective 'we' and 'they' and the

individual 'I, 'you' and 's/he'.<sup>27</sup> To enter into the labyrinth, then, is to engage in a potentially redemptive act which possesses the ability to define the true nature of both the individual and her culture. This is very close indeed to Atwood's reference in 'Canadian Monsters' to the value of a process of cultural rediscovery akin to archaeology:

The digging up of ancestors, calling up of ghosts, exposure of skeletons in the closet, which are so evident in many cultural areas, have numerous motivations, but one of them is surely a search for reassurance. We want to be sure that the ancestors, ghosts and skeletons are really there; that as a culture we are not as flat and lacking in resonance as we were once led to believe.<sup>28</sup>

For Atwood, the entry into the labyrinth is achieved through memory or the written word, both of which provide the powerless with the means to empower themselves by regaining and preserving their past. As she writes in the poem 'Procedures From Underground',

When you are down you will find  
 those who were once your friends  
 ...  
 You will  
 tell us their names, what they want, who  
 has made them angry by forgetting them.<sup>29</sup>

Atwood's concerns in this poem are reminiscent of Isabel Allende's novel *Of Love and Shadows*, in which 'underground' is a mine shaft filled with the bodies of *desaparecidos* murdered by a brutal military regime. When they are discovered, however, the eloquent silence of the bodies of 'the dead who were beginning to spring out of the ground like weeds' (p.215)<sup>30</sup> inspire people to speak out against their oppression 'to insure that the men, women, and children swallowed up by that violence would never be forgotten' (p.280).

Atwood's fiction, too, similarly stresses the importance of recovering a lost personal and/or cultural tradition as a reaction against censorship and oppression. The narrator of *Surfacing*, for example, displays an obsessive preoccupation with her personal history, going over it again and again in an effort to separate true memory from false, just as the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* clings stubbornly to her recollections of what it was like before the state of Gilead was established in the hope that they will enable her to retain her individuality within a society that is antipathetic to any kind of autonomy.

There is another aspect of the labyrinth (or 'underground') motif, however, of which Atwood is well aware; that of solitude. It can be the means of enlightenment, but it may also represent a vicious circle of isolation and despair, as redemption leads only to 'further repression from without and within, and a new round of disillusionment and despair'.<sup>21</sup> Like the heroines of such nineteenth-century novels as *The Mill on the Floss* and *Wuthering Heights*, whose unconventional and headstrong impulses are ultimately curbed and silenced in the grave, 'underground' for Atwood's protagonists can represent censorship and the stifling of rebellion. Atwood makes the dark aspects of this image explicit in 'Alternate Thoughts From Underground', where she identifies it with all those repressed and silenced by 'the invaders...the inheritors, the raisers/ of glib superstructures'.<sup>22</sup>

Like the anonymous narrator of 'Alternate Thoughts From Underground', many of Atwood's heroines, such as the protagonists of both *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, appear to be almost fatally isolated within narratives in which truth is extremely hard to discern from delusion, and the return from the labyrinth, if indeed it is achieved at all, is shrouded in ambiguity. In *Bodily Harm*, however, the image of the labyrinth as prison or grave is made literal

when Rennie is 'disappeared' after being caught up in a political coup on the Carribean island of St Antoine. The narrative casts doubt on its own overtly optimistic ending, for although Rennie is described leaving the island after being liberated from prison, the fact that this passage is written in the future tense hints that it may actually be only fantasy and daydream, and that 'it is altogether possible that Rennie does not escape the prison, that she dies there'.<sup>23</sup> If that is the case, then her revelation that she is not 'exempt' (p.301)<sup>24</sup> from participation in a dangerous world may well not benefit her at all.

However, in spite of the fact that her emergence from prison might be imagined rather than real, Rennie nevertheless finds that her experiences have enabled her to formulate an agenda for action and resistance: 'she is a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report'(pp.300-1). Clearly Atwood intends us to realise that it is Rennie's arrival at this decision which is important, not her ability to carry out her intentions in actuality. In *Surfacing*, too, nothing has ostensibly changed when the narrator finally emerges from the woods, yet Atwood enables us to see that her protagonist may indeed have achieved her liberation from the labyrinth. Even a single resolution 'to refuse to be victim' (p.191)<sup>25</sup> is extremely important, for by her very ability to make such a resolution, the narrator, like Rennie, has undermined the discourse of the powerful. While the Americans remain a 'pervasive menace', the narrator's repossession of her history enables her to formulate an agenda for action: 'they exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied' (p.189).

Atwood provides her readers with the map through the labyrinth in *Survival*, where she identifies and analyses what she terms 'basic victim

positions' which, she claims, 'are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group or a victimized individual'.<sup>36</sup> 'Position One' is 'To deny the fact that you are a victim'; 'Position Two' is 'To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim', but to see it as an inevitable state - 'an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of biology...,the necessity decreed by History'. 'Position Three' marks the decision to enter the labyrinth, for it involves the acknowledgment of 'the fact that you are a victim but...refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable'; while 'Position Four' is the most radical of all, involving the decision to be 'a creative non-victim', and is the only way, according to Atwood's schema, in which the labyrinth of solitude can be escaped.<sup>37</sup> Most of Atwood's later novels such as *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, end with the narrator's acceptance of the fourth position, which renders 'Victor/Victim games obsolete',<sup>38</sup> thus opening possibilities for a new society which unites, rather than separates, its members.

Just as Atwood attempts to achieve a reconciliation between the sexes in her fiction, so she also tries to eliminate the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless in novels like *Surfacing* and *Bodily Harm*, where the heroine works her way through a mythic, essentialist, landscape only to discard it at the end. The narrator of *Surfacing* indicates her movement away from divisive classifications by rejecting her earlier categorisation of Joe as an 'American', affirming instead the value of their common humanity. Significantly, she describes him as 'a mediator, an ambassador' (p.192), terms which indicate an attempt to reach out beyond divisions in order to forge a new relationship which no longer has the struggle for power as its basis. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie, who has always taken pride in her ability to 'predict men', and to be 'able to tell exactly what a given man would do at a given time' (an attitude which, as the narrative shows, merely gives an illusory sense of control, for, like

Anna in *Surfacing*, it confirms, rather than neutralises, the fact of her victimisation) only achieves true liberation when she abandons her belief that there is 'such a thing as most men' and gives up 'deciding what will happen next' (p.241). In other words, once she has rejected her role as victim she is able to negotiate new relationships with men as individuals on theoretically 'equal' terms.

It is through such conclusions that Atwood throws the essentialist element in her fiction into ironic relief, ultimately nullifying it altogether. Both *Surfacing* and *Bodily Harm* attempt to show that, in fact, men and women aren't all that different from each other: they just *think* they are. The narrator of *Surfacing*, for example, gains only a false sense of power from adopting the role of mother-goddess, and her quest for her parents, initially perceived by the narrator (and therefore the reader) as of archetypal significance, must in the end be rejected as delusion: 'No total salvation, resurrection. Our father, Our mother, I pray. Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human' (p.189).

It is wrong, therefore, for women to define themselves as *fundamentally* different from men, for that is to deny the value of their shared humanity. Barbara Hill Rigney, for example, comments that Atwood 'affirms' in *Surfacing* that 'truth...is to define the world as it exists and to extricate the self from the multitude of possible mythologies. Withdrawal from reality into myth...[signifies] the death of an authentic human identity'.<sup>39</sup> The narrator's revelation thus shows her that essentialist classifications confirm her in her role as Other, and that her survival, like Rennie's, can only be achieved by proceeding to an ideological space where she can accept the guilt of having participated in the process of her own oppression. The act of neutralising victor/victim roles as they relate to gender makes the narrator realise that her

'old belief that I am powerless' (p.191) was in fact an evasion of liability, and functions as Atwood's own reiteration of her belief that 'for women to define themselves as powerless and men as all-powerful is to fall into an ancient trap, to shirk responsibility as well as to warp reality'.<sup>40</sup>

Feminist politics, therefore, are to Atwood like any other politics in that they offer no real alternative to the dominant order. It is only by breaking out of politics altogether, as Offred breaks out of Gilead, that the individual can formulate a personal agenda for action. Atwood does not deny the injustices of her society, but her fiction refuses to concentrate on women's issues to the exclusion of all other examples of inequality, and denies women any opportunity to assume the stereotyped role of martyr - as all her heroines attempt to do at some point in the narrative. Atwood's theories on power and politics go some way towards justifying her attitude towards gender reconciliation, described in the previous chapter, because they illustrate the processes by which she abandons essentialist viewpoints; summed up in her statement in 'Writing the Male Character' that 'I think women have to take the concerns of men as seriously as they expect men to take theirs, both as novelists and as inhabitants of this earth'.<sup>41</sup>

However, the problem with this emphasis on the role of the individual in the formulation of the discourses of power is that it does not add up to any coherent strategy with which to combat the problem of mass political oppression. In fact, even Atwood herself acknowledges that the ability to become 'a creative non-victim' within an oppressive society is a problematic issue, for 'you can't become a creative ex-victim - insofar as you are connected with your society - until the entire society's position has been changed'.<sup>42</sup> Just how this wider revolution is to be achieved is a problem Atwood does not tackle, for none of

her heroines changes the world; merely her own point of view. The achievement of having formulated a discourse which will revolutionise their awareness of themselves as subject is far more important to Atwood's protagonists than any political changes they might achieve from this new perspective, as the ambiguous endings of her narratives prove. An interesting contrast to Atwood's work, however, is provided by Kate Wilhelm, who, throughout her fiction, attempts to achieve a balance between the demands of the political and the personal. While acknowledging the importance of the individual in the identification and exposure of oppression, her characters do not work their way towards a personal revelation as Atwood's do. Instead, their knowledge is given a political impetus through Wilhelm's imperative that they use whatever knowledge they have gained for the good of society at large.

In spite of their ultimate, very dissimilar conclusions, a comparison of Atwood's and Wilhelm's novels tends to reveal more similarities than differences. Like Atwood, Wilhelm presents the conflict between culture and nature in essentialist terms, constructing her narrative around the tension created by the opposition of masculine and feminine. The issue is presented as not just a mere difference of opinion, but a potentially catastrophic clash between two incompatible perspectives on reality. As in Atwood's work, phallogocentric culture is characterised by its rigid, linear concepts, based as it is upon the acquisition of power over nature by means of technological development. It is a process that is seen to be ultimately fatal for both sides, for the world of Wilhelm's novels, to paraphrase Vivienne Forrester, is one 'crippled...,mutilated [and] deprived of women's vision'.<sup>43</sup>

Wilhelm emphasises the self-destructive aspect of the dominant order by setting the majority of her novels against a background of ecological crisis, where the world is in imminent danger of destruction through such things as the



affects of pollution upon the atmosphere and of chemicals upon the land. While this is also obvious to everyone in her novels, nothing is done to rectify the situation because no-one is able to envisage any alternative course of action.

*Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang* is a typical example, telling the story of an attempt to save a world slowly dying from the effects of science upon the ecology. Industrial pollution has destroyed the atmosphere, causing increased radiation leading to disease, drought and famine, but a small group of people create an enclave in which they attempt to repopulate the world with clones. As is inevitable in Wilhelm's order of things they ultimately fail, for the society they have invented is as unnatural as the one they are trying to replace. Their fundamental mistake, Wilhelm shows her readers, is their failure to understand that nature has its own way of redressing the balance, for 'something remembers and heals itself' (p.23).<sup>44</sup> Her references to the process of evolution throughout the novel provide an essential counterpoint to the main theme, highlighting the intrinsic blindness that leads to the scientists' inevitable undoing. However noble its intentions, science stubbornly refuses to accept that the world can continue quite well, if not better, without the human species.

As their society develops, the clones are seen to have inherited their creator's lack of vision, mistakenly regarding the men who made them as little more significant than the dinosaurs, and themselves as the natural successors of humanity. However, their tiny technocracy grows smaller with each succeeding generation as their ability to reproduce diminishes, and they become unable to cope with nature or with solitude. Lacking any sense of imagination, initiative, or empathy with the natural world, they physically and mentally collapse when separated from the psychological props provided by their clone siblings and their artificial society. Indeed, their fears are justified, for it becomes increasingly clear in the course of the novel that the regenerative power of

nature will inevitably sweep them aside in the course of its progression. It is obvious that, in Wilhelm's opinion, a society based upon the linear concepts of science is rigid in outlook and construction, and therefore vulnerable to change, in a way that nature, with its inherent ability to adapt, is not.

Throughout her work, however, Wilhelm does not just deconstruct the scientific world-view, but questions the very concept of 'reality' upon which it is founded. In an essay entitled 'The Uncertain Edge of Reality', she argues that

*Homo sapiens sapiens* builds mountains of information, data, knowledge, and abstractions. We stand somewhere on that mountain to observe our world and we think from this place alone can reality be revealed at last. We don't see that our mountain is but one of chain, that we are surrounded by countless eroded mountains, that the ground below is uneasy, as if it were being undermined. Indeed it is; the mountain-building is a continuing activity. What we accept is little more than reality by consensus and compromise.<sup>46</sup>

Like Atwood, Wilhelm concurs with Foucault's theories on the intrinsic vulnerability of discourse to change, emphasising that it is the culture's willingness to accept scientific theories that validate them, not any intrinsic value within the ideas themselves. Wilhelm comments that the real power of science is actually decidedly nonscientific, since 'today's scientists are the equivalent of yesterday's shamans: they point the way and the rest of the populace follows. And they are human with the same divisions that the rest of us have, the same uncertain edge of reality we all share'.<sup>46</sup> Through such arguments, she makes a point that is central to her fiction; that 'if what we have now is the ultimate reality, the universe is absurd. We...have made, and are making, the reality we live in day by day, and we can change it'. Again, Wilhelm echoes Atwood in her conviction that political agendas originate from within the sphere of the individual. Imagining 'reality as the surface of pond that we have dug and filled with water', she maintains that it is possible to 'drop questions

like pebbles into it, first here, then there, with each one setting up ripples, disturbing that surface. Eventually, so slowly no one even notices, the pond is filled with pebbles, but as the water is displaced, it flows out and makes a new pond further down the slope'.<sup>47</sup>

*Fault Lines* is a very effective example of Wilhelm's self-appointed role as disrupter of the dominant discourse. The novel is set in San Francisco, a city that lies above the San Andreas Fault, and shows the singleminded stubbornness of a society that believes it can ignore the shifting ground beneath its feet. However devastating the earthquakes that inevitably occur, society always shifts the responsibility onto a different phenomenon which can be more easily controlled and understood: 'We tell ourselves it wasn't the earthquake that was so deadly, it was the fire, as if the city would have burned if the water mains had not been ruptured and the fire-alarm system not wrecked, and the gas lines not broken. This is what we tell ourselves, and we lie' (p.109).<sup>48</sup> San Francisco's situation thus becomes a metaphor for the psychic state of humanity: just as earthquakes are caused by friction between two moving tectonic plates, so the tension created between one version of reality and another causes psychic and intellectual disruption within a single-minded technological culture. The situation is only made worse by ignoring it, but Wilhelm shows in this novel that it is in the nature of humanity to ignore what it cannot cope with, because "'we never understand things really, It's a game we play...pretending we do, making things work, or pretending they work if they don't. It's just a game'" (p.54).

However, through the character of the political scientist Jason Mohr, *Fault Lines* also foregrounds the serious aspects of such a 'game' by arguing that those who attempt to make the dominant ideology aware that it is built on ever-shifting ground are often brutally silenced. When he predicts future catastrophe

for humanity, his work is censored and his career destroyed: incarcerated in a mental institution, he soon comes to realise that "the cure is simply not tell them what they don't want to hear. You don't upset their world view and they are delighted with you and pat you on the head and let you go" (p.126).

In fact, Wilhelm shows that Jason Mohr is saner than those who so vigorously work to silence him. The short stories contained in the collection *Somerset Dreams and other Fictions*, for example, are almost unanimously based around the premise that most of those who live in the cultural mainstream exist in a state of incipient schizophrenia, torn between the conflicting demands of nature and society, the semiotic and symbolic order. On the surface, they lead normal, socially acceptable lives, but underneath the force of repression is building, demanding to be translated into action.

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Hélène Cixous shows the particularly female nature of this anger: 'The little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath!'<sup>49</sup> Wilhelm, too, consistently presents this struggle in gynocentric terms, preserving the equation of the female principle with nature and the male with culture that runs throughout her work. Technocracy as a whole is seen to be suppressing the 'female', natural, part of itself, and this struggle is reflected in the individual psyche.

However, this experience is not confined to women alone, for according to Wilhelm, men also have the chance to rediscover the female element that exists within their own subconscious, and which they must resurrect and accept if they are to become psychically whole. It is a theme Wilhelm explores in much of her work, but it is the central concern in a haunting short story entitled 'The Encounter',<sup>50</sup> in which a man and a woman are marooned together in a snowed-in bus station.

Wilhelm's narrative manipulation is significant and subtle: the action is presented without authorial comment, but is nevertheless loaded with half-articulated implication. The consciousness through which the story is viewed (although it is not narrated in the first person), is that of the male character, Randolph Crane; a man, it becomes increasingly obvious, who represents all the worse androcentric assumptions that force women into their cultural role as Other. His memories of his estranged wife, Mary Louise, betray an extremely ambiguous attitude toward women, seemingly composed of a complex combination of erotic fascination and uncontrollable disgust:

Mary Louise wore a red velvet gown that was slit to her navel, molded just beneath her breasts by a silver chain, and almost completely bare in the back, down to the curve of her buttocks. The silver chain cut into her tanned back slightly, Crane stared at it...How easy it would be, a flick of a chain latch, and she'd be stripped to her hips. Was she counting on someone's noticing that? Evers maybe? Or Olivetti?...Something about women who wore red in public. Like passing out a dance card and pencil, the promise implicit in the gesture?

"Slut!" he said, through teeth so tightly pressed together that his jaws ached,  
(pp.52-3)

He regards himself as being 'tight and self-contained' (p.56), but, as his wife realises, he is repressing a range of violent emotions: "I know there's a room somewhere where you've locked up part of yourself, and I keep searching for it. Someday I'll find it and open it just a crack, and then I'll run. Because if it ever opens, even a little, everything will come tumbling out and you won't be able to stop any of it. How you'll bleed then, bleed and bleed, and cry and moan" (p.66). The reference to blood, with its connotations of menstruation, is significant, for it locates the site of Crane's repression firmly within the realm of his female consciousness. So great has the force of this repression become that it has assumed an objective reality within the conscious world. Crane, obsessively watching the woman in the bus station, comes to identify her

with all the women he has known and feared in his life. When he strangles her in an attempt to rid himself of the memories, however, her metaphorical role only becomes clearer, because in the act of murder he has finally acknowledged her presence.

"We can't stop it now," the woman said, following him. "You can't close the door again now, I'm here, You finally saw me, Really saw me, I'm real now, I won't be banished again, I'm stronger than you are, You've killed off bits and pieces of yourself until there's nothing left to fight with, You can't send me away again,"

The temporal discontinuity of the text echoes the confusion within Crane's mind as he battles his own female side; a fight he inevitably loses because his anima has all the strength his long repression has given her. Absorbed into his own female consciousness, Crane is able to watch his own death objectively.

The ultimate aim of 'The Encounter', however, is to prove that such a splitting-off of the consciousness solves nothing, for Crane's male persona is completely destroyed by his long-denied female aspect. It is as if the action of repression produces an equal and opposite reaction, of which such objectified symbols are the result, for the greater the repression, the more devastating the destructive power it unleashes. As Emily's father tells her in *Fault Lines*: "every stress you put on any system has to be relieved...It might take years, or moments, but relief will be found. And the longer the period of stress, the more explosive the act of achieving relief" (p.55).

Wilhelm echoes many South American authors in arguing that redemption from this self-destructive cycle - described by Jean in *Juniper Time* as 'the clash of our urge toward control or destruction of everything natural, and its own will to live and mature' (p.277)<sup>51</sup> - can only be found by turning to the cultural peripheries, to which all alternatives to the dominant order have been

exiled. Such a view is comparable to that expressed by Isabel Allende in *Eva Luna*, where events within a turbulent totalitarian state are rendered insignificant against the immensity of the jungle by which it is surrounded. A place of 'immoderate geography' where 'all ages of history co-exist', the jungle serves as a reminder that 'in a decade that had witnessed great upheavals...for many it was no different from previous times' (p.158).<sup>52</sup> Significantly, the revolution which succeeds in overthrowing the dictatorship comes from the jungle, where the guerillas are guided and protected by Indians who 'had, even with the intrusion of colonizers, maintained their history, customs, language, and gods' (p.246).

If, as Wilhelm asserts in 'The Uncertain Edge of Reality', reality is formed by 'consensus and compromise' only, then those who refuse to compromise are indeed a threat to a civilisation built up around a rigid world view, since all one has to do is to refuse to believe. Although, as 'The Encounter' shows, Wilhelm frequently represents the conflict between science and nature, the self and the Other, in gender-specific terms, she ultimately echoes Allende in extending the range of the metaphor to include all the cultural and racial groups who have been pushed to the periphery of the dominant order. *Juniper Time*, for example, focuses on the plight of the North American Indians, making them a symbol for all 'minorities' who, like women, are banished from participation in the prevailing ideology. In spite of his gender, Robert, chief of the Wasco Indians, is one of Wilhelm's most eloquent apologists, arguing persuasively against "'the cloud and shadow'" cast over the Indian nations by the white man's culture, which, he says, "'obscured too many things we sensed were important, even though your people seemed unaware of them'" (p.239).

Virginia Woolf argues that such an awareness of existing on the cultural margins is an intrinsic part of the female condition, maintaining that women are

capable of experiencing a 'sudden splitting of consciousness', in which they are transformed 'from being the natural inheritor of that civilization' to 'outside of it, alien and critical'.<sup>53</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis remarks with reference to Woolf's comment that 'that shifting focus, bringing the world into different perspectives, is the ontological situation of women because it is our social situation, our relationship to power, our relationship to language'.<sup>54</sup> Although both Woolf and DuPlessis seek to transform this experience of marginality into a positive, potentially liberating experience through the practice of their art, Simone de Beauvoir concentrates on its negative aspects. She argues that woman, having been forced to 'accept this alien point of view'<sup>55</sup> of herself as man's Other, is fundamentally alienated from herself, discovering 'inferiority in...[herself] as a fixed and preordained essence'.<sup>56</sup>

*Oh, Susannah!* is probably Wilhelm's most purely 'feminist' work, and one against which de Beauvoir's views seem particularly relevant. However, it is unfortunate that it is also probably her least successful as a novel. Nevertheless, she manages to make some pointed comments about the way women's identities are regulated within a patriarchal culture. *Susannah*, having lost her memory in an accident, has to relearn all the culturally-conditioned responses necessary to function within society, thus allowing Wilhelm to highlight their ultimate absurdity by relaying them through the medium of a totally impartial observer. Conscious that she is not behaving as a woman should, *Susannah* turns to women's magazines for guidance, accepting wholesale their false constructions of femininity.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a list of things I need, I'll go shopping for them tomorrow."

He looked at the open magazine uneasily. "What kind of things?"

"A hair dryer, a blow dryer, a curling iron, a manicure set and fingernail polish remover, a girdle. There are two kinds, One makes you flat, and the other makes you round, I'll have to try them both, I guess. And there must be a hundred different kinds of bras...a



hair-setting gel, a conditioner, maybe a brightener. It's supposed to be good for light hair like mine. Bath oils and powder. Several sizes of sanitary pads and tampons, for different kinds of days. A long list of makeup, mascara, foundation cream, cleansing cream, stuff like that. A disposable deodorant douche. A razor, or maybe an electric razor. I'll have to look at them." (p.103)<sup>57</sup>

When challenged by Brad, Susannah replies that "'these are the things women need and use. Why do you want me to be different?'" (p.104). The central irony of this episode is that these items, so absurd when listed in isolation, are indeed part of most women's everyday experience, purchased and utilised without question. Adrienne Rich reveals the more sinister implications this ridiculous concept of glamour holds for women: 'We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness'.<sup>58</sup> When Susannah is tormented by the feeling that she 'did not know what was wrong with being herself, but she suspected that something was very wrong with it, she simply did not remember what it was' (p.104), she is responding to the pressures of a patriarchal culture where the female's difference from the male norm is simultaneously condemned and encouraged in order to confirm her in her role as Other.

A consistent flaw in Wilhelm's argument in this case, however, is that Brad (Susannah's mentor and future lover) might not have reacted as vehemently as he does in the condemnation of the magazine's version of femininity if Susannah did not already naturally conform to masculine ideals of beauty and desirability. A 'perfect nine' (p.51), she obtains expensive *haute couture* clothes from the mother of Brad's girlfriend, who also gives her a part-time job as a fashion model. It is hard to accept the parody of the romantic heroine that Wilhelm obviously intends when Susannah conforms to the androcentric elements within

this criterion so absolutely, even up to the end of the novel, when she is united with the man she really loves. Wilhelm's feminist opinions appear to be best reflected in her work in a nonspecific context, for her argument is far more convincing when setting up a parallel between women's situation under patriarchy and that of oppressed people as whole.

This can be seen by comparing *Oh, Susannah!* to *Fault Lines*, for while the character of Susannah gains her significance solely in relation to the social situation of women, Emily Carmichael functions as a symbol for all those whose experiences are relegated to the margins of cultural discourse. She is remarkable because, in a patriarchal system, she has always retained a strong sense of her own identity: "I'm still me," I say. "I'm still Emily, me. When I was little I thought when I grew up I'd be someone else. When I was thirty, I thought by forty I'd be someone else. But it never happened. I'm still me!" (p.192). Unlike Susannah, Emily does not succumb to the temptation to conform, valuing her personal integrity enough to refuse marriage even to a man she loves, because in becoming a wife "I would no longer be myself...I would be waiting for you, my life revolving around you, my plans waiting for your plans to be made. I can't do it" (p.52). Her very refusal constitutes an act of rebellion, for by refusing to play along with the rules of the patriarchal game, and thus achieve some sort of acceptance within the dominant order, both men and women immediately perceive her as a threat: "You've been able to live your life like a man, with no responsibilities at all. If we all lived like you do, there wouldn't be any civilisation!" says her more conventional sister, Wanda (p.161).

Emily Carmichael's rejection of the institution of marriage recalls Anne Sexton's poem 'The Wedding Ring Dance', in which the poet, 'letting my history rip itself off me', discards her wedding and engagement rings. She is unable to

imagine anything beyond the moment of her act of rebellion, however, describing herself as 'stepping into/something unknown/ and transparent'.<sup>59</sup> Like Sexton, although Wilhelm deconstructs the institutions and the world-view of patriarchy, its alternatives are not fully realised within her fiction. As her critique of matriarchal institutions in such novels as *Oh, Susannah!* shows, a simple transferral of political power from one side of the powerful/powerless equation to the other would not signal the institution of a genuinely new order, but merely perpetuate rigid dualistic patterns of thought.

In this respect, Wilhelm is in clear opposition to such feminist theorists as Françoise d'Eaubonne, who, while sharing Wilhelm's view that humanity's ecological consciousness must be raised, argues that it can only come about by recreating society 'in the feminine gender'.<sup>60</sup> In *Oh, Susannah!*, for example, Wilhelm engages in an extended, and quite savagely critical, pun on feminist matriarchal constructs. Susannah, suffering from what the doctors term 'confabulation'(p.32), embarks on a picaresque search for her true identity, and in the process she invents and discards a number of false personae, including that of the stereotypical feminist. Wandering into a women's meeting, she fabricates an elaborate utopian fantasy that bears a distinct resemblance to such ideal feminist societies as Joanna Russ' *Whileaway*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Sally Miller Gearhart's *Wanderground*; agricultural, artistic, and exclusively female.

Although Susannah's fantasy contains many of the elements Wilhelm presents in other novels as essential for a balanced society - respect for nature, celebration of human creativity, and rejection of the dehumanising aspect of technology - her subsequent indictment is severe. The absence of men is presented as directly contrary to her humanist praxis, with its stress on the counterbalancing of equal opposites, and she consequently has the whole thing

collapse into bathos:

"Without the aid of their females...[men] will not be able to perfect the cloning process. They will wear dirty clothes, be driven to distraction by mismatched socks, become fat. They won't be able to find anything at home, or in their files. Their teeth will fall out because they will forget to make dental appointments." (p.75)

However, in her earlier novels at least, Wilhelm's conscientious avoidance of feminist extremes frequently backfires, for her rejection of a matriarchal alternative to the present order is so vehement that the societies she formulates often appear to be based on familiar patriarchal role models. *Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang* is particularly disturbing in this respect, for the ever-present voice of wisdom throughout the novel is that of Grandfather Wiston, patriarch of a huge extended family that includes not only the Wistons themselves, but 'the honorary members - the brothers and sisters and parents of those who had married into the family' (p.4). The text sanctions his authority by presenting it as part of a natural, organic, pattern, for Grandfather Wiston acts consistently as the novel's ecological spokesman, teaching his descendants their role as "'custodians of the soil...not owners, just custodians'" (p.9). Although he dies before civilisation's final collapse, his influence over his grandson David ensures the continuation of his authority through successive generations. David, although one of the scientists who has perfected the cloning technique, eventually rebels against the travesty of society he has helped to build, returning to a life based upon his grandfather's values, symbolised by the 'antique forest' (p.67).

This continuity of a 'natural' consciousness, which surfaces in one member of every generation, is specifically patriarchal. Although a woman, Molly, succeeds David in the role of enlightened character, she is in many ways only

important in her role as mother to Mark, who succeeds in breaking out of the downward spiral into oblivion in which the clones' culture is trapped. It is significant that Molly is, for all her raised awareness, still a clone, which, in addition to her gender, reinforces her role as a conspicuous outsider in the patriarchal triumvirate that dominates the novel's central discourse. The 'escape' that Mark offers is in fact a return to the kind of organic patriarchy Grandfather Wiston represented, for he rescues a harem of women from the breeder's quarters and sets off into the wilderness to repopulate the world. What the novel does not dwell on is that the women's social situation has not appreciably changed, for they still function as breeders. The end of the novel is unsettling - more so because the final description of Mark's new natural society is loaded with possessive pronouns - 'his valley'; 'his people' (p.250); 'his child' (p.251) - which only serve to reinforce the absoluteness of his authority, however benevolent it might be.

In her more recent fiction, however, Wilhelm has, to a great extent, avoided such distressing lapses into essentialism by playing down the gender-linked aspects of her argument. Against her growing preoccupation with apocalyptic concerns she demonstrates an increasing tendency to portray the entire human race as a disadvantaged 'minority'. For example, in *Huysman's Pets*, published in 1986, Wilhelm returns to the central theme of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*: the artificial manipulation of human life for scientific ends. Her handling of the topic in *Huysman's Pets* is, however, much more sophisticated, and subtle, than in her earlier novel.

The narrative is based around the efforts of a biographer, Drew Lancaster, to uncover the facts concerning the pioneering research of a recently deceased scientist, Stanley Huysman. He finds out that Huysman's former assistant is carrying out experiments on a group of children, the 'Huysman's Pets' of the

title, confined in a remote research station. Initially, the children, who are experimented upon in the interests of science, are perceived as the oppressed group within the narrative, for the novel concentrates not only on Drew's revelations, but on his efforts to free them. Drew recruits several people to help him in this venture, including an Indian, Jack Silver Fox. In spite of the fact that he remains a marginal character, Jack's involvement in the narrative is extremely significant, for Wilhelm implicitly invites a parallel to be drawn between the Indian, representative of a culture eradicated by a technological society, and the children, another group threatened by the uncaring forces of scientific advancement.

It is only at the very end of the novel that Wilhelm abruptly reverses the assumptions she has so carefully nurtured throughout the book, when Drew comes to realise that he has been covertly manipulated by the children. Through Huysman's genetic manipulation they possess unique paranormal abilities which makes them the real threat which places the future of the whole of humanity in jeopardy. In this context, therefore, Jack Silver Fox does not represent the children so much as humankind itself, contemplating, like the Indian race, the possibility of extinction. As Drew says, the existence of these talented new beings has made humanity 'the new dinosaurs' (p.245),<sup>61</sup> anomalies within a radically changed world.

The author's own judgement on this situation is curiously suspended, however, rendering the ending of the novel extremely ambiguous. The talent of Huysman's *Pets* is that they can manipulate the Jungian concept of synchronicity by perceiving the underlying patterns that link people and events, thus representing a principle of natural order that is quite alien to American society as Wilhelm presents it. This means that it is possible to argue that the children symbolise escape, not oppression, and a return to a natural order of

things remembered only by the Indians, with their vague race-memories of 'abilities the people once had and lost' (p.223).

Wilhelm's fiction imitates the literature of Latin America as well as the writing of Native Americans in seeking to reconnect the personal with the political, and the past with the present. The rediscovery of repressed memories, both collective and individual, is a central concern within her fiction. In *Oh, Susannah!*, for example, Susannah shows that without the memories which give her a sense of self-identity she is lost, because "people are made of bits and pieces of their past....People are the sum of everything they've done, everything they've thought, everything others have done to them' (p.82). Deprived of her memory, she is unable to formulate the decisions that will give shape to her future; a situation which echoes the experience of all repressed peoples or groups. As Adrienne Rich says, 're-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes...is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves'.<sup>62</sup>

However, while *Oh, Susannah!* concentrates on the importance of the recovery of memory to the individual, in correspondence with the broadening of the scope of the discussion within Wilhelm's work, *Huysman's Pets* considers the same theme from a communal perspective. This novel demonstrates that the sense of simultaneity which science believes to be an exciting new discovery is in fact only a rediscovery of something the Indians have always known. Supporting Paula Gunn Allen's argument that 'new experiences [should] be woven into existing traditions...so we can understand how today's events harmonize with communal consciousness',<sup>63</sup> it holds out the hope that marginalised and oppressed groups, regardless of race or gender, will gain access to a sense of historical continuity which will give them power to both influence and renew the future.

Wilhelm's tendency to fall back on patriarchal structures might be considered to be also exhibited, to a much greater extent, by Ursula Le Guin, who could superficially seem to be rather out of place in this discussion. I have already briefly mentioned the criticism levelled at her for her apparent lack of interest in promoting the cause of feminism through her work, a fact which cynics might consider responsible for her place as one of America's leading science fiction writers - she is the 'token woman' in the sf canon who will not disrupt the male domination of the genre. Gwyneth Jones, for example, believes Le Guin to have been 'hopelessly miscast as a feminist'<sup>64</sup>, while Joanna Russ, in maintaining that Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* portrays 'a world of men', thus illustrates her contention that authentic female characters very rarely appear in science fiction.<sup>65</sup> Le Guin would therefore appear to be an anomaly compared to the other writers included in this thesis, who demonstrate their feminist views by breaking down or deconstructing the boundaries of genre classification. Russ, for example, is frequently referred to as a writer of science fiction, but the obvious postmodernist influences on her work undermines such a simple categorisation; while Wilhelm exploits science fiction's ability to create new worlds while rejecting scientific principles altogether. Le Guin, however, seems to obey all the rules of mainstream science fiction with her representation of futuristic societies, thus seemingly allying herself with the very masculinist, technocratic forces authors like Atwood, Russ and Wilhelm are struggling to resist.

However, Gwyneth Jones' dismissal of Le Guin as a feminist is increasingly hard to maintain in the light of Le Guin's most recent publications, the novel *Always Coming Home*, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, a collection of essays from 1976 to 1986; and *Tehanu*, the final book in the Earthsea cycle and, as I intend to prove, her most 'feminist' work so far. In fact, Le Guin has always



classified herself as a feminist: in an interview in 1975 (just after the publication of *The Dispossessed*) she claimed to find her evident preference for male protagonists 'puzzling...because I consider myself to be a moderately strong feminist', and justified herself by stating that 'I do write from a woman's point of view; I'm a woman so I can't write from anything else'.<sup>66</sup>

Critics like Joanna Russ, however, place the validity of such statements in question, regarding Le Guin as habitually reproducing conventional patriarchal structures within her narratives, and ignoring the subversive, deconstructive potential offered to women writers by science fiction. Russ uses Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as an example of this tendency, demonstrating that, while the world of the novel creates a believable, complex, culture, 'family structure is not fully explained...child-rearing is left completely in the dark'. For Russ, Le Guin's neglect of such 'female' concerns is further emphasised by her failure to portray androgyny in anything other than masculine terms - 'there is a human observer on Winter and he is male; and there is a native hero and *he* is male - at least "he" is *masculine in gender, if not in sex*'.<sup>67</sup> While initially fiercely defending herself from such criticism as Russ', Le Guin now seems to have drastically modified her approach to the whole feminist issue. The increasing involvement of female characters and female concerns in her fiction reflects her acceptance of the legitimacy of much of the original criticism of her work.

It is undoubtedly true, though, that the majority of Le Guin's works show little interest in the subject of gender. Like Wilhelm and Atwood, Le Guin tends to move away from specific issues or concerns in order to raise questions which involve both men and women, for the minutely detailed future societies she creates in her novels challenge accepted attitudes towards such universal issues as power and suppression. The imagery associated with these concerns is very

similar to that employed by Isabel Allende in *Of Love and Shadows*, for Le Guin, too, is concerned with the contrast between public political achievement and private oppression. In Le Guin's work, as in Allende's, darkness is revealed at the heart of almost every political system: the darkness of the mine shaft or the prison which swallows up and silences dissenters.

In *The Dispossessed*, for example, the scientist Shevek travels to the world of Urras, believing that its capitalist system will be more sympathetic to his work than his own anarchistic planet, Anarres. At first he is deceived by the glamour and libertarianism of Urras, but after becoming caught up in a ruthlessly suppressed protest movement, he arrives at the realisation that "Urras is a box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box, and what is inside it? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man" (p.286). The hero of the *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, has almost precisely the same experience in the course of his mission to persuade the planet of Gethen to join the coalition of planets known as the Ekumen. Two rival systems exist on Gethen, the monarchy of Karhide and the communist state of Orgoreyn.

Although the novel begins in Karhide, Ai becomes frustrated at its convoluted and illogical politics, and crosses the border into Orgoreyn, a country which initially impresses him: 'everything was simple, grandly conceived, and orderly. I felt as if I had wasted two years in Karhide. This, now, looked like a country ready to enter the Ekumenical Age.' (p.102).<sup>66</sup> What Ai fails to realise, just as Shevek does, is that he has been deceived by a well-rehearsed façade, which is abruptly shattered when he becomes a political liability and is made to 'disappear' into a labour camp; only one of many where the government sends its detractors. Recalling a previous brief imprisonment for having lost his papers, he now realises that his dismissal of the experience as an

unfortunate mistake was a crucial failure to recognise the true basis of Orgoreyn society: 'I knew now the sign I had been given, my first night in this country. I had ignored that black cellar and gone looking for the substance of Orgoreyn above ground, in daylight. No wonder nothing had seemed real' (p.145).

In *Of Love and Shadows*, Allende likens her heroine's discovery of the fact of oppression to the crossing of 'a borderline between her orderly world and a dark unknown region' (p.133). In a similar way, Le Guin reverses her narrator's perception of fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, in order to expose the fact that oppressive regimes constitute their power from an illusion of control which is only maintained by the brutal oppression of all alternative points of view.

The revelations both Genly Ai and Shevek express in almost identical terms are thus extremely important in enabling the reader to formulate a final judgement between two opposing societies: Karhide and Orgoreyn, Anarres and Urras. Le Guin is not in the habit of idealising one social or political system at the expense of another, and, in a sense, there is little to choose between the two the reader is offered in each novel. Both Karhide and Anarres have their own way of silencing detractors - Karhide by assassination or enforced exile, Anarres by the subtle manipulation of public approval - but neither is associated with Le Guin's ultimate condemnatory image of the box or the cellar, which indicates a systematic programme of oppression at work within society.

In the short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas',<sup>69</sup> for example, an ideal society is maintained at the expense of the hideous suffering of a single child confined to a dark and dirty basement room. However, those who walk away from Omelas make a silent but profound protest against their society's failure to recognise that the suffering of one child, even if the health and happiness of all the rest depends upon it, is not acceptable. The story's moral is one which runs throughout Le Guin's work - the individual is far more important

than any abstract system.

According to Le Guin, the only social and political order which is capable of escaping the dark, confined spaces of oppression is the pacifist form of anarchism found in *The Dispossessed*, even though, in this novel, she portrays it as having been somewhat debased and distorted by the people of Anarres. Le Guin's anarchism is not, as she puts it, 'bomb-in-the-pocket stuff', but is a political theory whose 'principal target is the authoritarian State (capitalist or socialist)', and whose 'principal moral-practical theme is co-operation (solidarity, mutual aid)'.<sup>70</sup> The ultimate objective of what Le Guin terms Odonianism, after its fictional founder, is to abandon depersonalised governmental systems, of whatever kind, in favour of an informal arrangement based upon individual human interaction.

Anarchism, or Odonianism, is, however, only a stage in Le Guin's analysis of social discourses and power structures, for *The Dispossessed* gains a great significance when read in the wider context of a body of work she has created around the concept of the Ekumen: her so-called 'Hainish' novels. The Ekumen is Le Guin's riposte to the militarist, colonising empires of space opera, for it is an organisation whose aim is to persuade planetary cultures, of whatever type, to agree to mutual co-operation for the good of the greater whole. Although she has not developed the history of the Ekumen chronologically, it functions as a complex self-referential system which fits together to form a coherent whole which cannot be adequately contained by any individual narrative.

The Ekumen reifies its objectives of unification by its very existence as a literary device, for it is the means by which inter-textual, as well as inter-planetary, coalitions are formed. This stresses the fact that, while Odonianism is the identifiable rationalisation of already existent political theory (Le Guin cites Kropotkin as a major influence),<sup>71</sup> the Ekumen is something quite different,

promoting Le Guin's Taoist-based beliefs in the inherent balance of the universe - a philosophy summarised in her injunction, "'You don't push things around!'"<sup>72</sup> Genly Ai, Le Guin's most articulate supporter of the Ekumen, repeatedly describes it as a 'co-ordinator' (p.36), whose 'power is precisely the power of its member states' (p.22). Its motives in seeking alliances among the inhabited worlds are not only for 'material profit', but also for 'increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight' (p.35). Later on in the novel, using terms even further removed from the discourse of power, Ai speaks of the Ekumen as 'an attempt to reunify the mystical with the political' (p.119). As Rafail Nudelman notes, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is important in defining the Ekumen 'as mystical idea rather than a concrete organisation',<sup>73</sup> which represents 'a unity of a peculiar kind - not the sum of its parts but rather a common factor, an essential constant derived from them'.<sup>74</sup>

In this respect, it is Ai himself who is the best expression of what the Ekumen stands for, not merely because of what he *says*, but of who he *is*. Metonymically, he is standing (or standing *in*) for the mystical/political organisation he embodies, and which is embodied in him, for his mission is singlehandedly to persuade Gethen to join the organisation, lacking even adequate proof to convince a sceptical population that he is indeed from another planet. Such a strategy is justified by Le Guin's constant weighting of the novel's value system in favour of the individual, for the decision to join the Ekumen must, in the end, be a personal, not a bureaucratic, one. Within her schema, such tactics undoubtedly work, for neither the politics and procession of Karhide nor the Machiavellian plotting of Orgoreyn open Gethen's way to the Ekumenical Age. Instead, the breakthrough comes when two individuals, the human

Ai and the Gethenian Estraven, cross the desolate wastes of the Gobrin Ice together, and through their mutual suffering learn to trust the alien Other.

In her own way, therefore, Le Guin is as preoccupied with the problems of dualism as Russ or Atwood, writing of her concern with 'the dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used', and expresses her hope that such a system 'might give way to what seems to me...a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity'.<sup>75</sup> Her most interesting analysis of dualism, especially in the context of a feminist criticism of her work, occurs in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, because it is here that the theme is explicitly gender-linked.

The records of a previous Ekumenical researcher on Gethen, Ong Tot Oppong, note that, in an androgynous culture, 'the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened or changed', for 'there is not division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive' (p.85). However, the narrative goes on to demonstrate that the elimination of sexual divisions does not automatically ensure a unified culture, for Gethen, like Anarres, is certainly not that. Instead, other systems such as politics, religion and tradition all perpetuate binary patterns of thought that, in other cultures, are based on the principle of gender difference. It is Genly Ai himself who emphasises Le Guin's evident belief that the tendency to dualism is deeply ingrained within individual thought, for his whole narrative is informed by his own, often unconscious, dualistic assumptions.

The inherent irony in Le Guin's adoption of this perspective has often been ignored by the novel's many critics, such as Russ and Sarah Lefanu, who tend to treat its presentation of Gethen entirely seriously. Lefanu, for example, finds fault with the fact that Ai, 'a trained anthropological observer', nevertheless

exhibits 'preconceptions of and prejudices towards women...[that] are positively prehistorical'.<sup>76</sup> However, Ai's failure to function as an impartial observer does not necessarily imply a lack of awareness in Le Guin herself, for the views of her narrator need not echo her own. Indeed, as Anne Cranny-Francis argues in an excellent analysis, Le Guin's adoption of a prejudiced male narrator is certainly no indication of her own failure as a female author. Instead, it actually 'constitutes a deconstruction...of the representation of women, of femininity, in a patriarchal society'.<sup>77</sup> Cranny-Francis claims that Le Guin deliberately manipulates Ai's unconscious expression of his sexist attitudes in order to demonstrate that 'the ideological mechanism by which the unequal position of women is maintained' is 'encoded into our thinking, into our language'.<sup>78</sup>

By throwing Ai's innate misogyny into ironic relief, Le Guin paves the way for the novel's didactic climax, when Ai finally breaks free of the boundaries of gender classification and sees Estraven, whom he has previously distrusted as 'womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit' (p.18), with an unprejudiced eye:

I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and has pretended not to see in him; that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality...I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship, to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man, (p.210)

This revelation is a personal victory for Ai, who not only comes to accept the woman in Estraven, but also, by implication, the validity of the female principle in general. On a metaphorical level, too, the nullification of Ai's previous misogynistic assumptions can be seen as an essential part of Le Guin's critique of the principle of dualism.

Nevertheless, as *The Left Hand of Darkness* also illustrates, Le Guin still

insists on the existence of a basic dualistic principle which lies beyond all ideological classifications, including questions of gender. Although Ai and Estraven eliminate most of the differences between them, they retain a belief that 'duality is essential...so long as there is *myself* and *the other*' (p.199). Accordingly, gender difference is treated in this novel as a cultural phenomenon to be eradicated along with all other artificial systems which work to divide individuals. When these are gone, however, a couple still remains, in accordance with Le Guin's belief in the unique value of each *person*; male, female or androgyne.

This dismissal of the importance of gender has been a major influence on Le Guin's fiction until recently, and has also constituted one of its major flaws. Sarah Lefanu argues that 'contradictions and unresolved tensions'<sup>79</sup> abound within Le Guin's work, and that these are caused, to a great extent, by her consistent refusal to foreground the issue of sexual difference. That this results in the unconscious reproduction of essentialist assumptions is amply illustrated by Le Guin's tendency to base her narrative around a central *male* character. She has repeatedly emphasised her commitment to the idea of character as a literary concept, maintaining that 'a book does not come to me as an idea, or a plot, or an event, or a society, or a message; it comes to me as a person'.<sup>80</sup> She specifically cites *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* as examples of this process; both narratives which clearly illustrate her habit of subordinating all other elements of the text to the demands of a central male figure. Le Guin has only ever produced the weakest of justifications for such a lapse - in an interview given in 1975 for the *Portland Scribe*, for example, she maintains that her preference for 'men viewpoint characters' cannot be avoided because 'you can't argue with your - whatever it is down inside you that writes the stuff. If you do argue with it you start writing propaganda, and



I don't want to do that'.<sup>21</sup>

Sarah Lefanu, however, argues that 'these male heroes with their crisis of identity, caught in the stranglehold of liberal individualism, act as a dead weight at the centre'<sup>22</sup> of novels such as *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 'push[ing] these works into the tradition of the bourgeois novel with its construction rather than deconstruction of the subject as hero'.<sup>23</sup> Far from being revolutionary explorations of the new, therefore, Le Guin's narratives obey all the conventions of classic realism, straightforwardly reproducing conventional liberal humanist assumptions which envisages the individual, in the words of Catherine Belsey, 'as a free, unified, autonomous subjectivity'.<sup>24</sup> The existence of the figure of the hero in her work thus automatically reinstates a patriarchal, subjective standard, for by his identification with a transcendent 'truth' he renders all other subject positions meaningless. The urge towards revolution that is also always present, though in a rather baffled form, within Le Guin's texts, is thus consistently curtailed and controlled.

Nowhere is this tendency more pronounced than in the Earthsea trilogy - *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, and *The Farthest Shore* - which particularly emphasise Le Guin's apparent unawareness of the patriarchal bias which is the inevitable consequence of the subordination of all other elements of the narrative to the demands of a male hero. The action of all three novels revolves around the pivotal figure of Ged, a wizard of exceptional magical ability whose career follows the familiar archetypal pattern of the quest.

In Earthsea, Le Guin has created a quasi-medieval culture with traditional sexist assumptions preserved intact, for the few female characters that appear in the Earthsea trilogy are locked into stereotyped roles that inevitably consign them to the periphery of the narrative. The trilogy does not contain a

single female character who poses any real challenge to the patriarchal order, for a woman's role in Earthsea is clearly to be a daughter, sister, wife or mother who keeps the home fires burning for her men. Only two female characters in the entire trilogy exist outside these classifications; Serret in *A Wizard of Earthsea* and Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan*. In both cases, their power is of a particularly circumscribed kind, for it is mostly derived from men: Serret's from her husband, Tenar's from the God-Kings who rule her country of Karg. As they are both ultimately defeated by Ged - Serret is killed, while Tenar is persuaded to join the patriarchal order of Earthsea - neither is permitted to keep her autonomy for long.

Episodes such as these emphasise Ged's ultimate role within the narrative as guardian of the patriarchal *status quo*, codified in the Earthsea novels as the principle of Balance or Equilibrium. The power of Earthsea's most accomplished magical practitioners, known as mages, is to influence the Equilibrium that keeps order in the world. Possessing this knowledge, they are also charged with its preservation, learning that 'you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good or evil will follow on the act' (p.48).<sup>25</sup> Women, who know 'nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which the true wizard knows and serves' (p.16) are thus explicitly excluded from participation in magic. Those who choose to become witches are dismissed as unimportant weavers of charms, a great part of which is 'mere rubbish and humbug' (p.17). True to the stereotype, they also have a tendency to do harm, brewing not only 'love potions', but 'other, uglier brews...to serve men's jealousy and hate' (p.17). Wavering between good and evil because of their ignorance concerning such higher truths as the Balance, witches embody a dubious and untrustworthy morality.

Such a schema has clear social and cultural implications, for it literally

keeps women in their 'rightful' place; the private sphere of the home. Women who practise magic do so informally, in villages that are too poor to afford the services of a more prestigious male practitioner, and the skills they possess are appropriate to the domestic crises with which they deal - love potions, curses and healing charms. The art of magery, on the other hand, is open to any man who has the ability, no matter what his original social status, and thus represents an unparalleled opportunity for self-advancement (exemplified by Ged, the former goat-herd who becomes the archmage of Roke). When practised by men, therefore, magic becomes a political and public activity, for 'wizards trained on Roke went commonly to cities or castles, to serve high lords who held them in high house' (p.77). If the adventures of Ged are anything to go by, mages spend much of their time saving the world, thus gaining fame and influence beyond anything to which women could possibly aspire.

However, Le Guin's latest novel, *Tehanu* (1990), continues the story of Earthsea from a dramatically transformed perspective, in which the figure of the male hero has finally been moved aside in order to make room for a radically altered perception of the subject. Moreover, Le Guin now conceives of the subject as specifically *female*, with all the multiple contradictions and uncertainties inherent in such an ideological stance. Any reader who hoped for an unproblematic continuation of the themes of the original trilogy would be disappointed, for the startling differences between *Tehanu* and the other narratives within the Earthsea series demonstrate just how much Le Guin's work has altered, both in tone and subject matter, since the publication of the last novel of the cycle, *The Farthest Shore*, in 1973.

With *Tehanu*, Le Guin effectively offers a feminist critical analysis of her earlier work, exposing the phallogentrism within her own creation. Although *Tehanu* follows directly on from the events of *The Farthest Shore*, the seventeen

years of real time that divides the two novels is clearly evident. *The Farthest Shore* ends with Ged, having lost his power in a titanic struggle to close the door between the worlds of the living and the dead, flying home to Gont on the back of the dragon Kalessin. As K.V. Bailey says, Ged has been transformed into 'a great Wordsworthian figure';<sup>26</sup> a prototypical Romantic poet or sage who retreats from the world in order to engage in a pantheistic communion with Nature. 'He is done with doing. He goes home' (p.477), says the Master Doorkeeper of Roke, thus symbolically closing the narrative circle formed by the trilogy and beginning the creation of a legend.

However, *Tehanu* deliberately breaks the symmetry of the circular narrative, not only by its own anomalous presence as a belated addition to a trilogy, but also by stripping away the layers of rumour and myth which obscured Ged's ultimate fate in *The Farthest Shore*. Far from being a romantic figure, he is portrayed as a deeply insecure man struggling to come to terms with the loss of his power, and ashamed to appear in public bereft of the talents which defined his former status. Le Guin therefore denies Ged his former central role as hero, for, lacking the power to control his world, he can no longer dictate the direction of the narrative. This opens the way for a refocussing of the text which echoes Ged's own entry into the far less exalted sphere of the personal and the powerless; an area which, in *Earthsea* at least, is the natural province of women.

The novel's tone echoes this switch in perspective, rejecting the lyrical, somewhat stylised, language of the original trilogy for a much more colloquial form of utterance. Ged's speech, for example, is hesitant and awkward, completely lacking the complicated poetic constructions of his former, rather proclamatory, style:

He got up then. His voice shook. "But don't you - can't you see - all that is over - is gone!"

She sat staring, trying to see his face.

"I have no power, nothing. I gave it - spent it - all I had. To close - So that - So it's done, done with." (p.75)<sup>27</sup>

Le Guin's adoption of such an informal and somewhat elliptical mode, however, adequately expresses the problematic nature of the questions the narrative is attempting to confront. Different viewpoints and perspectives mingle in a debate that dominates the novel, and to which there is no easy resolution. Action is almost entirely abandoned, and a plot which has the potential to become an old-style adventure is virtually ignored, since there is no longer anyone to take on the role of hero.

The most immediate difference in Le Guin's presentation of Earthsea, however, is the new value she assigns to women's voices. With Ged reduced to the status of a common man, other characters within the novel are now able to be heard, and foremost amongst them is the former priestess Tenar, now a farmer's widow and the mother of two grown-up children. Her adoption of Therru, a little girl who has been hideously disfigured when a group of men, her own father amongst them, raped and then attempted to murder her by pushing her into a fire, foregrounds the situation of the powerless in Earthsea. When Therru's father comes to Tenar's house to reclaim his daughter, Tenar's automatic reaction is to lock him and his gang out, for even though she knows the attempt to be futile, it is the only thing she knows how to do. Tenar's friend Lark fits the episode into a wider metaphorical context, noting that Tenar's reaction under threat dramatises the general situation of women in society, confined to their home by a sense of fear carefully and covertly perpetuated by a sexist system: 'It's like we're all our lives locking the doors. It's the house we live in' (p.180).

Such a questioning of the old order, however, is an indication that doors are now opening in Earthsea which will allow women to escape from the restrictions of sexist ideology. The text maintains a sense of impending revolution, for as Tenar seeks to construct a strategy which will give her a voice within what Le Guin now identifies as a specifically patriarchal discourse, the novel becomes an analysis of the relationship between women and power which stands Le Guin's former portrayal of Earthsea's culture on its head. Now seen from a female perspective, witches, for example, so easily glossed over and disregarded in former narratives, are transformed into paradigmatic, potentially subversive figures who challenge traditional male privileges and preserves.

In fact, as their true significance comes to light, witches lose most of their former sinister connotations, and are revealed to be, for the most part, extremely sensible women fulfilling a useful social function as 'midwives and healers with a few love potions, fertility charms, and potency spells on the side, and a good deal of quiet cynicism about them' (p.40). Only a few are 'fierce, bitter women, ready to do harm' (p.40), and it is clear that this has much to do with frustration at being denied any effective social status because 'they could not tell, as any prentice wizard could, the reason for what they did, and prate of the Balance and the Way of Power to justify their action or abstention' (p.40).

It is obvious that Le Guin does not see the attempt to bring women into a new relationship with power succeeding within the present system, for Ged's stubborn belief that 'No woman can be archmage. She'd unmake what she became in becoming it' (p.192) is no mere knee-jerk response to the issue of female power. As Simone de Beauvoir says, women are in the paradoxical situation of 'belong[ing] at one and the same time to the male world and to a sphere in which that world is challenged'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, although women participate in

and, in many cases, actively promote, phallogocentric discourses of power, they nonetheless, by the very fact of their gender, contain within themselves the means by which that discourse can be overthrown. The challenge women thus pose to the dominant order signifies that, although the system as it stands has no place for women, this does not mean that the system itself cannot be changed.

In *Tehanu* this is indicated by putting the future of magery itself under threat, for the Nine Masters of Roke are unable to find an archmage to replace the vacancy left by Ged. All they have to guide them is the ambiguous prediction 'A woman on Gont' - a prediction, Tenar realises, they fundamentally misinterpret. Blinkered by their patriarchal attitudes, they are convinced that 'this woman is to guide us, show us the way, somehow, to our archmage' (p.141), for they are totally unable to consider that they might be seeking a female possessing power in her own right.

In fact, the fulfilment of the mages' prediction is far from anything they could possibly have envisaged, for the 'woman on Gont' is finally revealed as Theru, whose symbolic connection with fire undergoes a transformation from the tragic to the triumphant. A link between women and dragons is established early on in the narrative, and maintained throughout. Folk memories of a time when humans and dragons were members of the same species still exist in Earthsea - stories are told of dragons who take the form of women, and songs sung of 'those among us who know they once were dragons' (p.21).

Tenar herself establishes an instant rapport with the dragon Kalessin when it returns Ged to Gont, experiencing a sense of kinship never achieved by the mages who surround their rare meetings with dragons with glamour and mystique. Her memories of Kalessin gain a strange and ambiguous meaning within both her waking and her sleeping life, the importance of which is only revealed when the dragon returns at the end of the novel, flying 'from the doorway of

the sky' (p.216) to reclaim Therru as one of the mythical dragon-people. The narrative does not elaborate on exactly what Therru represents for Earthsea, but her ability to speak 'the language of the dragons, the words of Making' (p.217) as her native tongue is of great significance. As the Language of the Making is the source of all magery, it clearly represents the final transference of the power of the wizards into the realm of the female, and thus the sowing of the seed that will become a radically new order. *Tehanu* is aptly subtitled 'The Last Book of Earthsea', for with the appearance of Therru, Earthsea as Le Guin has created it is no more.

In fact, the whole novel can be seen as a systematic movement away from the themes and techniques which characterised the earlier books in the sequence. While the original trilogy shares J.R.R. Tolkien's and C.S. Lewis' rather reactionary preoccupation with the heroic romance, *Tehanu* bears many more similarities to such feminist narratives as Marge Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time* and Sally M. Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, novels which privilege the day-to-day routines of the household and the farm over the doing of great deeds. To a great extent, Le Guin directs the attention of her readers away from the fantastic elements of the narrative, concentrating instead on familiar aspects of domestic life. Her rejection of the themes and techniques of estrangement are clearly evident in her presentation of Ged and Tenar, for in this novel the former mage and high priestess are now a goat-herd and a housewife. The familiar heroic pattern of the quest is also put aside in order to concentrate on the rhythms and routines of a rural community, in which the domestic tasks of weaving, cooking and gardening are of far more significance than magic. Perhaps the admittedly great differences between *Tehanu* and the other Earthsea novels are not so surprising when one considers the seventeen-year gap which separates their publication. However, it was written only five years after



*Always Coming Home*, a book which marks a great alteration in Le Guin's work, and one with which *Tehanu* has far more in common.

In many ways, *Always Coming Home* represents a logical culmination of Le Guin's anthropological concerns, for her work has always been characterised by convincing representations of imaginary cultures. However, this novel takes that interest a significant step further, for it consists mainly of a fictional anthropological study of what is clearly a Native American society. Susan Bassnett, in a recently-published study which places Le Guin's work in its cultural and political context, describes it as 'an image of the lost golden age, the pre-conquest world of North America as it might have been'.<sup>29</sup> It must be noted that this interest is not a new feature of Le Guin's work, for she has exhibited an awareness of her cultural roots in other novels - her description of Ged, for example, with his red-brown skin and hawk-like features, recalls the physical characteristics of the North American Indian, and the magic of *Earthsea* bears a certain resemblance to shamanism. What makes *Always Coming Home* different, however, is the way Le Guin has allowed this awareness to dictate the entire course of the narrative.

The novel takes the form of a series of studies of the many different aspects of the life of the Kesh, the people of the Valley. Their customs, their songs and stories, their clothing, even their diet, are all examined in detail as Le Guin elaborates on the nearest she has yet come to a utopia. Unlike the followers of Odo in *The Dispossessed*, the people of the Valley fulfil all her anarchistic ideals, living in a spirit of peaceful co-operation with nature and each other without the need to resort to centralised governmental institutions. Characteristically, Le Guin absorbs questions of gender into her concern with the greater whole; although as in *Tehanu*, she accords a great importance to women's voices within the narrative. The story line that occasionally surfaces

from within the jumble of interspersed texts which make up the novel is that of a woman, Stone Telling, who makes the kind of symbolic circular journey 'out of the Valley and ultimately back to it'<sup>90</sup> which Le Guin has formerly reserved for male heroes.

What ultimately places *Always Coming Home* and *Tehanu* apart from the rest of Le Guin's work is their sense of integration. *Always Coming Home* is an expression of her American heritage, and a work which, as Bassnett says, 'reveals her to be writing out of a tradition',<sup>91</sup> while *Tehanu* demonstrates a new attempt to incorporate shifting feminist perspectives into her fiction. *Tehanu* is a far from perfect novel, but its very awkwardness highlights Le Guin's increasing willingness to confront problematic issues such as gender, to which there are no easy resolutions, appearing to have left traditional heroes behind in order to explore both her cultural context, and her place as a woman within it.

For the first time, therefore, she is making an explicit connection between gender and oppression - an equation which brings her work much closer, in terms of ideological motivation, to that of Atwood and Wilhelm. In 'A Non-Euclidean View of California', which shares many similarities with 'The Uncertain Edge of Reality', Le Guin states her view that the relentless forward progression of technology has trampled the older, better, civilisations that lay in its path. An escape from technology is now imperative, and can only be achieved by turning away from 'the Father Figure we have set up before us'<sup>92</sup> and attempting a reintegration with our long-forgotten roots:

I have no idea who we will be or what it may be like on the other side, though I believe there are people there. They have always lived there. It's home. There are songs they sing there; one of the songs is called "Dancing on the edge of the world,"....

This is the New World! we will cry, bewildered but delighted. We have discovered the

New World!

Oh, no, Coyote will say, No, this is the old world,™

## CHAPTER TWO - NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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### CHAPTER THREE

Let us know that an ostensibly masculine, paternal identification, because it supports symbol and time, is necessary in order to have a voice in the chapter of politics and history. Let us achieve this identification in order to escape a smug polymorphism where it is so easy and comfortable for a woman to remain; and let us in this way gain entry to social practice,<sup>1</sup>

Can you take down the master's house with his tools? Well, you'd use any tools available, but your own way.<sup>2</sup>

So far in this thesis I have considered two possible approaches to the issue of patriarchy and genre relations. The first of these, exemplified in the work of Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood's earlier novels, regards the question of male/female relationships as a problematic one to which there is no easy answer, or possibly no answer at all. The other, evident in Atwood's later fiction, as well as in the writing of Ursula Le Guin and Kate Wilhelm, refuses to consider the situation of women under patriarchy apart from its wider social and cultural context. However, yet a third approach is possible, and it is one which forms a link between the work of two very different authors: Doris Lessing and Angela Carter.

These two authors have much in common with the other writers discussed in this thesis. Like Russ and Atwood, they use their fiction to examine the problems faced by women in a social setting created for and maintained by men: like Le Guin and Wilhelm they also see feminist concerns as relevant to the situation of all oppressed and exploited groups within a phallogentric society. However, while the work of Lessing and Carter thus constitutes a critique of patriarchy in terms comparable to those discussed in former chapters it is fundamentally different in one important aspect - it sees patriarchal structures



as being in some way necessary, even (in some situations) desirable. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is an issue they approach in very different ways and to very different ends.

Lessing's status as a feminist is problematic and difficult to assess, especially in the light of her statement that "'I'm impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters'".<sup>3</sup> Lessing's fiction demonstrates a concern with women's place in society, and her treatment of such issues is indeed comparable to that of other writers whose work is motivated by feminist convictions. However, her public ambivalence concerning women's issues as anything other than a literary theme inevitably compromises this element of her work. Even though feminist ideology is wide-ranging, encompassing a broad selection of opposing and complementary arguments, it might be reasonable to question whether the term 'feminist' can ever be applied to the informing philosophy behind Lessing's work.

Elayne Antler Rapping, discussing this topic, explains that Lessing has always 'considered herself a "humanist" rather than a "feminist" writer'<sup>4</sup>, and that she has spent an admirable career attempting to 'write seriously about the world of empires and revolutions without denying or compromising her femininity, to incorporate the feminine perspective into the mainstream of literary tradition'.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, notable that Rapping consistently uses the - ideologically speaking - rather questionable adjective 'feminine' throughout her argument, betraying androcentric assumptions which become explicit in her conclusion that women in Lessing's fiction 'emerge as the guardians and interpreters of the common life, the maintainers of its order, pattern and meaning; for it is women who provide the glue of compassion and continuity without which men could not function and children could not replace them'.<sup>6</sup> In a

less favourable light, it could be concluded that although Lessing may highlight the silent heroism of the housewife and mother, she does little to change her historic situation or offer her any alternative to her designated role in the background of society.

Angela Carter is a different case altogether. Whereas Lessing emphatically denies that her work is 'a trumpet for Women's Liberation',<sup>7</sup> Carter does not hesitate in acknowledging the influence of feminism upon both her life and her writing, saying 'The Women's Movement has been of immense importance to me personally and I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life'.<sup>8</sup> Carter claims that her feminist convictions were formed out of her experiences of the 1960's, which she describes as a time 'when, truly, it felt like Year One, that all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings'.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, 'the process of growing into feminism was part of the process of maturing'<sup>10</sup> - a statement assuming an easy, natural, relationship with the concept of feminism, both politically and intellectually, which Lessing, growing up a generation earlier, clearly does not share.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Carter's writing is easily susceptible to feminist interpretations. Indeed, although her work operates on a number of different levels, I believe that it is impossible to reach any real understanding of it unless the feminist viewpoint is taken into account. By Carter's own admission, she writes out of an awareness that, as a woman, her 'position...isn't the standard one: you have to bear that in mind when you are writing, you have to keep on defining the ground on which you're standing, because you are in fact setting yourself up in opposition to the generality'.<sup>11</sup>

However, the dazzling inventiveness of Carter's narratives conceal a

surprising sense of feminist moderation, for, unlike Joanna Russ, Carter does not regard men as the source of all society's problems, nor does she manipulate her art in order to exclude them. In fact, she abhors didactic literature, even in the cause of feminism, dismissing, for example, Marilyn French's novel *The Women's Room* as yet another manifestation of the bourgeois tradition in fiction, which seeks 'to teach people how to behave in social circles to which they think they might be able to aspire'.<sup>12</sup> She claims to have 'finished the book with every sympathy for the men: they seemed to have awful lives surrounded by such dreadful women'<sup>13</sup> - a statement which demonstrates (apart from her liking for making deliberately provocative statements) a characteristic willingness to take the male point of view into consideration. If, as Carter believes, 'everything is relative - you see the world differently from different places. You cannot make any statements which are universally true',<sup>14</sup> such moderation becomes an automatic assumption, for no existential concept of 'truth' exists upon which one can take an ideological stand, feminist or otherwise.

Whereas militant feminist writers such as Russ portray women as the martyrs of patriarchy, Carter dismisses such attitudes as meaningless mock-heroics. While 'the notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick', she writes in her ironically-entitled 'Polemical Preface' to *The Sadeian Woman*, 'the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick'.<sup>15</sup> On a feminist level, therefore, Carter is working towards an equality in which the female perspective is just as valid as the male - no more, and certainly no less. The dominant culture, in her opinion, exploits both genders, for the manipulation of women into false constructions of femininity - a concept which is central to her fiction - confines and degrades men as well. Indeed, she has claimed that such cultural myths 'effect [sic] men much more than women, because women know in their hearts that they're not true',<sup>16</sup> and

this conviction is echoed in her work, in which male characters often lag behind the female ones in the quest for cultural and personal redefinition.

Both Lessing and Carter echo Julia Kristeva's dissatisfaction with the concept of feminist rebellion. She argues that women rebel against the patrilineal, monotheistic order in one of two ways; either by means of overt confrontation or quiet withdrawal. The first involves the imitation of men, and thus formulates no real alternative to the existing system, while those who attempt the second are actually capitulating to their own marginalisation, unable to influence women's political or social situation. Kristeva thus seeks a compromise between these two extremes, believing that women cannot exclude themselves from participation in patriarchal discourse altogether, for that is their only chance to effect historical change. However, the voice with which they speak from within that order must be authentically female. This can be achieved, she says, by seeking out the points where phallogocentric discourse fails: 'by listening; by recognizing the unspoken...by emphasizing at each point whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, that which disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers'.<sup>17</sup>

Kristeva's opinions function as a standard against which Lessing and Carter's approach to the dominant order can be assessed. Like Kristeva, both authors see value in the patriarchal order; it is the purpose of this chapter to examine whether such an attitude can lead to the formulation of a truly subversive practice which manipulates the principles and practices of the Law of the Father for feminist ends, or whether it constitutes mere acquiescence in the phallogocentric *status quo*, thus changing nothing.

Although Doris Lessing is often discussed as though her science-fiction novels were merely an interesting diversion from a career that has been

primarily devoted to realistic literature, I hope that this discussion will prove that an element of the fantastic runs throughout much of her work, even those novels - such as *The Golden Notebook* and *The Summer Before The Dark* - which tend to be regarded as naturalistic. Moreover, it is by a feminist analysis that that this pervasive strand of fantasy surfaces, for throughout Lessing's fiction it is women who are particularly associated with the fantastic. In Elaine Showalter's words, 'she presents women as being more practised than men in interpreting inner space.'<sup>10</sup> Showalter presumably uses the term 'inner space' purposely here in order to recall Lessing's preface to her fantastic novel *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell*, which she categorises on the title page as 'Inner-space fiction. For there is never anywhere to go but in.'<sup>11</sup> For Lessing, the realm of inner-space is an alternative reality in which women are particularly at home (although, ironically, *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell* has a man as its central character), and which she explores through a variety of mainly female personae.

Women are in a better position than men to communicate the alternatives represented by inner space for a variety of reasons. In Lessing's analysis, women's sympathy with such alternative realities is not innate, but is determined by the peculiarities of their cultural situation. Her presentation of women's social position is very similar to Kate Wilhelm's, in that Lessing too shows women and their concerns as marginalised by patriarchy; pushed to the edge of the cultural mainstream and dismissed as insignificant. With so few alternatives open to them in the real world, it is not surprising that they turn to the realm of inner space in an attempt to find an identity denied to them elsewhere. In doing so, of course, such women lose whatever small cultural credibility they may have hitherto possessed, for in the eyes of their culture, they have overstepped the boundaries of sanity which the culture itself defines.

That insanity is predominantly a women's complaint is never in doubt in Doris Lessing's fiction. In *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell*, for example, she describes the inmates of the lunatic asylum in which Charles Watkins is confined as 'of any age, size, type and of both sexes. But the middle-age predominated, and particularly, middle-aged women' (p.226). This theme is treated more explicitly in *The Golden Notebook*, where Anna Wulf - herself well on the way to a nervous breakdown - is horrified to find that three afternoons' political canvassing reveals:

'Five lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had: self-doubt. A guilt because they were not happy. The phrase they all used: 'There must be something wrong with me.' Back in the campaign H.Q. I mentioned these women to the woman in charge for the afternoon. She said: 'Yes, wherever I go canvassing, I get the heeby-jeebies. This country's full of women going mad all by themselves.' (pp.175-6)

It is remarkable how many of Lessing's principal characters become (in the eyes of society, at least) insane at some point in their narration - Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*, Martha Quest in *The Four-Gated City*, Kate Brown in *The Summer Before The Dark*, even the rational Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments*, all succumb to the lure of inner-space, an area of the human mind which lies beyond rationality.

This element in Lessing's work echoes the preoccupation of such nineteenth-century women novelists as the Brontës, all of whom create female characters who are drawn to the brink of madness by the pressures placed upon them by a society which denies them the opportunity for self-fulfilment. In *Wuthering Heights*, for example, Cathy Earnshaw describes herself in her new role as wife to the conventional Edgar Linton as 'an exile, and outcast...from what had been my world' (p.107).<sup>20</sup> Her pregnancy only intensifies this sense of exile,

and her former manic energy is replaced by 'a dreamy and melancholy softness' in which her eyes 'appeared always to gaze beyond, and far beyond - you would have said out of this world' (p.133). The ultimate 'inner-space' image in Emily Brontë's novel is that of the grave, Cathy's place of maximum retreat from the socialising pressures placed upon her. Buried out upon the moor, she is no longer Mrs Edgar Linton, but an elemental spirit to whom cultural habits and distinctions no longer apply.

Throughout *Wuthering Heights*, the family is portrayed as a place of conflict within which the woman is often claimed as victim. Although Lessing is far less melodramatic in her analysis of the pressures endured by women who have no identity outside the domestic sphere, she is no less condemnatory. In Lessing's fiction, as Rapping notes, 'the very concept of madness with all its embarrassing paraphernalia: voices, visions, hysteria, delusion, is connected with and grows logically out of the feminine condition'.<sup>21</sup> As in Cathy Earnshaw/Linton's case, it is a retreat from the pressures of being female; a silent rebellion in a patriarchal society where women are denied a voice and are constantly torn between conflicting roles and demands.

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, for example, Kate Brown, 'looking back at a typical family scene' envisages herself 'tender and swollen like a goose's fattening liver, with the frightful pressure of four battling and expanding egos that were all in one way or another in conflict or confluence with herself, a focus, a balancing-point' (p.85).<sup>22</sup> The whole concept of the nuclear family is questioned in this novel, where it is presented as being maintained solely at the expense of the mother's sanity. Kate Brown recognises that her feelings of entrapment and desperation are far from unique, concluding that 'at the hub' of every conventional family is 'a mother, a woman, sparks flying off her in all directions as the psyches ground together like pebbles on a beach in a

storm...there like a grindstone at the heart of everything' (pp.86-7).

However, there is a small but significant group of women in Lessing's fiction who strongly resist all attempts to assimilate them into the symbolic order society represents. These girls stage far more than just an adolescent rebellion; by remaining in a pre-Oedipal stage of development, they attempt to avoid initiation into what Jacques Lacan terms 'the Law of the Father', described by Margaret Homans as 'simultaneously the prohibition of incest with the mother, the *non* of the father, and the sign system that depends on difference and on the absence of the referent, the *nom* of the father, that complex of signifying systems and laws that make up Western culture'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, they are refusing to enter a system that automatically marginalises them, and where they will forever be defined in terms of what they lack - the prime signifier, the phallus.

In *Shikasta*, for example, the narrative of the envoys is periodically interrupted by the diary of Rachel Sherban, recording the progress of her battle for the possession of her mind and body against the dominant social dialectic. She actively resists the onset of maturity, claiming in her diary that 'I don't want to grow up. I want to stay a little girl. I am writing this because I am supposed to be telling the truth. So that is the truth' (p.281).<sup>24</sup> Her avoidance of the development of an adult sexuality is made explicit in an episode where her Moroccan friends Shireen and Fatima - Shireen already married and the mother of five children; Fatima engaged at seventeen - dress Rachel up in Fatima's bridal outfit. Although it is all treated as a great joke, Rachel unaccountably feels enormous distress at the role she is being forced to play, feeling as if she is being dragged 'down into a terrible snare or trap' (p.303). When the two women have gone, she strews sand over the surface of the pool that is the only mirror she has, and, in rejecting her reflection, she



symbolically rejects a world where female identity is shaped by male desire. Rachel resists such adult roles throughout her narrative, and finally commits suicide in a final quixotic gesture of defiance against a symbolic order she believes would destroy her identity.

The heroine of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Emily, is another pre-adolescent rebel against the patriarchal order, who, although she is a more exotic figure than Rachel Sherban, recalls her nevertheless. The novel, set in an English city that is slowly reverting to a state of primitive tribalism, is Lessing's most Gothic narrative, and Emily, clan chieftainess and creator of fantastic disguises, is a heroine from myth and fairy-tale; Beauty with her cat-dog Beast, Hugo. Physically mature, but free of all the responsibilities that being a woman within a structured society entails, she is the inhabitant of a fantastic world where the processes of time are mysteriously suspended; and is thus able to create as many different roles for herself as her imagination can provide, without running the risk of becoming trapped inside any of them.

Unlike Rachel Sherban, who kills herself to escape it, Emily does in due time take on a woman's role and obligations, setting up home with her lover Gerald. All this is watched and commented on in a typically ambivalent manner by the novel's narrator, who, as a woman brought up in the twentieth-century, does not approve of what Emily has become. 'The trouble was, she did love Gerald; and this longing for him, for his attention and his notice, the need to be the one who sustained and comforted him...this need drained her of the initiative she would need to be the leader of a commune. She wanted no more than to be the leader of the commune's women' (pp.98-9).<sup>25</sup>

However, Emily's dream is eventually revealed to be just another adolescent illusion, for her real initiation into womanhood occurs in a scene towards the end of the novel. Emily, having found out that Gerald, far from being the

faithful lover of her dreams, is having affairs with several girls in the commune, gives vent to her despair in a fit of hysteria, and in so doing makes the final transition from archetypal adolescent to what the Survivor describes as 'eternal woman at her task of weeping' (p.151). Such an outburst is not a prelude to action: instead it is a wordless cry of rage against a society in which women will always, inevitably, have cause to grieve. 'They are tears that know better than to demand justice, they have learned too much....it is not the pain in a woman's crying that is the point, no, it is the finality of the acceptance of a wrong' (p.151). Emily's weeping echoes that of her mother that the Survivor has heard issuing from the alternative world behind her living-room wall; it is 'the woman's plaint' (p.131), universal and timeless.

It is interesting to compare Lessing's treatment of this theme with Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a novel which shares many similarities with *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, for its principal character alternates, like Emily, between two alternative worlds. Also, however, Piercy echoes Lessing in her concern regarding the inevitability of female role in the symbolic order. Connie Ramos, a Mexican-American woman confined within a mental institution for attacking her niece's brutal pimp, recalls with conscious irony her rebellious assertion to her mother that "'I won't grow up like you....To suffer and serve. Never to live my own life'". Her mother's fatalistic response that "'You'll do what women do, You'll pay your debt to your family for your blood'" (p.46)<sup>26</sup> proves to be tragically correct, for Connie does indeed inherit her legacy of poverty, pregnancy and unhappy relationships. Although Connie eventually appears to escape her fate by being transported into a utopian future, the narrative's avoidance of a definite resolution leaves open the depressing possibility that women's only future may indeed be the one of blood and self-sacrifice envisaged by Connie's mother. In that case, Connie's 'escape' is no more than a desperate

delusion which draws her deeper into the endless cycle of female defeat.

However, *Woman on the Edge of Time* at least holds out the possibility of a society in which women are no longer automatically condemned to a life of frustrated powerlessness, while *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in allowing the 'woman's plaint' to echo freely between the two worlds in the novel, portrays it as inescapable. Emily's entry into the patriarchal order in the 'real' world is echoed symbolically in the world behind the wall, where the Survivor watches as Emily takes part in a grotesque parody of her earlier, adolescent play-acting. On the other side of the mirror, however, she is no longer in control of the roles she enacts, for like other female characters in Lessing's fiction, she has become fixed within a narcissistic reproduction of male desire. The Survivor finds Emily standing in front of a mirror 'turning her head this way and that before the glass...her lips held apart for fantasy kisses', wearing a scarlet dress that 'embodied the fantasies of a certain kind of man who, dressing a woman thus, made her a doll, ridiculous, both provocative and helpless; disarmed her, made her something to hate, to pity, to fear - a grotesque' (p.165).

This scene is the culmination of Emily's development from childhood to womanhood, all of which has been witnessed by the Survivor from the other side of the wall. She realises that 'that horrible mirror-scene, with its implications of perversity, was the end' (p.166), marking the final phase of her gradual transition from being a mere observer of this alternative world to becoming a participant within it. Emily's dilemma is finally resolved when, with the Survivor, Gerald, and a group of children, she steps 'out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether' (p.189), where, presumably, the state of women is much improved. This, however, is only an assumption, for Lessing refuses to give us any absolute assurance that this is so by creating a new world that cannot be described in any terms that we would understand.

In fact, the ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* illustrates very well the fundamental problems that lie at the heart of any feminist critique of Lessing's work. Having implicitly addressed herself to the problem women face within a patriarchal society through the character of Emily, a character comparable to the creations of other feminist writers such as Angela Carter, Lessing then neatly evades the issues she has raised by transporting her into an alternative mode of existence where her audience cannot follow. While Lessing obviously intends the effect of the narrative shift to be one of expansion and an opening out of endless impossibilities, the reader experiences the effect of (literally) coming up against a brick wall, behind which lie the unknowable and the indescribable. Although the ending of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is similarly ambiguous, the alternative society to which Connie may have escaped is at least a fully realised and recognisable one which carries on the feminist debate initiated in the 'real' world of the novel. Lessing's utopia, however, is far from convincing, for at a point at which the questions of the critic are only just beginning, Lessing's questioning has ended, assuming there to be no need for questions in Nirvana.

The feminist dilemma with regard to Lessing is therefore clear. While her themes, characters, even her narrative methods, promise to initiate an analysis of patriarchal society, she ultimately withdraws; either back into the mainstream, or into an unimaginable utopian setting where everything miraculously turns out right for everybody. This consistent refusal to face the implications of the issues she raises is, however, understandable, although not justifiable, when one considers Lessing's frequently-expressed view that the individual is always, whether she acknowledges it or not, part of a greater whole. In her introduction to the third of the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series, *The Sirian Experiments*, she says:

We see ourselves as autonomous creatures, our minds our own, our beliefs freely chosen, our ideas individual and unique...with billions and billions of us on this planet, we are still prepared to believe that each of us is unique, or that if all the others are mere dots in a swarm, than at least *I* am this self-determined thing, my mind my own. Very odd this is, and it seems to me odder and odder. How do we get this notion of ourselves? (p.11)<sup>27</sup>

It seems to me that it would be very hard, in the light of this statement, for Lessing totally to espouse any kind of feminist political initiative. Where she subordinates individuality totally to the group, feminist theory generally emphasises the value of individual experience, constituting from it a group mind that does not deny its diversity. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, writes that 'feminist thought is not monolithic; every woman who struggles has her own reasons, her own perspective, her particular experience, and she offers them to us in her own way'.<sup>28</sup> A characteristic of much feminist writing is its subjectivity, whereby the author rejects intellectual abstractions and forms instead an ideology based on personal experience. For example, in *Silences* by Tillie Olsen, and Adrienne Rich's collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, both authors consistently relate the position of the women writer in society to their own situation.

Such an attitude is antithetical to that consistently upheld by Lessing, who through her work stresses the value of objectivity and impersonality. Women who rebel, who strive to do anything that separates them from the group, are in the end either reabsorbed into it (Kate Brown and Emily) or excluded completely (Rachel Sherban). The only exception is to be found in *The Four-Gated City*, where Martha Quest and Lynda Coldridge discover new identities within a transformed society that grows up after a worldwide catastrophe. Even that, however, based as it is upon the concept of telepathy, pays tribute to the power of the group mind.

Nowhere is this attitude of Lessing's more obvious than in the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series, whose science-fiction structure enables her to retreat to a point of maximum objectivity, as she explains in her introduction to *Shikasta*:

As I wrote I was invaded with ideas for other books, other stories, and the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a large scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes. It was clear I had made - or found - a new world for myself, a realm where the petty fates of planets, let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution expressed in the rivalries and interactions of great galactic Empires.

Her central premise is simple - Earth (Shikasta) is merely one of many planets under the management of the Canopeans, a race of beings far above humanity on the evolutionary scale. The first book in the series, *Shikasta*, is a sweeping overview of Earth's history from the Canopean perspective, which is so broad that it causes all human differences to fade into insignificance. As Johor, the novel's main narrator, comments, 'the long view of planetary maintenance and development does not need, nor can depend upon, the sympathies, the empathies of the near, the partial views' (p.216).

The novel's structure backs up this view. Like *The Golden Notebook* it is an assemblage of parts, but, unlike Anna Wulf's, the informing consciousness behind it is very definitely not a divided one. The Canopean envoy Johor's reports of his Shikastan missions are mingled with a variety of other narrative voices provided by diaries, letters, and extracts from Canopean textbooks, but it is his narrative that holds them all together, and nowhere does Lessing suggest that he is anything less than a trustworthy interpreter of events - even though Canopeans are capable of making mistakes. Indeed, in a sense, *Shikasta* is the story of a Canopean salvage operation, as the planet was originally intended to function as a harmonious whole, but has slipped out of the 'Lock' that provided

it with metaphysical sustenance from Canopus and is now therefore in decline. However, the reader's inclination is to regard them as near to omniscient and omnipotent as makes no difference.

Although presented as essentially benevolent, themselves subject to the demands of their central tenet that the individual will be subordinated to the demands of the greater whole (or 'Necessity'), the Canopeans tend to emerge from the Shikasta series as alarmingly totalitarian rulers, who, in the words of Lorna Sage, 'celebrate heterogeneity, and render it permanently provisional'.<sup>29</sup> Unlike its rival, Shammat, Canopus does not physically compel its subjects to obey, but nevertheless, its inexorable logic does not invite argument - obey the Necessity and live; disobey, and die. Lessing tries very hard to emphasise that 'this submission...was not serfdom or slavery' (p.41), but fails to be convincing, for her Canopeans are so far removed from an identifiable human perspective that their certainty cannot help but sound like smug self-satisfaction. Far from 're-cognizing' her concept of reality after viewing society from a Canopean perspective, the reader is inclined to retreat from the Orwellian totalitarianism implicit in the *Canopus* series: succinctly described by Lorna Sage as 'claustrophobia in space'.<sup>30</sup>

This is a feeling that soon becomes familiar to anyone who tries to find a feminist approach to Lessing's science fiction, for, intentionally or not, Canopean rule comes across as entirely patriarchal. Although Canopeans are technically above the divisions of gender, Lessing consistently refers to them by the masculine pronoun, reinforced by the fact that the great majority of envoys visit Shikasta as human males. The only exception is Nasar, in *The Sirian Experiments*, who rescues Ambien II from a South American temple in his incarnation as a priestess. *The Sirian Experiments*, however, is the third in the *Canopus* sequence, by which time the Canopean's male identity has already become

firmly established in the reader's mind. This is echoed in Ambien II's narration - she recognises Nasar in spite of his outward form, and has difficulty reconciling the dichotomy:

*She...she...I was making myself use this word, as I saw a dim light begin to fill the passages we fled along, and as I saw her, Rhodia, this strong, tall, handsome female...I had to say she, think she - yet in my half-trance or sleep, in the almost complete dark of the deep earth, I had been able to feel only Nasar, his presence had been there around me. (pp.213-4).*

Nasar only looks female, while retaining the essential quality of his maleness, and the overall effect is consequently rather unsettling and slightly comical, as if he has disguised himself in drag. The *Canopus* series as a whole contains only two major figures who are genuinely female - Al.Ith and Ambien II, both of whom are clearly subordinate to the benevolent patriarchal authority of Canopus.

In a review of *Shikasta*, Ursula Le Guin highlights the strongly didactic element in Lessing's science fiction, commenting that 'at times Canopus in Argos sounds strangely like a pulpit in Geneva'. She points out that this inevitably undermines Lessing's efforts to achieve a truly universal perspective by 'subverting the estrangement that is the goal of the technique, and so disastrously shrinking, instead of expanding, the universe'.<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that Le Guin criticises Lessing's extreme didacticism so strongly, for she abhors it even in her own work. Although Canopus and Le Guin's creation, the Ekumen, are similar in many ways, for both exist to embody their authors' social and ideological ideals, the motivation behind them is very different indeed. While the Ekumen, like Canopus, often comes across as patriarchal and absolutist, it nevertheless attempts to assert the value of the individual, for it is upon the good of the individual that the good of the whole finally rests.



No such harmony between the one and the many exists in Lessing's work, which exhibits an urge to eliminate dualism altogether by absorbing it totally within a group dialectic. As Moira Monteith comments, 'she seems to desire to return to a pre-symbolic state where there is no differentiation between oneself and the other. She repeats frequently that individualism is bad and the good of the whole is what is most desirable'.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Le Guin, Lessing never apologises for the didactic content of her fiction, for it is obvious that she is not ashamed of her tendency to propagandise. Even Katherine Fishburn, in a generally complimentary critique of Lessing's work, has to admit that

she is always omnipresent in her texts - I doubt she could efface herself from them even if she really wanted to. What she has to say is simply too important to her to risk being misunderstood. She may have faith that we can change as a species (else why all these books urging us on?) but she does not have faith that we can do it without her - or at least others like her.<sup>23</sup>

This shameless use of didacticism, which is particularly noticeable in the Canopus novels, runs counter to all Lessing's attempts to achieve a radical perspective. Her universe may have pretensions towards utopia, but, in the final analysis, it shrinks (to borrow Le Guin's term) humanity in general, and women in particular, back into the familiar, limited roles assigned to them by a patriarchal system. Instead of progressing forward towards a new and exciting future, therefore, Lessing's vision takes the reader back to somewhere we have all been before - the world of childhood. In the Canopean novels, humanity as a whole is presented as immature, desperately in need of adult government, and the presence of the benevolent, male, Canopeans in Lessing's fiction, gently but firmly guiding humanity in accordance with their own superior vision, foregrounds her tendency to fall back onto standard patriarchal models. Nowhere does she exhibit an awareness of the ironic similarity between Canopus and the

attitude of the male-dominated cultural structures she attempted to criticise in such earlier novels as *The Summer Before the Dark* and *The Golden Notebook*, where individuals are forced into futile, self-destructive action against a society in which their powerlessness is preordained.

Lessing's narratives, for all their pretensions towards radicalism, merely recreate a model of the culture from which they have sprung, tending to fix the subject within a perpetually childlike, subordinate, role. They therefore form an interesting contrast with the narratives created by Angela Carter, which drive in precisely the opposite direction - outwards. Childhood is a motif which also recurs in Carter's work, but unlike Lessing she consciously manipulates the limitations inherent in such a perspective, using it as a starting point for a subversive reconstruction of the subject. As such, her narratives constitute a definite rejection of patriarchal authority and test the validity of many of its institutions. Carter's attitude towards this issue is intriguing and often complicated, for, due to the moderation inherent in her feminist stance, her condemnation is not absolute. Indeed, she appears to find a place for the patriarchal principle in her feminist praxis; albeit one carefully defined and clearly delimited.

Carter's novels are surreal and often disturbing, presented as originating from the psychic tensions caused by the changing interactions between an individual, painfully evolving, ego, and the corporal cultural consciousness with which it is intimately linked. While Lessing's fiction rejects individuality and the presentation of character in favour of an impersonal consideration of the human species as a whole, Carter's is concerned with the exploration of the progress of the ego of a primary character, who is both a personality in his or her own right and a carrier of ideology. Progress is metaphysical as well as

material, working towards an objective which, in Carter's schema, comes with the discovery of a discourse which has space for the autonomous self. At the beginning of *The Passion of New Eve*, for example, Evelyn states his intention to 'go to the desert...there to find, chimera of chimeras, there, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks of the untenanted part of the world, I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself' (p.38).<sup>24</sup>

Carter's narratives, therefore, are organised around the central metaphor of personal growth and development, and the figure of the father is central to such a scheme. Not surprisingly, some feminist critics have expressed misgivings concerning her tendency to reproduce such patriarchal institutions as the father/daughter relationship seemingly unchanged, for no reader can fail to recognise the fact that the female characters in Carter's fiction are frequently characterised by their adoration of the patriarchal figure.

An extreme example of this is seen in the novel *Heroes and Villains*, whose heroine, the emotionless and often vicious Marianne, is totally devoted to her father. Loving him 'so much she only wished she could be sure he was really there' (p.10),<sup>25</sup> she denies the advent of her sexual maturity and refuses to marry in order to remain in the parental home. After her father's death she destroys everything he valued, including her own beauty, such as it is: 'She found a pair of scissors and chopped off all her long, fair hair so she looked like a demented boy. She had no idea why she cropped her head; the impulse seized her. It made her very ugly and she examined her ugliness in mirrors with a violent pleasure' (p.15).

Although Carter portrays Marianne as ignorant of her true motivations, the reader is able to conclude that she is de-sexing herself now that the only object of her subconscious desire has gone, ensuring that no other man will find her attractive. Her devotion reaches unhealthy proportions, for her father

haunts her even when she has lost her virginity and become another man's wife. The barbarian Jewel is not, at first, desirable for himself, but is only an imperfect father-substitute. His sexual advances to Marianne on their wedding night, for example, only recall memories of her father and his 'gentle voice speaking of happenings between men and women that, in spite of her affection, she could not associate with happenings between the hairless old man and her mother's ghost' (p.83).

In spite of the fact that the presence of the patriarchal figure at the centre of the narrative must make many feminist readers distinctly uneasy, he is impossible to ignore. However, the figure of the father becomes distinctly less problematic when considered from the point of view of his origin in the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In tracing the development of the individual unconscious, Lacan theorises that the infant begins its life in the realm of the Imaginary which, as Toril Moi explains, 'corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child believes itself to be a part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world. In the Imaginary there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence'.<sup>36</sup> It is the Law of the Father which eventually intervenes, destroying the child's unitary self-image and identification with the mother, and forcing it to assume a gendered identity within the Symbolic order. According to Lacan, the desire to regain that sense of control experienced within the Imaginary order remains with the subject, becoming, in the words of Chris Weedon, 'the primary motivating force of the psyche'.<sup>37</sup>

*The Magic Toyshop*, for example, is a Gothic elaboration on Lacanian theory to which the figure of the father remains crucial. Melanie, the heroine of the novel, begins the narrative surrounded by images that signify her position within the childhood realm of the Imaginary, of which the most important is her

bedroom mirror. Like Emily in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, she spends hours in contemplation of her reflected image; an action which itself reflects the infant's initiation into Lacan's Imaginary order. He theorises that the infant's recognition of its own reflection not only causes it to perceive itself as a split subject for the first time, but gives it the comforting illusion that it can control that alienated part of its self.

Carter seizes on this ability of the mirror to perpetuate deceptive images of the self, and the limitless possibilities it presents becomes a metaphor for the means by which the fantastic narrative itself is generated. Rosemary Jackson comments that 'it is remarkable how many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes',<sup>28</sup> and describes the mirror as functioning 'as a metaphor for the production of other selves', establishing 'different space where our notions of self undergo radical change'.<sup>29</sup> Carter exploits to the full the potential inherent in this metaphor, for her heroes and heroines live on the boundaries between the imaginary and the symbolic, able to create roles for themselves as objects of desire, but not yet entrapped within them. Melanie poses before her mirror pretending to be the model for a variety of famous artists, such as Toulouse Lautrec or the Pre-Raphaelites, trying on a variety of different, often rather dubious, identities. Although she imagines her self-imposed iconographic roles as whore and virgin being sanctioned by the gaze of the male artist, it is nevertheless still a game over which she has full control, and does not yet pose a genuine threat to her autonomy.

Melanie's favourite role, however, is that of a bride, marriage being the rite that patriarchal society decrees marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood, confirming the entry of the female into the Symbolic order. As part of this narcissistic fantasy, she tries on her mother's carefully-preserved wedding dress, which she eventually tears while attempting to climb an apple

tree in moonlight. It is an act of great significance, since it is the first hint that Melanie is on the verge of leaving the Imaginary order. Trying on the dress is an attempt to cover up the beginning of a sense of lack as Melanie, by wearing her mother's clothes, endeavours to prevent the slow but inevitable splitting up of a psyche which has hitherto wholly identified itself with its maternal origins. While Marianne's devotion is wholly for her father, Carter foregrounds Melanie's primary attachment to her mother, who appears in Melanie's memories as a dynamic and glamorous figure who appears to overshadow her husband. Shown in her wedding photograph 'explod[ing]...in a pyrotechnic display of satin and lace', her mother's 'flying hems' (p.11)<sup>40</sup> virtually obscure Melanie's father. Melanie remembers him as a shadowy figure who 'was always the same; tweed and tobacco, nothing but tweed and tobacco and type-writer ribbon' (p.10).

The reduction of the father figure to a virtual cypher mutes, but does not obliterate, the presence of his patriarchal authority within the text. Ironically, the wedding-dress episode emphasises this, for the obviously incestuous undertones attached to Melanie's role-playing leaves it accessible to the alternative reading that it demonstrates Melanie to be in a state of Oedipal crisis. In other words, rather than indicating the urge to regain the pre-Oedipal state of complete identification with the mother, it can signify an attempt to usurp her place in the affections of the father. Indeed, Melanie's own explicit fears that tree-climbing might abort 'the slowly-ripening embryo of Melanie-grown-up inside herself' and strand her forever 'in childhood, a crop-haired tomboy' (p.20) would support this assumption. Her guilt when she hears of her parent's death in an air crash also underlines the Oedipal interpretation, for in some obscure way she feels that she is to blame for the disaster "'because I wore her dress. If I hadn't spoiled her dress, everything would be alright. Oh,

Mummy!" (p.24). As a 'penance', and in an attempt to stifle any possibility of further maturity, Melanie becomes, on the surface at least, a child once again, 'wearing her hair in stiff plaits, in the manner of a squaw' (p.28).

However, the linked images of the wedding dress and the apple tree signify Melanie's inevitable fall from Eden and her exclusion from the paradisaical garden of her childhood, an event which is echoed on the literal level by the move to London. Her benevolent father is replaced by the tyrannical figure of Uncle Philip, who functions as the representative of the phallic Law of the Father which breaks up the primal mother/child relationship in order to integrate the child into the patriarchal Symbolic order. By thus separating the figure of the natural father from the Law of the Father, Carter is making an important distinction between culture and biology. The natural father, who presides over the world of childhood and is the first object of his daughter's devotion, appears to be acceptable to Carter, although there are strict limitations to that acceptability. It is the *unnatural* father that Carter challenges, symbol of the Symbolic order which seeks to extend the authority of the patriarch beyond what she regards as its natural boundaries, retarding the development of the female identity in order to manipulate it into a model of the fulfilment of masculine desire. This distinction is echoed in Lacanian theory where, as Claire Kahane says:

Just as Lacan distinguishes between the penis and biological organ and the phallus as signifier, he distinguishes between the actual father, who is relatively insignificant, and the paternal metaphor, the name of the Father in the Symbolic order represented by language. Lacan's father is thus the *figure* of a function that breaks the Imaginary relation between self and other-as-image-of-self.<sup>41</sup>

While the status of Melanie's natural father in her life remains unquestioned, Uncle Philip, corresponding to Virginia Woolf's definition of the

patriarch as one 'who has to conquer, who has to rule,...feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself',<sup>42</sup> usurps a parental authority to which he is not entitled. In this way, he becomes the means by which Carter can carry out a critical deconstruction of Lacan's theories on feminist grounds, exposing the innate patriarchal bias in his ideas. Lacan identifies the Symbolic order with the phallus, which he defines as a transcendental signifier which establishes the principle of sexual difference and signifies the sense of lack the infant experiences on being separated from the object of its desire. He emphasises that the phallus cannot be equated with the penis, for men and women share an equal inability to exert control over the Symbolic order. Nevertheless, as Chris Weedon points out, Lacan thus 'employs an anatomically grounded elision between the phallus and the penis which implies the necessary patriarchal organization of desire and sexuality'. This leads to Weedon's logical conclusion that 'men, by virtue of their penis, can aspire to a position of power and control within the symbolic order. Women, on the other hand, have no position in the symbolic order, except in relation to men'.<sup>43</sup>

Carter's deconstruction of family relationships in *The Magic Toyshop* supports Weedon's criticism of the patriarchal bias in the Symbolic order. In this context, Uncle Philip's profession as a toy-maker is ironically apt, for he blatantly exercises his patriarchal authority in order to make the other members of the household no more than puppets who will meekly consent to dance to his tune. Aunt Margaret's brother Finn warns Melanie that any member of the family who refuses to work for Uncle Philip will be turned out on the streets to starve. Under the threat of another fall from grace, Melanie meekly accedes to Uncle Philip's tyrannical demands. She is instructed 'not to speak until you're spoken to' because Uncle Philip (whose wife, appropriately enough, is dumb) 'likes silent women' (p.63), and discovers that she cannot wear trousers because



they would make her 'a walking affront to him' (p.62).

Under his pervasive authority, Melanie soon begins to feel herself to be 'a wind-up...doll, clicking through its programmed movements. Uncle Philip might have made her over, already. She was without volition of her own' (p.76). This is confirmed on a literal level when Uncle Philip commands her to become a life-sized puppet in order to participate in a performance of Leda and the Swan. The episode is a strange mixture of the laughable and the horrific - the swan itself is not 'the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings', but is nothing more than 'an egg-shaped sphere of plywood painted white and coated with glued-on feathers' (p.165). However, under the control of Uncle Philip, in whose hands the swan is an instrument of displaced incestuous desires, the performance becomes a frightening and humiliating experience for Melanie, who is forcibly 'mounted' (p.167) by the puppet. This distorted replay of her earlier fantasies emphasises that the infinite possibilities of the Imaginary have disappeared from Melanie's life and been replaced with the impossibility of ever returning to her childhood home. She smashed her mirror when her parents died, and now cannot escape from the Law of the Father which transforms her former games into horrible reality.

Melanie's experiences make it apparent that Carter regards the Symbolic order as a system which forces women into iconographic roles as the objects of male desire and possession: the subversive significance of the photograph on Melanie's mother's dressing-table. While Lacan theorises that the Symbolic order is organised around the urge to satisfy desire for the lost mother - a process which is linked to the search for meaning which generates language - Carter indicates that women become figuratively identified with that obsession. By forcing women into the paradoxical situation of being the objects of both repression and desire, the Law of the Father creates the illusion that desire can be captured and controlled.

Throughout her fiction, Carter analyses this process through the metaphor of the mirror, a symbol which is susceptible to a number of contradictory interpretations. While it once indicated for Melanie the freedom of the Imaginary order, metamorphosed into the voyeuristic gaze of Uncle Philip it now represents entrapment, foregrounding the process whereby women gain a gendered identity within the patriarchal Symbolic order by being fixed within culturally-approved stereotypes of femininity. Figuratively emphasising the alienation of the female personality from her culturally-generated feminine façade, mirrors in this context are nearly always multiple, and the images thus produced often further distanced from the self by being filtered through the medium of the approving male gaze. The female ego thus loses her former control over her reflected image, and is rendered unable to resist the carrying out of an iconographical process which fragments her self beyond any hope of recovery.

*The Passion of New Eve*, for example, is a novel which is almost wholly concerned with an analysis of the artificial construction of the feminine subject, and the linked images of the mirror and the male gaze are central to this agenda. Their first appearance in the novel is heavily ironic, thus revealing their potential as subversive symbols. Evelyn, before his transformation into the female Eve, watches his mistress dress before a mirror, lying 'on the bed like a pasha, smoking, watching...the transformation of the grubby little bud who slumbered all day in her filth; she was a night-blooming flower' (p.28). It is a process in which, from his male perspective, he finds much to admire, for he regards it as granting Lillah 'an absent-minded dignity that she only acquired through the mirror; the mirror bestowed a grace upon her, now she was her own mistress' (p.29). In fact, Lillah is *his* mistress, not her own, and she is dressing for her night job in a sex show; ironies of which Evelyn is seemingly unaware. Indeed, his presence, in the role of what John

Berger calls 'the spectator-owner',<sup>44</sup> only confirms her in her function as the surveyed object of masculine desire.

Evelyn eventually gets his comeuppance, however, after his transformation into Eve, when the misogynistic tyrant Zero forces her into assuming the same fetishistic role s/he was once so happy to assign to Leilah: 'I was the worst dancer in the world, as you can imagine, and I dreaded these occasions for I would remember watching Leilah watch herself in the mirror and now I sensed all the lure of that narcissic loss of being, when the face leaks into the looking-glass like water into sand' (p.103). Later, Eve, dressed as a man, is forcibly married to the movie star Tristessa, herself a man dressed as a woman, and Carter again brings the images of the mirror and the male gaze into play, clearly revelling in the subsequent convolutions of the narrative as it struggles adequately to contain and express such a confusion of subject positions:

[Zero] stepped back to look at me. I saw him step back and I saw his reflection in the mirror step back and the reflection in the mirror step back and the reflection of that reflection in another mirror stepped back; an entire audience composed of Zero applauded the transformation that an endless sequence of reflections showed me was a double drag. This young buck, this Baudelairean dandy so elegant and trim in his evening clothes - it seemed, at first glance, I had become myself again in the inverted world of the mirrors, But this masquerade was no more than skin deep. Under the mask of maleness I wore another mask of femaleness but a mask that now I never would be able to remove, no matter how hard I tried, although I was a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again, like Rosalind in Elizabethan Arden. (p.132)

Beneath the self-reflexive structure, in which the narrative consciously appreciates its own efforts to incorporate the shifting perspectives of endlessly metamorphosising images of the self, lies Carter's characteristically subversive sense of the serio-comic. She is at once parodying and perpetuating

a carnivalesque narrative structure which cloaks rebellion in laughter, as Julia Kristeva describes:

A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of the *the author* emerges an anonymity that creates and sees itself create as self and other, as man and mask.<sup>45</sup>

Kristeva carries out her analysis of this mode of discourse using terms which are strikingly similar to the passage from Carter quoted above, and which accurately sums up the didactic intentions behind Carter's circuitous linguistic constructions. In creating a dialogical text in the Bakhtinian mode,<sup>46</sup> in which no subject position is fixed, and the concept of gender itself is fluid and endlessly fluctuating, Carter is exposing the grotesque artificiality of such constructions. Male and female-ness are never automatically-assumed 'givens' in her fiction, where in imitation of Virginia Woolf's Orlando, who oscillates between gender-identities so frequently it becomes 'difficult to say and cannot...be decided' whether s/he is 'most man or woman' (p.124),<sup>47</sup> ambiguously-gendered figures such as Tristessa and Eve/lyn cross and re-cross boundaries the patriarchal order assumes to be unsurmountable.

Such larger-than-life characters, however, only amplify a common experience, for, as Carter's narrative shows, the gaps and silences within the dominant discourse force all women into adopting contradictory responses to it. When Lillah merges her gaze with Evelyn's in order to study her reflection in the mirror from a masculine perspective, she is unknowingly embodying a paradox which challenges patriarchal assumptions concerning gender even as she endeavours to perpetuate them. As John Berger says, 'men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she

will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it'.<sup>48</sup> To thus incorporate, in Carter's words, 'an element of the male impersonator'<sup>49</sup> into the female self is an action which in itself undermines the concept of a fixed gender-identity.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe, the notion of woman as male impersonator is one which regularly recurs in women's modernist writing, where it functions as an image of both transgression and liberation. While male modernism, according to Gilbert and Gubar, 'opposed false costumes....since the ultimate reality was in their view the truth of gender',<sup>50</sup> feminist modernists such as Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall manipulated the image of the transvestite in order to suggest 'that no one, male or female, can or should be confined to a uni-form, a single form or self'.<sup>51</sup> Although Carter's fiction contains a significant number of female cross-dressers, such as Albertina in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve*, for her all women ultimately possess the potential to subvert the images formed for them out of the male gaze, by the very fact of their participation within them. The situation of Eve/Evelyn is only common female experience writ large and amplified through Carter's choice of narrative mode, since every woman has internalised the male gaze. If, as Cixous supposes, patriarchal culture is based upon the concept of difference, to eliminate the basic binary opposition founded in gender and engage in what Gilbert and Gubar describe as 'the disentangling of anatomy and destiny',<sup>52</sup> is to undermine the entire structure of the dominant discourse.

The notions of the mirror and the voyeuristic gaze culminate for Carter in the concept of desire, a theme which assumes an immense significance throughout her fiction. As *The Sadeian Woman* makes clear, she regards desire as an instrument of liberation, because 'sexual relations between men and women

always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations'.<sup>53</sup> The act of looking upon women as objects of desire is therefore not just an act of masculine repression, but also, by rendering its patriarchal bias transparent, forms a weak point in ideology which is open to exploitation.

However, Carter's incorporation of the themes and images of pornography into her own fiction, and especially her treatment of the relationship between sex and violence, is an area of her work which has aroused much debate. Does Carter's work in fact constitute pornography, and if so, does she transcend the limitations inherent in such a form or merely replicate them? As Paulina Palmer has noted, the question is further 'complicated by the fact that...the meaning of a visual image or fictional episode is frequently ambiguous...open to the different interpretations which the observer or reader chooses to impose on it. Thus, an episode which one reader may interpret as a serious investigation into the female victim's response to the experience of violent sex, may strike another as pornographic'.<sup>54</sup>

The complications caused by Carter's ambiguous approach to the subject is illustrated in the novel *Heroes and Villains*, in which Marianne is captured by the Barbarian Jewel and raped when she tries to escape. The rape itself is described in terms which make it seem anything but erotic: 'Because she was so difficult to penetrate, he spilled several hot mouthfuls of obscenities over her. Taken by force, the last shreds of interior flesh gave; he intended a violation and effected one; a tower collapsed upon her. Afterwards, there was a good deal of blood.' (p.55). It is, however, the culmination of a long build-up in sexual tension between the two characters. From the moment of her capture, Marianne has seen rape as inevitable, and has already come close to it several times. In fact, she has just evaded being publicly violated on a kitchen table by Jewel

and his brothers, an event which emphasises the way in which Carter appears to exploit her heroine's powerlessness for erotic, rather than subversive, ends. Marianne's inability to defend herself is total, for even her attempted struggles titillate her would-be rapists: 'Marianne discovered she was not in the least frightened, only very angry indeed, and began to struggle and shout; at this the brothers laughed but did not cease to crowd in on her. So she closed her eyes and pretended she did not exist' (p.49). Her final, desperate, defence is a conscious alienation from the self, indicating her complete acquiescence to the principle of male sexuality as an overwhelming force from which there is no escape.

In her discussion of the novel, Paulina Palmer observes that Carter's insistent portrayal of rape and sexual violence risks 'reproducing the chauvinistic cliché that female pleasure is dependent on submission and victimisation', but concludes that Carter surmounts such a risk 'by foregrounding the contradiction between the female hero's intellectual autonomy and independent spirit, and her vulnerability to physical attack'.<sup>55</sup> However, I do not find Palmer's argument totally convincing. The heroine's defiance seems to do her absolutely no good at all, for she remains a victim whether she likes it or not. *Heroes and Villains* can certainly be read as a critical analysis of patriarchal institutions, but the kind of erotic sensationalism which surrounds the topic of rape is extremely disquieting.

There is a similar emphasis on rape and violence in Carter's collection of modified fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, which some critics regard as the final confirmation that Carter, in her attempt to subvert ideology, is actually duplicating it. The stories in the collection centre almost exclusively upon sexual relationships, most of which appear to reproduce, as Ellen Cronan Rose says, 'the Freudian account of female development, in which a woman achieves

sexual maturity by shifting her attachment from a father to a male lover'.<sup>56</sup> The heroines of these stories may conquer their latent desire for their fathers, but they inevitably do so by turning to another male, who introduces them to the sexual side of their nature. Acts of rape and seduction occur throughout the narratives, which not only expose Carter's almost invariable bias towards heterosexuality, but also her continuing fascination with the politics of violence. Man is 'carnivore incarnate' (p.158)<sup>57</sup> - an alien, unpredictable, predatory creature before whom the immature, virginal heroine is 'a tender herbivore...Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial' (p.58).<sup>58</sup> In other words, a born victim.

For critics such as Patricia Waugh, Carter's deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional fairy stories, and of the subject within them, is entirely successful, 'subverting their stereotypes through the release of that feminine desire entirely suppressed in the original forms'.<sup>59</sup> However, Patricia Duncker regards Carter's attempt to appropriate such a traditionally patriarchal narrative form as an inevitable failure - in her essay 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*', Duncker sees Carter, because she is 'rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures', falling into 'the infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale...to be the carrier of ideology'.<sup>60</sup> According to Duncker's analysis, therefore, Carter's presentation of female sexuality and desire fall into the very patriarchal assumptions she is endeavouring to avoid.

However, in an extremely convincing study, Ellen Cronan Rose argues that Carter's treatment of sexuality is heavily ironic, and that *The Bloody Chamber* is a series of critiques of patriarchy beneath a deadpan façade. In an analysis of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', a rewriting of 'Beauty and the Beast', she states that the story's intention is to demonstrate that 'in patriarchal cultural myths,



women do not grow up. They simply change masters - from a beastly father to a fatherly beast'.<sup>61</sup> She finds evidence of 'patriarchal bonding'<sup>62</sup> in both 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and Carter's other adaptation of the Beauty and the Beast story in *The Bloody Chamber*, 'The Tiger's Bride', where the heroine's father uses his daughter as a stake in a game of cards he plays with the Beast. In both cases, says Cronan Rose, Beauty's father and the Beast collude in a pact which reduces Beauty to the status of a mere pawn in an exclusively masculine negotiation - therefore the heroine of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' does not celebrate the discovery of female sexuality so much as the development of a specifically *feminine* sensibility within certain culturally-defined parameters. Furthermore, the transformation of Beauty's decision to stay with the Beast into the triumphant conclusion of the narrative indicates that it is a sensibility that is fostered with the exclusive purpose of satisfying masculine desire.

Cronan Rose regards 'The Tiger's Bride' as a more progressive feminist revision of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon'. While the first story reproduces the phallogocentric assumptions of the original text, the second rewrite actively sets out to deconstruct them. In this version, Beauty sends her father a clockwork doll 'to perform the part of my father's daughter' (p.86), thus exhibiting an awareness of the mechanisms by which patriarchy operates. Determined that the Beast's 'appetite need not be my extinction' (p.88) she consents to his request that she strip naked before him. In a reversal of the conclusion of the previous story, the Beast retains his tiger's form and Beauty, by 'stripping herself of her clothes and her socialized identity'<sup>63</sup> also becomes a tiger; thus, according to Cronan Rose, 'undoing the oppression of gender...by stripping herself of the veneer of civilisation which has socialized her as a woman'.<sup>64</sup> The metamorphosis which marks the ending of both narratives indicates the differences between them. The conclusion of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' is not in the least erotic -

Beauty turns the Beast into a man through the strength of her devotion, bringing him into a social order which she does not appear to question. In 'The Tiger's Bride', however, it is the other way around, for in a sensual transformation scene, Beauty becomes Beast. There is no doubt which is the most triumphant from Carter's point of view, for by joining the Beast in his animal state, the heroine of 'The Tiger's Bride' has transformed the risk of being reduced to a depersonalised fetishistic object<sup>65</sup> into a reciprocal pact which confirms her own sexuality as well as the Beast's.

Those who condemn Carter's work for exploiting female sexuality for voyeuristic ends tend to ignore the full spectrum of her analysis of the theme of desire. For a start, there are many instances in her narratives where, when a voyeuristic act is committed, the tables are promptly turned on the voyeur. An example of this in *The Passion of New Eve* has already been discussed, for Evelyn's enjoyment of Leilah as erotic spectacle is reversed after his sex change, when he in turn becomes an object of desire for Zero. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Melanie is forced to act out Uncle Philip's incestuous fantasies on his behalf; but his prurient gaze is ultimately made to rebound upon him when he views the actual enactment of incest between his wife and her brother. Melanie herself also participates in this theme of reversal - when she finds that Finn has made a hole in wall between their bedrooms in order to watch her undressing, she uses it to spy on him, thus making herself the active (masculine) observer and turning Finn into the passive (feminine) object of observation. As Paulina Palmer says, such episodes indicate that 'despite appearances to the contrary, the roles adopted by men and women are, in fact, flexible. They are open to change'.<sup>66</sup> The figure of the voyeur, therefore, is far from being a negative one which naively upholds patriarchal assumptions, for wherever it appears in a text, Carter employs a series of deft ironic inversions

in order to manipulate the image into the instrument of its own subversion.

The desiring gaze, then, is not a phenomenon which is enacted solely upon the passive bodies of women on behalf of men, for Carter's novels present it as a process to which men are equally as susceptible. Nor do they have to follow the example of Evelyn/Eve and have a sex-change first. Finn and Frankie are as oppressed by Uncle Philip's tyranny as Aunt Margaret or Melanie, and they, too, benefit from his overthrow. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Desiderio is raped or seduced by a number of men, women and mythical beasts, and the passage which describes his rape by the appropriately-named Acrobats of Desire in a caravan filled with mirrors directly recalls the experience of Evelyn/Eve: 'At one time, thirty-six brilliant eyes were fixed on me with an intensity which varied according to the distance between the images of the eyes and their originals...I was trapped. I could not move. I was filled with impotent rage as the wave of eyes broke over me' (p.117).<sup>67</sup> Men, too, can therefore lose touch with their selves under the fragmenting power of the voyeuristic erotic gaze, which in Carter's novels is fairly indiscriminate.

However, although Carter may frequently show men suffering the same indignities under a phallogocentric system as women, their position in relation to that system is subtly different. While Carter's description of the voyeuristic gaze with relation to woman foregrounds the ideological processes that turn her into what Cixous terms the 'coded mannequin'<sup>68</sup> of patriarchy, when turned upon man it signifies almost precisely the opposite concept. Carter extracts a great deal of subversive enjoyment from the sufferings of Evelyn/Eve and Desiderio, aware that there is a great deal of satisfaction to be obtained from toppling the male sex from its privileged position in patriarchy. Like Joanna Russ, Carter shows an evident delight in humiliating her male characters, and engages in a great deal of slapstick comedy at their expense.

This is especially evident in *Nights at the Circus*, where the journalist Walser joins the circus as a clown in order to expose the winged *aerialiste*, Fevvers, as a fake. Fair-haired and square-jawed, he is ideal hero material, a 'man of action' who 'subjected his life to a series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle. That was how he knew he was alive' (p.10).<sup>69</sup> In the anarchic world of the circus, however, Walser soon loses his 'hitherto impregnable sense of self-esteem' (p.145). An injury to his arm deprives him of the ability to write, which means that the boundaries between make-believe and reality merge as far as Walser concerned, since it means that 'for the moment, his disguise disguises - nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a *real* clown, for all practical purposes' (p.145). This leads to his public humiliation as the 'Human Chicken', and a series of catastrophes which deprive him of ever more control over his actions.

This is not, however, done simply for the fun of it. Walser's sufferings, like Desiderio's and Evelyn's, have an ultimately salutary effect upon him, leading him to question a code that he has hitherto taken for granted. The loss of his memory after a train crash in Siberia, makes Walser 'like the landscape...a perfect blank' (p.222), confirming his now complete identification with those who, like circus performers and women, live on the margins of the patriarchal order. Having been reduced to nothing, Walser is rescued by Fevvers in a reversal of the traditional fairy-tale motif, and under her influence reconstructed into 'the New Man...a fitting mate for the New Woman' (p.281) - an act which bears an obvious correspondence to Cixous' assertion that 'it will be up to man and woman to render obsolete the former relationship and all its consequences, to consider the launching of a brand-new subject, alive with defamilialization'.<sup>70</sup> What *Nights at the Circus* therefore demonstrates is that

the transformation of men into objects of desire is more than mere exploitation, but indicates Carter's ultimate optimism concerning male/female relationships. By placing men in the space in the dominant discourse normally reserved for women, she enables them to regard patriarchy from the outside, where they are able to see its effect upon those who exist on the margins of the symbolic order.

As many critics have suggested, the trouble with this conclusion is that, in her earlier books at least, Carter has failed to suggest ways in which such a deconstruction of the masculine might be achieved. Her novels are entertaining and persuasive fantasies which tend to remain theoretical and highly fantastical. Like Melanie and Finn in *The Magic Toyshop*, they conclude in a state of 'wild surmise' (p.200); unable or unwilling to envisage the possibilities revealed by the author's subversive activities. Paulina Palmer, for example, while regarding Carter's earlier work as 'presenting a brilliantly accurate analysis of the oppressive effect of patriarchal structures', believes that their focus on the processes of victimisation means that they 'run the risk of making these structures appear even more closed and impenetrable than, in actual fact, they are'.<sup>71</sup> Although Carter's work constitutes a series of brilliant exposures of femininity as an artificial cultural construction, she tends not to envisage many individual or social alternatives to the institutions she displaces.

However, *Nights at the Circus* marks a definite change in Carter's attitude to this issue, a change summed up by Palmer:

Here she treats themes relating to liberation and change, in the organisation of personal life and the social formation. Acts of resistance against patriarchy are represented. The deconstruction of femininity and masculinity is explored, and...the perspective becomes increasingly woman-centred. A re-evaluation of female experience takes place and the emergence of a female counter-culture is celebrated. The figure of the puppet is no longer central to the text. It is replaced by the images of Fevvers' miraculous wings.<sup>72</sup>

As Palmer says, it is Fevvers who is the undoubted embodiment of Carter's new utopian vision. She is a creature of unresolvable paradox, who may be an object of speculation, humour, loathing or lust on the part of male observers, but is never trapped by the limitations such categorisations attempt to impose upon her. Time and time again, her wings prove to be the instruments of her liberation, both actual and economic. Her power of flight enables her to escape from a number of sticky situations, kidnap and prospective rape among them; and by exhibiting herself in the music hall and the circus, as well as in society, she becomes financially independent. Her wings can even save Fevvers from the trap into which the majority of her predecessors in Carter's fiction have fallen: the power of the male gaze.

In Walser's eyes, she saw herself, at last, swimming into definition, like the image on a photographic paper; but, instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream,

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life; 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (p.290)

However, on obeying her foster-mother Lizzie's injunction to "'Show 'em your feathers, quick'", Fevvers soon returns to her normal, triumphantly independent self, 'all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates' (p.291).

*Night at the Circus* also shows, for the first time in Carter's work, female characters exhibiting a sense of solidarity. Most of her other heroines appear to live their lives separated from other women - Marianne sets out to become as good as the men, rejecting female friendship along the way; Melanie dares not be too friendly with Aunt Margaret; while Eve's friend and lover is Tristessa, who wears make-up in a vain attempt to conceal the fact of his masculinity. *Nights*

at the Circus, however, contains several examples of productive and mutually supportive relationships between women. Fevvers grows up in a brothel whose inhabitants are prostitutes by night, and feminist researchers by day. The female inhabitants of a Siberian asylum escape to found a woman's Utopia. In the circus, the Princess of Abyssinia and Mignon, the brutalised wife of the ape-man, begin a lesbian relationship which, as Palmer says 'is presented in Utopian terms'.<sup>73</sup>

This novel thus marks a significant alteration in Carter's treatment of the female subject. While her concern with the artificial construction of gender within a patriarchal system remains central to the narrative, it is treated in a very different way. Fevvers, unlike Carter's other heroines, exercises a remarkable amount of control over her social and sexual identity, blatantly manipulating feminine stereotypes for her own ends. Although her low-cut dresses, extravagant make-up and long blonde hair superficially appear to separate her from such characters as Albertina, Marianne and Eve/Evelyn, all of whom, in their various ways, contain obvious elements of the transvestite or the androgyne, Fevvers certainly wears the (metaphorical) trousers in every relationship in which she is involved. Significantly, she appears never to have had any parents; and although she acquires a foster-mother in Lizzie, she exhibits no desire for a father-substitute, refusing integration into the patriarchal Symbolic order by her very presence as an anomaly.

Fevvers is thus Carter's ultimate symbol of female autonomy, successfully resisting all masculine attempts to degrade her into an object of desire. Her wings confirm her in this role, for their resistance to classification poses a challenge to the very system that is struggling to come to terms with the contradiction she represents. More than that, they are the external symbols of an internal subversive impulse that, according to Hélène Cixous, is common to

all women. She defines the act of flight as 'woman's gesture', maintaining that women share 'with birds and robbers' the desire to 'fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorientating it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down'.<sup>74</sup>

While the heroines of Carter's other novels undermine the patriarchal order by functioning as examples of female victimisation, Fevvers actively attacks that same order and works to overthrow it. The laughter that reverberates through the novel's final pages is that of Cixous' subversive Medusa, whose role is 'to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter'<sup>75</sup> - and it can only be echoed by Carter's audience, who see the patriarchal principle finally collapsing under the impact of Fevvers' ridicule, leaving a Utopian space in which the couple can finally meet on equal terms.



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PART TWO

*THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE*

## INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the War of the Roses, The middle-class woman began to write,<sup>1</sup>

'The difference between mad people and sane people,' Brave Orchid explained to the children, 'is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over.'<sup>2</sup>

As the first section has shown, the six authors included in this thesis hold differing opinions regarding the position of women within the dominant order. Indeed, the only thing they appear to agree on is that, on the whole, such a position is not a satisfactory one. It is the aim of this second section to demonstrate that, in spite of these authors' diverse feminist attitudes, they all proceed to formulate remarkably similar strategies in order to effect an escape from an ideology now identified as being specifically patriarchal. Because the process of this escape consists of two distinct stages, this part of the thesis is split into two chapters. The first deals with these authors' consciousness of themselves as writers within a system they have already identified as inimical to the autonomous female voice, while the second examines how they utilise the metaphor of the quest in order to develop a revised tradition which will enable them to escape from such restrictions.

The preoccupations with female authorship and male censorship voiced in the first chapter of this section can be traced back to the nineteenth century, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar show in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Although they describe it as a period which marked the beginning of 'a distinctively female literary tradition',<sup>3</sup> they also claim that the women who began to write

in increasing numbers during the nineteenth century were inevitably forced to contend with the misogyny inherent in patriarchal attitudes towards creativity, arguing that 'in patriarchal Western culture...the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim'.<sup>4</sup> Because of this implicit equation between male sexuality and the act of creation, women who wish become authors in their own right (rather than being 'authored' by men)<sup>5</sup> are inevitably placed in an impossible situation due to the fact that 'since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as "Cyphers," deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.'<sup>6</sup>

Mary Jacobus brings a psychoanalytical perspective to this issue, emphasising how the tensions arising from 'the vicious circularity'<sup>7</sup> of such a problem frequently render the dissenting voices of nineteenth-century women writers incoherent and hysterical, trapping them within narratives which are full of gaps and absences. Her summary of the predicament of the 'artist-hysteric' is strongly reminiscent of Gilbert and Gubar's argument:

The woman under patriarchy is caught in an unavoidable hysterical dilemma. She can either submit to the desire of the father, identifying herself with it so completely that she becomes what he desires her to be...alternatively, a woman can break with the desire of the father by choosing to be "like himself" instead of what he likes. This means, for the writer and actress, being at once self-authoring and self-estranged, haunted by the father's repressed castration anxiety, for ever retelling his forgotten story. \*

As Jacobus describes it, the experience of the female author is profoundly contradictory, and, battling against 'the legacy of female self-hatred and masculine misogyny which every "cultured" woman writer internalizes',<sup>9</sup> the typical female writer of the nineteenth century reproduces this hysterical dilemma within her work. In her essay on George Eliot's short story 'The Lifted Veil', for example, Jacobus effectively dramatises the plight of the woman writer who, 'trapped in male prevision',<sup>10</sup> is unable to accept the artistic legacy of her female forebears, preferring to identify herself with patriarchal authority. This act of betrayal enables her to retain the only sense of a secure self offered to her within a phallogentric culture, but it also confirms her in her role as hysteric. Eliot, claims Jacobus, is a perfect example of this kind of evasion, for 'Marianne Evans is doomed to experience her powers either as demonic possession or as feminine dispossession unless her incapacitating femininity can be erased under the masculine name of George Eliot'.<sup>11</sup> The title of this essay, 'Hysterics Suffer Mainly From Reminiscences', echoes Jacobus' conclusion that both women writers and the characters they create are trapped within the act of reminiscence, which is 'the narrative tense of hysteria, a reenactment which turns all futures to the inescapability of the past'.<sup>12</sup>

However, the role of the woman writer as artist-hysteric does not end with the nineteenth century. Jacobus's debate makes clear that a preoccupation with madness and reminiscence also surfaces in the work of twentieth-century women, where it represents the treading of a fine line between the 'impersonality' that characterises postmodernism,<sup>13</sup> and the classic realist narrative which assumes the existence of the unified subject who, in the words of Catherine Belsey, is 'the origin of meaning, knowledge and action'.<sup>14</sup> In this period, insanity parodies the modernist situation, representing alienation from the self and other people. For example, when the heroine of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) first

enters a psychiatric clinic, she does not see the inhabitants as individuals, but as 'shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life' (pp.149-50)<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Esther perceives, the ruthlessly efficient regime of the hospital or mental asylum allows that sense of personal alienation to be confirmed and strengthened by the clinical, impersonal handling of the patient by the medical establishment. Sanity, on the other hand, grants the individual a sense of identity which is self-contained and inviolate, existing in an ordered, rational reality.

As the authors discussed in this thesis demonstrate, however, this does not necessarily mean that the realist mode is the preferable literary form for women, for their writing is characterised by a systematic disruption of the conventional value system which automatically assumes sanity as preferable to madness. Indeed, much of their work calls the very concept of rationality into question, regarding insanity as offering the woman writer a very viable alternative to what writers like Russ and Carter regard as the illusory concept of the unproblematic, autonomous subject. At the same time, the theme of madness and mental disturbance, as in the work of nineteenth-century writers, still represents censorship and artistic frustration, illustrating the danger of the rejection of the security provided by realism. The woman writer who celebrates insanity has to remember that a *total* retreat into impersonality denies the individual the privilege of a place within the dominant discourse and draws her back into reminiscence.

The archetypal, perpetually recurring patterns of myth might seem only to reinforce the relentless cycle that binds the hysteric to the reenactment of her past, yet it is out of this agonising paradox that the motivating force for the feminist quest originates. Both Maggie Humm and Rachel Blau DuPlessis see this kind of radical mythic revision as characteristic of post-war women's writing; a



time, as Humm says, in which 'the definition of what was prototypically feminine became problematic'.<sup>16</sup> DuPlessis discusses the poems of Denise Levertov, Muriel Rukeyser and Adrienne Rich as examples of modern poets who demonstrated the possibility of using mythological motifs in a dynamic, historically-specific way in order to arrive at a radical redefinition of the self:

The gendered, historically sculpted person, realizing the dimensions of her opposition to dominant ideologies, breaks the repeating sentences and sequences of that dominance in myths of critique. These myths entail critical perceptions about the nature of women. They recast long-sanctified plots, especially quest patterns, and reenvision such familiar figures as the hero, the lady, and the reborn god. The poems are so strongly reevaluative that they may even appear antimythological...precisely because they record the realization that certain prime myths are invalid and crippling for women.<sup>17</sup>

In a very similar way, the writers in this thesis utilise the quest motif as a means of replacing the necessity for compulsive repetition of phallogocentric dictates with the possibility of change, thus instituting a new order through the formulation of a revised cultural mythology within which female concerns are capable of greater articulation.

As Waugh points out, such a modern modification of a romantic convention is not without its problems, since it does not necessarily have to challenge either 'the dominance of expressive realism' or 'the dominant liberal view of subjectivity, with its belief in the unified self and a universal human nature'.<sup>18</sup> She notes that many feminist authors simply reverse the gender-linked components of the familiar quest plot, thus creating fictions which 'set out to deny difference, to insert women into a fundamentally unchallenged social and fictional structure (usually quest or picaresque) where sexual conquest and self-realization...[are], however, to be pursued by a female protagonist'.<sup>19</sup> Although Waugh sees such an approach as 'a stage in the recognition of oppression',<sup>20</sup> she reserves her full approval for work which 'implicitly or

explicitly, recognizes the construction of women as 'other', but refuses the unitary concept of self which appears to be its self-evident opposite: the achieving, rational, autonomous, transcendent, successful 'self'.<sup>21</sup>

Waugh, however, who cites Marilyn French, Erica Jong and Lisa Alther as examples of novelists who make such a simplistic reversal in their work, is here speaking of the quest in the broadest possible terms. In this context, any narrative which charts the personal progression of a single character towards self-knowledge and a greater maturity is utilising the pattern of the quest. The approach of the authors in this thesis differs from that adopted by such authors as French and Jong, because for them such a theme is a point of departure from realism. Their characters embark upon fantastic journeys which inevitably lead to an examination of the part played by such factors as myth and symbolism in the formation of the female subject in culture, through the introduction of mythic symbols which, in the words of Maggie Humm, 'defy traditional feminine ideas of feminine passivity in an oblique way'.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of cultural revision enables the woman who wishes to write to overthrow the figure of the silent, 'feminine' woman which haunts her socialised consciousness, and replace it with, in the words of Toril Moi, her own 'images of femaleness'.<sup>23</sup> Naturally, such images must necessarily include the concept of the woman author who is secure within a tradition of female enunciation, although DuPlessis claims that women writers who engage in such a project must reject 'unchanging, unhistorical types'. Instead, such figures must be replaced by new myths which, because they are 'historically specific inventions', do not substitute archetype for archetype, but archetype for what she usefully terms 'prototype'.<sup>24</sup> According to her analysis,

prototypes...do not investigate moments of eternal recurrence, but rather break with the idea of an essentially unchanging reality. Prototypes are original, model forms on which to

base the self and its action - forms open to transformation, and forms, unlike archetypes, that offer similar patterns of experience *to* others, rather than imposing these patterns *on* others....A prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity, of its transformation.<sup>26</sup>

All the writers in this thesis show a similar interest in such a process of radical revision of mythic patterns, seeing in such a practice the possibility of shattering the complacency of the dominant order. In Kristevan terms, they attempt to exploit the anarchic potential of the semiotic to disrupt the symbolic order which allows the subject a stable position in discourse, thus questioning the whole concept of subjectivity. Indeed, it can be argued that the protagonists of these narratives venture on their quests solely in order to *displace* their sense of an autonomous self, for only by becoming aware that their subjectivity is not immutable, but constructed through the interplay of external cultural forces, can any consideration of change become possible. However, their use of myth as a source of revolutionary prototypes means that these authors retain a sense of self, albeit one which is radically transformed. Moreover, it is these attempts to imagine the development of a completely new female subjectivity which enable them to avoid entrapment within the repetitious cycle of hysteria and censorship which signifies complete alienation from self and society.

The work discussed in this thesis can therefore be said to consider the idea of female creativity from both a nineteenth and a twentieth-century perspective. When examining the existence of a female literary tradition, in which the figure of the madwoman, both as author and character, features prominently, insanity dramatises a history of female censorship and self-defeat. However, when combined with a process of radical mythical revision, such a figure can be transformed into a postmodernist prototype of the empowered,

creative and autonomous woman who shatters the restrictions of male censorship in order to appropriate the right to enter the realm of enunciation on her own terms.

PART 2 INTRODUCTION - NOTES AND  
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## CHAPTER FOUR

Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed, it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against.'

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -  
 One need not be a House -  
 The Brain has Corridors - surpassing  
 Material Place - <sup>2</sup>

In 1983, Joanna Russ published *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, in which she maintains that, even in a period that has seen unprecedented social advances for women, a female author is still unable to write a book without experiencing both interior and exterior conflict. Mingling the voices of many women writers, past and present, with her own argument that patriarchal society employs a variety of strategies in order to censor women's writing, Russ demonstrates her belief that feminism has made very little difference to male acceptance of female art. Her opinions are echoed in the work of Angela Carter, Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, Kate Wilhelm and Doris Lessing, all of whom exhibit a similar self-consciousness regarding their status as women writers. With the exception of Angela Carter, these authors frequently centre narratives around the paradigmatic figure of the woman artist, and, through articles and interviews, they all also contribute to the feminist debate surrounding the issue of female creativity and literary production.

As Chris Weedon says, although 'women's writing has long had more of a foothold within the literary institution than other types of marginalized

writing....due to the existence of 'great' writers, recognized as part of the 'great tradition' who are women', this acceptance is a qualified one. Writers such as Jane Austen are included within the conventional literary canon in spite of the fact that they are female, 'on the basis of readings which actively repress or marginalize gender concerns which reaffirm patriarchal definitions of women'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, women's literature remains susceptible to an insidious form of censorship, whereby the only writing which is generally acceptable within the literary mainstream is that which is amenable to the kind of reading which glosses over gender-specific features of female art. Weedon comments that

Subjectivity works most efficiently for the established hierarchy of power relations in a society when the subject position, which the individual assumes within a particular discourse, is fully identified by the individual with her interests. Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced.<sup>4</sup>

The writers discussed within this thesis all see women's writing as an act of resistance of the kind Weedon describes, publicly articulating this sense of dislocation between the individual and the wider social discourse in which she is placed. If writing is regarded as an overt refusal to comply with a society which is largely organised around phallogentric concerns, it is therefore a potentially subversive act which the dominant discourse must stifle in order to preserve its homogeneity.

What makes this topic particularly interesting to examine and discuss is the fact that, in spite of being united in a common cause, these writers exemplify the many different ways this issue can be approached. Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood, for example, share an explicit and absolute commitment to the issue of female authorship and male censorship. The majority of Russ' work consists of texts which invite the reader to participate with their writer in

the process of the formulation and transmission of a female literary tradition which will overturn centuries of enforced silence; while Atwood specifically examines the means by which such a silencing of women's voices and creative energies is still being achieved.

However, while both Russ and Atwood openly examine the insecurities they believe to be inherent in their position, authors such as Carter, Wilhelm, Le Guin and Lessing do not question their rights to write as women in quite such an overt way. Ursula Le Guin and Angela Carter, for instance, urge the necessity to write from a woman's perspective as a means of, in Carter's words, 'decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought',<sup>5</sup> but neither articulate the message of feminist rebellion as overtly as Russ and Atwood. Indeed, the figure of the female artist does not appear in Carter's work at all, for she deals with the issue by focusing almost exclusively on the antithesis of the woman writer; that of the muse who acts as the inspiration for male literary production. She graphically demonstrates how much more preferable it is to write for oneself, rather than be the passive object of the creative process. On the other hand, Le Guin interprets the directive to 'write as a woman' rather differently, which causes her to fall into the trap that Carter avoids - that of failing effectively to define the exact nature of the female point of view from which she is supposedly writing. The feminist opinions that she expresses in her cultural criticism never seem to be satisfactorily transposed into her fiction, with the result that many of her narratives accede to the very pressure of male censorship she claims to be attempting to overthrow.

Like Atwood, Kate Wilhelm and Doris Lessing examine the tactics of censorship itself, but more specifically. Both regard the directive to keep silent as originating from within the psyche of the individual woman herself - for example, many of Wilhelm's short stories revolve around female characters



who are torn between the desire to act independently of men, and the necessity of conforming to social conventions; a dilemma which initiates potentially destructive self-conflict within the unconscious. In Wilhelm's fiction, however, this rebellion is ultimately turned against the self in order to preserve society and the stability of the *status quo*, often with horrific results. Wilhelm's work therefore raises implications for the female artist: implications which are specifically examined by Doris Lessing. Much of her work is haunted by the emblematic figure of the literary madwoman, who, trapped within the inarticulacy which is the symptom of her own hysteria, is confined within the asylum, which functions as a potent symbol of cultural censorship.

There is, however, a great deal of unity contained within this diversity of approach. Broadly speaking, all six authors focus on similar specific problems concerning the issue of female creativity, and all express concern at the lack of a female literary tradition. In various ways, all explore the processes of censorship by which that tradition is stifled. It is a search that invariably ends within the mind of the individual writer, for the silencing pressures that are placed upon woman from without are also deeply ingrained within her own psyche, ensuring that she effectively regulates her own behaviour. The creative woman thus has to fight against herself in order to produce anything at all, and it is a struggle which, as this chapter will show, can lead to the reproduction of hysterical symptoms within her narrative. The metaphor of insanity is a powerful one within most of these works, in which it represents the writer's experience of alienation, both from her culture and from the part of her self which wishes to conform and keep silent.

Terry Eagleton has said of the established literary canon that it accepts only 'two and a half women, counting Emily Brontë as a marginal case'.<sup>6</sup> It is

therefore hardly surprising that the problem of artistic survival is one that preoccupies many women writers, including those discussed in this thesis. In 'Notes From the Front Line', Angela Carter draws attention to the relatively short history of female literary production by presenting herself as an example of 'a new kind of being. Because I simply could not have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place'.<sup>7</sup> For Carter, however, this lack of a tradition is not so much due to patriarchal censorship as to the undeniable fact of biological difference, because 'being pregnant most of the time is tiring, enfeebling, and a drain on one's physical and emotional resources. In fact, most women were ill most of the time until the introduction of contraception and efficient post- and ante-natal care and you need to be quite strong and healthy to write big, fat books'.<sup>8</sup> In a typically contentious fashion, therefore, Carter deliberately undermines the mystique attached to the act of writing (which she describes as 'only applied linguistics'),<sup>9</sup> before eventually asserting the value that such an occupation nevertheless has for women:

Yet this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction *as* women - it is part of the slow process of decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought. I really do believe this. It has nothing at all to do with being a 'legislator of mankind' or anything like that; it is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Carter never features the figure of the female artist directly within her work does not mean that she ignores the lack of a female literary tradition: as 'Notes From the Front Line' demonstrates, she, just as much as any of the other authors included in this thesis, regards the establishing of such a tradition as an important feminist issue. Instead, Carter approaches the topic of female authorship from a somewhat oblique angle,

focusing not on women who write, but on women who act as the object of inspiration for male creativity. By subverting the stereotypical, romantic, image of the female muse, Carter implicitly promotes the alternative concept of the female author. In this way, she demonstrates that it is better to be the woman who speaks, rather than the woman who is spoken of.

A typical example of her approach is the short story 'Black Venus',<sup>1</sup> which is centred on the historical character of Jeanne Duval, mistress of the poet Baudelaire. Carter has described it as being 'about how awful it is to be a muse...I just can't imagine anything more awful than being Baudelaire's mistress - the *symbolism* put on one's frail shoulders!'<sup>2</sup> The story makes Baudelaire's romanticised vision of Jeanne seem rather ridiculous by uncovering the prosaic reality that lies behind the extravagant images supplied by his erotic fantasies. Time and time again, the perceptions of Jeanne and her 'Daddy' jar in a clash of irreconcilable opposites. He sees Martinique as a place of 'lilting palm-trees' and 'purple flowers', while she remembers a 'harsh blue sky' and 'fly-blown towns' (p.10): he says she dances 'like a snake' (p.14), while Jeanne 'knew he'd never so much as *seen* a snake....if he'd seen a snake move, he'd never had said a thing like that' (p.15). The final confirmation that reality and fantasy are completely divorced is provided by the fact that Baudelaire's muse, as the recipient of 'the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis' (p.23), is in fact no 'venus', but is 'secretly festering' (p.13) from the inside out.

Jeanne is more than the object of Baudelaire's over-heated poetic imagination, therefore - she is also its victim. Carter stresses that Jeanne's colonial origins are the ideal preparation for life as a muse, for, 'deprived of a history' (p.17), she is the perfectly blank cultural space upon which Baudelaire can elaborate his own fantasies. There is nothing glamorous or

ennobling in acting as an inspiration to a poet's imagination, for it leads to the obliteration of one's self and one's voice within history. For example, Jeanne finds Baudelaire's poetry 'a perpetual affront to her. He recited it to her by the hour and she ached, raged and chafed under it because his eloquence denied her language. It made her dumb' (p.18), confirming Carter's own view that in their absolute disregard for the actual woman who lies behind them, 'the Black Venus poems are incredibly beautiful and also terribly offensive'.<sup>13</sup>

It can be argued, however, that 'Black Venus' shows Jeanne eventually triumphing over her circumstances. After Baudelaire's death, she uses the money she gets from selling his old manuscripts to disguise her disfiguring disease, enabling her to return to Martinique and set herself up in business as a prostitute. The story's conclusion, however, is the final confirmation of an equation between muse and whore that is made throughout the narrative, which encourages the reader to reflect on 'what the distinction was between dancing naked in front of *one* man who paid and dancing naked in front of a group of men who paid' (p.12). In fact, Carter indicates that prostitution is probably the preferable profession, for the whore is 'seller and commodity in one...her own investment in the world' (p.20).

Although outside the historical context of 'Black Venus', an earlier story of Carter's, 'The Loves of Lady Purple',<sup>14</sup> deals with the same subject. Lady Purple is an elaborate and beautiful marionette who is, like Jeanne Duval, an object of masculine inspiration. In this story, Carter draws an analogy between the muse and the puppet, both of whom can be manipulated into iconographic images which will perfectly fulfil and sustain masculine desire - the operations of the puppet master are 'godlike', creating a 'radical symbiosis' between 'inarticulate doll and articulating fingers' (p.23). Like Jeanne, Lady Purple has no voice and no independent volition, but is subordinated to 'the iconography of

the melodrama' where all her movements are 'calculated in an angular geometry of sexuality' (p.27). Taking an improbable revenge, however, Lady Purple eventually comes to life, destroys her puppet master, and sets off to the nearest brothel in order to enact the salacious drama she has played out on stage so many times.

Both Lady Purple and Jeanne, therefore, eventually reject their role as muse in favour of the comparative autonomy of prostitution. Indeed, Lady Purple elevates it into an art-form of its own: 'she was not a true prostitute for she was the object on which men prostituted themselves. She, the sole perpetrator of desire, proliferated malign fantasies all around her and used her lovers as the canvas on which she executed boudoir masterpieces of destruction' (p.31). Whether prostitution actually leads to true independence for either of these characters is in fact debatable. Lady Purple's sexual creativity is an illusion; part of the play she enacts every night for the arousal of a male audience. Although she might be the resurrected form of the real Lady Purple, who will again annihilate men through the exploitation of their own sexual drives, she may alternatively be unable 'to escape the tautological paradox in which she was trapped; had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette?' (pp.37-8). Similarly, Jeanne may gain her freedom from Baudelaire, but she still devotes her declining years to the fulfilment of male fantasies, while exacting a silent revenge in the form of syphilitic infection. At the end of the narrative, both Lady Purple and Jeanne Duval are still the puppets of masculine desire - the only difference is that, as prostitutes, they pull their own strings.

Such narratives show Carter dealing with the issue of authorship by confronting her readers with monstrous, yet pitiable, parodies of the female who, without either a history or access to discourse, are obliterated by the

very male fantasies they inspire. The role of the muse is entirely stripped of romantic implications, for Carter stresses that muses do not achieve 'immortality, only a complete cancelling out of the self - a conclusion that supports Russ' bluntly uncompromising contention in *The Female Man* that 'You can't imbibe someone's success by fucking them' (p.65).'<sup>16</sup> The alternative to being a muse or a prostitute is to do as Carter herself does, and begin to write one's own stories. In claiming a voice, the woman thus also gains an identity within history, and final freedom from the manipulations of masculine desire.

In Joanna Russ' opinion, however, finding a place within either discourse or history is far from easy, for, as she claims in *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, female authors encounter 'various strategies for ignoring, condemning, or belittling the artistic works that result'.<sup>16</sup> By their very presence as writers, they undermine the patriarchal view that 'certain people are not supposed to have the ability to produce "great" literature'.<sup>17</sup> Deprived of any sense of a literary tradition, women are thus covertly discouraged from any creative endeavours, for as Russ argues:

When the memory of one's predecessors is buried, the assumption persists that there were none and each generation of women believes itself to be faced with the burden of doing everything for the first time. And if no one ever did it before, if no woman was ever that socially sacred creature, "a great writer," why do we think we can succeed now?'<sup>18</sup>

Russ' work centres almost completely around the struggle to resist such cultural and artistic isolation. Indeed, her fiction frequently reads very like her criticism, for both modes function as a vehicle for her endeavours to re/discover a sense of solidarity with a female literary past. Her novel *On Strike Against God* is a typical example of her tendency to transpose her

theoretical concerns into her fiction, mingling the personal and the academic in a fierce plea for what she views as a lost tradition. The narrator of the novel, Esther, is a feminist scholar who is desperately trying to construct herself as an autonomous subject outside the sphere of masculine control, and who finds that her work becomes a reflection of her own interior conflict. She is therefore denied any opportunity to duplicate the male role of the detached, impersonal academic, for her reading of literature written by women becomes a private emotional experience. Like Esther, these female authors have attempted to escape the restrictions of male censorship, and their 'dead voices, haunting and terrible' (p.91)<sup>28</sup> leave her 'gasping and sobbing in corners of the library stacks'. Esther's professional concerns are replaced with more intimate considerations, such as 'Where'd they live? Who did their cooking? Did they expect to get pregnant every year?', and her personal narrative voice is temporarily obliterated under a deluge of quotations: "How good it must be to be a man when you want to travel." "John laughs at me, but one expects that in marriage." "It had all been a therapeutic lie. The mind was powerless to save her. Only a man...." ( p.91).

In bringing these quotations into the text, Russ is consciously creating a complicated narrative structure. The exact source of the authorial voice is already in doubt, for, like Joanna in *The Female Man*, Esther's attitudes and profession are so similar to Russ' own as to make her virtually synonymous with her creator. Having mingled her own voice with that of her character, Russ then temporarily allows many other authors access to her textual space, thus definitively placing herself within the context of a largely ignored literary tradition. This process also involves the reader in a dynamic interaction with both author and text, for by reproducing fragments of other women's texts within her own, Russ has made the act of reading an obviously political one: The

reader, who, as Sarah Lefanu says, Russ always constitutes 'not only as subject but as female subject',<sup>20</sup> thus comes to represent another stage in the process of feminist literary transmission.

A similar process is at work in Russ' short story 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed',<sup>21</sup> which concerns Aurore Dudevant's metamorphosis into the writer George Sand. The story takes its title and its inspiration from a poem by Amy Lowell; and Sand, who is the narrator of the piece, demonstrates an anachronistic awareness of Lowell and her work. Sand tells of how she came to claim the tools of her trade, 'sword blades and poppy seed...dreams and visions' (p.25), from a shop owned by a mysterious "'Dealer in Words'" (p.26). Her narrative is acutely conscious of the problems of being a woman writer in a society which exacts a price for being an anomaly, for on being offered the poppy seed that will give her vision and the weapons which will enable her to 'separate one thing from another...and so get at death...or the truth' (p.25), Sand experiences a moment of hesitation, 'thinking of my ambition, my unhappy marriage, my poverty. It was unthinkable then for a woman to write' (p.26). She finds, however, that her urge towards authorship is stronger than any social consideration, and eventually claims the shop-keeper's offering as 'mine, by right' (p.27). Her action is a triumph, but not an easy one, for the decision to sacrifice everything, even one's name, for the sake of being an author is 'a serious business' (p.27). As Sarah Lefanu, in an excellent analysis of the story, notes, the narrative 'conjures up, without having to describe, the physical, material and social obstacles that women must overcome in order to write'.<sup>22</sup>

However, this reservation is counterbalanced by a strong sense of female solidarity - in Lefanu's words, 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds' 'places the genesis of ideas within a tradition, or a community, of women writers'.<sup>23</sup> This sense of community pervades the entire narrative, for Sand is not merely given



the means to write, but also told of the women writers who have been there before her:

the Hampshire lady who was no more regarded in society than a poker or a firescreen, for whom her sister was the love of her life, and who painted on her "two inches square of ivory" more than anyone has yet been clear-sighted enough to make out; the Yankee in her clean kitchen, writing a book condemning black slavery and thus, by a hidden meaning, her own; the young English girl who lost her baby and brought women's life-giving back into my trade with the myth of a monster that has made the world tremble. (p.27)

Prefacing the story with a quotation from Ellen Moers' study *Literary Women*, Russ evokes an entire female literary canon above and beyond those authors specifically mentioned in the narrative, adding yet another aspect to an already multi-faceted text.

Like Virginia Woolf, who said that 'Shakespeare's sister' will only be 'born' by 'drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners',<sup>24</sup> it is not enough for Russ that women write. With the aim of defeating centuries of male censorship, she also requires that such literature be situated within the context of a tradition. To this end, she creates a complex narrative which, by drawing attention to the processes of its own intertextuality, is capable of engaging author, reader and text in an active reinforcement of this central polemic. As in *On Strike Against God*, criticism and creative literature assume an equal validity within the narrative. Russ herself is deliberately carrying on the tradition of the woman writer embodied in Sand and her predecessors (indeed, in many sections of the story, the narrative 'I' could refer to either Russ or Sand), while also acknowledging the efforts of scholars like Moers who bring the work of Sand and other women writers to public recognition. The reader herself validates the efforts of both writer and critic by giving them

her attention - indeed, the ending of the story shifts responsibility for the continuance of the tradition directly onto the reader:

I have told you (with some help from Madame Lowell) where we got the tools of our trade, but do you now want to find out what those tools really were?

Are you truly curious?

*Then read our books!* (p.28)

Both *On Strike Against God* and 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed' make considerable demands upon their audience, for they assume a good deal of preliminary literary knowledge if they are to be fully understood. However, the challenge they pose is in itself part of the author's intention, because their very obliqueness aims to initiate a wider reading of women's literature. The struggle to read is transformed into an actual representation of the 'tradition of women writing and struggling to live, or living and struggling to live', within which Russ sites her own work.<sup>25</sup>

In her recent writing, Ursula Le Guin has expressed very similar concerns over the necessity of creating and maintaining a female literary tradition and has also criticised the pressures placed upon women to lead silent lives. Although Le Guin has never previously exhibited any particular awareness that her gender is of any importance to her literary career (as indicated by the fact that her novels have, for the most part, conformed to the conventions of mainstream science fiction) she has recently become much more explicitly concerned with feminist issues, and this has had inevitable repercussions on not only her fiction, but her awareness of her own position as a female author. In an essay written in 1986, she comments:

No matter how successful, beloved, influential her work was, when a woman author dies, nine times out of ten she gets dropped from the lists, the courses, the anthologies, while the men are kept....Most women's writing - like most work by women in any field - is called

unimportant, secondary, by masculinist teachers and critics of both sexes; and literary styles and genres are constantly redefined to keep women's writing in second place. So if you want your writing to be taken seriously, don't marry and have kids, and above all, don't die. But if you have to die, commit suicide. They approve of that.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, Le Guin not only expresses the fears of many creative women that their work will be pushed to the margins of the literary mainstream simply because of the fact of the writer's gender, but also evokes the dark spectre of the literary madwoman, whose struggle against male censorship leads to insanity and death. Only the figure of the suicide, she indicates, is acceptable to a male literary establishment, since it can act as a dramatic reminder of the dangers of creativity for women.

However, Le Guin consistently refuses fully to confront the implications of such a conclusion within her own work, in which she demonstrates an oblique approach to the entire issue of female creativity. In a rather tentative appeal which directly contrasts with the confrontational tactics employed by Russ, Le Guin urges women readers and writers to 'keep women's words, women's works, alive and powerful'<sup>27</sup> by engaging in the 'subversive act...of writing from a woman's experience of life using a woman's judgement'.<sup>28</sup> Although she acknowledges the force of male censorship, her insistence that it can be overthrown merely by the act of writing from an unproblematic female perspective allows her to refrain from confronting the subject in a direct, and therefore probably more contentious, way. The work of other authors such as Russ, Atwood and Lessing demonstrates that to state that there is such a thing as 'a woman's point of view' is to make a sweepingly gynocentric assumption, and while Carter says much the same thing in 'Notes From the Front Line', she validates her statement by placing it within a clear cultural context. Typically, however, Le Guin does not define her rather vague terminology, which

presupposes the existence of a reservoir of female experience which is held in common by all women, regardless of age, race, or social status.

Although her more recent novels, such as *Tehanu* (1990) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), are certainly more overtly feminist in their approach, Le Guin, unlike Russ or Atwood, consistently refuses to politicise the issue. Instead, she simply foregrounds the domestic concerns that have traditionally typified female experience. For example, Tenar's attempts in *Tehanu* to find a uniquely female power that will counter the male force of magery can be interpreted as metaphorically representing the struggle for female expression and the right to create. However, Le Guin characteristically evades overt references to the issue of female authorship, insisting instead on the creativity innate in such domestic skills as baking and weaving, which come to assume equal, if not superior, importance to the male talents of magery and magic.

The problems such evasions create, however, are demonstrated by a short piece of fiction dating from 1983, 'Sur',<sup>29</sup> in which a first-person narrator records the first (and only) all-female expedition to Antarctica, reaching the South Pole a year before Amundsen and Scott. However, out of consideration for the men who they know will come after them, the group make the strange decision to keep their achievement a secret. The narrator claims that she has 'no intention of publishing this report', and keeps it in a trunk in the attic among all her other family paraphernalia; 'Rosita's christening dress and Juanito's silver rattle and my wedding shoes and finneskos' (p.265). The act of female subversion this expedition represents is therefore stifled, for it is never permitted to leave the personal sphere in order to enter the public area of political debate 'lest...embarrassment or unpleasant notoriety thus be brought upon unsuspecting husbands, sons, etc' (p.267). Although Le Guin has hinted elsewhere that 'Sur' is to be read as an ironic commentary upon heroism,<sup>30</sup> it

also implies some interesting things about her attitude towards the issue of female creativity. Echoing the author's own opinion that the mere act of writing as a woman is subversive, the narrator clearly sees the fact of her achievement as sufficient, and her chronicle as of secondary importance. However, while her actions ensure that male egos remain intact, it can also be argued that such a censoring of the record devalues the expedition's achievement, denying the women of the future a tradition of female endeavour that is rightfully theirs. Leaving 'no footprints, even' (p.284), this group of female pioneers deliberately rejects a place within history.

However, although it could certainly be argued that the story is intended to be ironic, and is thus open to a subversive interpretation, it is difficult to ascertain whether Le Guin actually intends such a reading to be possible, for 'Sur' acquiesces to male censorship even while acknowledging it to be a problem. The narrator of the story is an example of Catherine Stimpson's "'hybrid" heroine',<sup>31</sup> who 'may act heroically but be punished, resigned or remorseful in the final pages',<sup>32</sup> for while the narrator is undoubtedly proud of her achievements, the necessity of suppressing them is completely unquestioned. Like the member of the expedition who creates exquisite, but ephemeral, ice sculptures, the narrator is 'carving in water' (p.275), because her writing is not destined for an audience. If Le Guin intends the white realm of the Antarctic metaphorically to function as a blank page upon which women can inscribe their own creative endeavours, then her own ambivalence ensures that the attempt is a failure, for in 'Sur' at least the prospect of male scrutiny is so intimidating that it succeeds in ensuring that nothing lasting is written by women, no matter how potentially heroic their efforts might be.

Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ function as examples of two extreme approaches to the problematic issue of female literary production, neither of

which is ideal. 'Sur' demonstrates how Ursula Le Guin's tendency to allow herself to be restricted by the very processes she criticises effectively leads to the censoring of her own output. However, while Joanna Russ is radically inspiring, her vehement demands for an audience who will participate with her in the rediscovery of old texts and the writing of new ones show an utter disregard for the patriarchal forces which attempt to silence women. Margaret Atwood, however, focusses explicitly upon the pressure to which Le Guin succumbs and Russ distainfully brushes aside: that of censorship. For Atwood, the female tradition, so recently reinstated, is in an extremely precarious position within a culture that is still dominated by men, and is by no means as secure as radical feminists like Russ would claim.

In her essay 'Witches', Atwood speculates that the powerful woman is 'an anomaly, a potentially dangerous anomaly...Women writers are particularly subject to such projections, for writing itself is uncanny: it uses words for evocation rather than for denotation; it is spell-making. A man who is good at it is a craftsman. A woman who is good at it is a dubious proposition'.<sup>33</sup> Atwood makes an implicit link between writing and witchcraft in much of her work - as 'Witches' makes clear, it is her own gesture of solidarity with her 'favourite ancestor'<sup>34</sup> Mary Webster, who survived being hanged for witchcraft. In a poem entitled 'Spelling', for example, the poet interprets the sight of her daughter playing 'with plastic letters/.../learning how to spell,/spelling,/how to make spells' as a potentially subversive act which recalls the martyrdom of the symbolic ancestor of every woman writer, 'the burning witch,/her mouth covered by leather/to strangle words'.<sup>35</sup>

'Spelling' demonstrates Atwood's tendency to portray the processes of censorship in graphically violent terms. The woman writer, she implies, is in an extremely vulnerable position, for the act of writing is a visible rebellion

against a social order which prefers women to keep silent. The grotesque image of the forcibly silenced woman in Atwood's poem 'Torture', who has had her face sewn up, and is 'put back on the streets,/a mute symbol'<sup>36</sup> is one which haunts her fiction. Her novel dedicated to Mary Webster, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a dystopic novel which clearly has its origins in Atwood's concerns regarding the prohibitions placed upon female authorship. Atwood's description of Gilead echoes the violence of her poetic imagery - women, forbidden to speak except in rigidly defined situations, are reduced to a fragmentary form of communication, which is no more than 'clipped whispers....amputated speech' (p.211).<sup>37</sup> Struggling against such censorship, Offred's narrative itself is 'in fragments, like a body caught in a crossfire or pulled apart by force' (p.279): an eloquent expression of the female artist's struggle for articulation in a hostile environment, where women who speak out of turn risk ritual execution.

Offred, denied her very name in a society in which only her fertility is of importance, recalls throughout her narrative the means by which an entire female literary heritage has been deliberately swept away. As part of the process of censoring women's self-expression, the captions and commentary on the feminist films the Handmaids watch as part of their new education are erased, and all the presses that print women's literature are smashed, in a purge which is enforced with frightening ease. Consequently, women's words are driven underground, tenuously surviving in cryptic, fragmented utterances such as the single phrase Offred discovers in the back of her wardrobe: '*Nolite te bastardes carborundum*'. Although she has no idea what it means, she finds 'a small joy' in 'feeling I'm communing with her, this unknown woman....It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person' (p.62).

A theme which runs throughout Atwood's literature is her concern that the act of writing as a woman is an activity that is fraught with immense dangers

and dilemmas. She frequently foregrounds this suicidal aspect of female art by linking it to the fairy-tale image of the red shoes which dance their wearer to her own destruction.<sup>36</sup> In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the red shoes represent the savage censorship meted out to women who refuse to conform. Offred, watching the execution of two rebellious handmaids, notes that 'beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes....If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet' (p.289). Offred's later assertion that 'I don't want to be a dancer' (p.298) specifically equates the grotesque dance of the executed Handmaids with female creative endeavour, for, by the very formation of her narrative, she is risking her life. As George Sand discovers in 'Sword-Blades and Poppy Seeds', the price the dominant culture exacts from creative women is high and, in Atwood's fiction, women who attempt to take up the tools of creativity often cut themselves.

However, the destructive dance of the red shoes does not only indicate outside censorship, but can also focus attention on the pressures within the female artist herself which force her to censor her own work. In both her fiction and her poetry, Atwood makes a number of specific references to the film *The Red Shoes*, in which Moira Shearer, forced to choose between her husband and her art, kills herself: 'The message was clear. You could not have both your artistic career and the love of a good man as well, and if you tried, you would end up committing suicide'.<sup>37</sup> Atwood sees the figure of the female artist as being in many ways a contradiction within the dominant order, for it means she is more concerned with her personal ambitions and desires than in fostering these feelings in others. Like many other feminist critics, she attacks the cultural pressures placed upon women to remain silent, to lead, as Tillie Olsen puts it, 'wholly surrendered and dedicated lives...to place other's needs first, to feel these needs as their own (the "infinite capacity"); their sphere,



their satisfaction to be in making it possible for others to use their abilities'.<sup>40</sup>

This feeling that 'woman' and 'writer' are two mutually exclusive categories is explored by Atwood in her novel *Lady Oracle*. Many of the trials and tribulations Joan Foster, Fat Lady turned novelist, has to endure are due to the fact that, in order to reconcile her creative desires with the rest of her life she is forced to fragment her inner self, adopting many and varied *personae* in order to correspond with the many different facets of her experience. The character of Joan Foster demonstrates that, unlike Le Guin, Atwood has no faith in the existence of a secure and unified female viewpoint from which to write. Joan is not only a poetess and devoted wife, she is Louisa K. Delacourt, prolific author of Costume Gothics, the Royal Porcupine's lover, and the protégée of a sinister Polish Count. Her efforts to keep each *persona* absolutely separate from the other places an almost intolerable strain upon her, and compromises her work (she can't write her Costume Gothics at home, for example, because her husband knows nothing of her identity as Louisa K. Delacourt). Even when she grows tired of maintaining the many deceptions of which her life is composed, she finds it impossible to do so, feeling 'if I brought the separate parts of my life together (like uranium, like plutonium, harmless to the naked eye, but charged with lethal energies, surely there would be an explosion' (p.217).<sup>41</sup> Potential tragedy therefore looms behind Joan's comic adventures, for she comes to understand through bitter personal experience how the fight to create is a potentially self-destructive one. Atwood presents the choice each creative woman (even, eventually, Joan herself) is forced to make between life and art as

the real red shoes, the feet punished for dancing. You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet off so you wouldn't be able to dance. Finally you overcame

your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted to dance. (p.335)

However, the violent struggle for enunciation that lies at the heart of Atwood's fiction is a common part of the female literary tradition. Ellen Moers, for example, discusses the 'imagery of self-hatred'<sup>42</sup> which energises the work of many women poets; in fact, Joan Foster's description of her artistic dilemma is expressed in terms reminiscent of Anne Sexton's poem 'The Red Shoes', which describes the act of creation as a 'death dance' which leads women to inevitable destruction:

All these girls  
 who wore red shoes,  
 each boarded a train that would not stop,  
 Stations flew by like suitors and would not stop,  
 They all danced like trout on the hook,  
 They were played with,  
 They tore off their ears like safety pins,  
 Their arms fell off them and became hats,  
 Their heads rolled off and sang down the street,  
 And their feet - oh God, their feet in the market place -  
 their feet, those two beetles, ran for the corner  
 and then danced forth as if they were proud,  
 ...the feet went on,  
 They could not stop.<sup>43</sup>

Like Atwood, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar regard this compulsion towards the mutilation of the self as arising from the contradictory position in which the patriarchal order places the female artist, who 'feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to "breed" like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she inherits from her literary foremothers'.<sup>44</sup> Gilbert and Gubar argue that the woman writer bears an immense weight of guilt and rage: at herself for daring to transgress social

norms, as well as at the society which demands such sacrifices. As Atwood's short story 'Lives of the Poets'<sup>45</sup> demonstrates, the internalisation of such intense emotions ultimately turns against the artist herself. Julia is a successful minor poet who goes on reading tours she hates in order to make money to help her husband's floundering business. She thus subordinates her own rights as an artist to male interests, in the belief that it will legalise the practice of her talents. However, the nosebleed that begins in her hotel room only hours before she is due to read is an obvious symptom of her unease at the situation in which she has placed herself. When Julia suspects that her husband is taking advantage of her absence in order to have an affair, her anger grows, and she envisages herself subversively using her art as a weapon to express her rage:

Stomach full of blood, head full of blood, burning red, she can feel it at last, this rage that has been going on for a long time...she is supposed to be good for them, they must open their mouths and take her in, like vitamins, like bland medicine. No, No sweet identity, she will clench herself against it. She will step across the stage, words coiled, she will open her mouth and the room will explode in blood. (p.195)

However, her imaginary explosion into rebellion never happens, for she believes it will accomplish nothing constructive in the salvaging of her life or her marriage: 'I'll come back and yell and scream, and you'll deny it all, you'll look at me, very cool, and say, *What are you talking about?* And what will I be talking about, maybe I'm wrong, I'll never know. Beautiful' (p.195). The only blood Julia can ultimately shed is her own, for the patriarchal system as Atwood envisages it is one where every woman is denied power within the sphere of effective action. Julia's rage may energise her poetry, but it will ultimately rebound back upon its source, ensuring that, in emotional terms, she will still emerge the loser.

'Lives of the Poets' is comparable to a short story by Kate Wilhelm, 'The Hounds',<sup>46</sup> which is similarly concerned with an examination of the patriarchal restrictions placed upon women's autonomous creative action. The heroine of the story, the demurely-named Rose Ellen, is haunted (and Wilhelm uses the word deliberately) by two dogs. On one level they are real animals, for her family as well as herself can see them and touch them. But they also fulfil another, deeply symbolic function within the narrative, as outward expressions of the building up of great tensions within her subconscious. Although Wilhelm ostensibly presents Rose Ellen at the beginning of the narrative as a perfectly normal, happily-married woman, the perceptive reader can immediately detect a certain degree of scepticism adopted by the author towards her subject:

Rose Ellen knew that Martin had been laid off, had known it for over a week, but she had waited for him to tell her. She watched him get out of the car on Friday, and she said to herself, "Now he's ready. He's got a plan and he'll tell me what we're going to do, and it'll be all right." There was more relief in her voice, that was in her mind only, than she had thought possible. Why, I've been scared, she thought, in wonder, savoring the feeling that there was no longer any need to deny it. (p.137)

According to criteria laid down by Peggy Kamuf, the opening of this story shows it to be an example of 'hysterical fantasy', which is given a 'specific structure...[by] the use of the passive voice as a fictional device to hide an active desire'.<sup>47</sup> Wilhelm conveys this tension between passivity and action through her choice of verbs: Rose Ellen *waits* for her husband to tell her a fact she already *knows*, thus giving the impression of a woman who is essentially passive, who 'waits' and 'watches' but rarely acts. This impression is reinforced by the illusion of action contained within the sentence "'Now he's ready....'" which, although it is presented as speech, actually exists 'within her mind only'. As a 'good' woman should, Rose Ellen remains silent in anticipation of her

husband's speech and action: although Wilhelm hints that this passive state has been maintained only by the repression of strong feelings. Rose Ellen's secret knowledge that her husband has lost his job lays upon her the responsibility for initiating an agenda for action - however, the prospect of his usurpation of that responsibility makes her feel relieved at no longer having to deny her fear and insecurity.

The tensions that are set up in this short passage, in which the imperative for action inherent in the possession of knowledge is denied at the expense of self-knowledge, run throughout the story. Rose Ellen has let her husband completely control her life, because she believes it is 'better to be civilized and give in' (p.143). Yet Wilhelm shows that Rose Ellen's denial of emotion sets up strong reactions within her psyche, of which the dogs are a manifestation, for her long-buried passions and potential for creative activity are resurrected in their beauty and sensuousness. However, the extreme nature of this reaction is not fully revealed until the dogs enter her dreams, when their role becomes far more specific. In these dreams, Rose Ellen acknowledges the dogs as hers, and watches them hunt 'a magnificent buck with wide spread antlers' (p.159) through a ghostly landscape. Her long-denied feelings of rebellion have therefore become externalised in the objects of the hunting dogs, which epitomise all her violent emotions towards the men who have circumscribed her life - her father, her step-father and her husband. Her dreams become increasingly full of violent detail, until she finds herself actually participating in the kill: 'In her hand was a knife, and when the dogs felled the animal, she braced herself to leap also' (p.160). This new commitment to action becomes reflected in her real life, in which, realising for the first time that "I never had a voice in anything" (p.156), she begins to assert a point of view.

However, just as Julia in 'Lives of the Poets' fantasises that her words

are weapons, but is in fact reduced to silent impotence by the effect of her own anger, the full force of Rose Ellen's rebellion is never translated into the realm of actuality. The story ends with an act of tragic irony, for the one independent deed she commits within the narrative is to kill the dogs before the 'signals' she reads in their golden eyes incite her actually to commit the violence she dreams of at night. Rather than risk the overthrow of the patriarchal *status quo*, and thus have to confront all the implications of independence, Rose Ellen turns the knife upon a part of her self - the part which is beautiful, creative and independent, but which also craves a bloody revenge against the culture which successfully keeps it repressed and silent. Her action parodies the murder that Virginia Woolf postulates must be carried out by every woman writer; that of the sacrificial, feminine, self - the Angel of the House. Woolf claims it to be an act of necessary self-defence, for 'had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing....Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe'.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Woolf, however, Rose Ellen gives in to the demands of the Angel of the House, and kills the source of her own creativity instead.

Typically, however, Wilhelm resists attaching a definitive ending to 'The Hounds', for the fact that the narrative is mediated solely through the confused consciousness of Rose Ellen herself means that another interpretation may be read into it. Rose Ellen may be simply insane, led into illogical and destructive acts by paranoid delusions which have no foundation in objective experience. And if Rose Ellen is mad, can her actions be rationally justified? However, this story undermines the normal dividing lines between rationality and madness, for viewed as a rebellious response to a lifetime of patriarchal oppression, Rose Ellen's insanity may, paradoxically, be interpreted as 'reasonable'.

Such a breaking down of the barriers between rationality and insanity is typical of women's writing, which frequently embodies its frustration at the struggle for enunciation in the figure of the female hysteric - an hysteria which is occasionally echoed within the experience of the author herself. Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims that 'the woman artist is not privileged or mandated to find her self-in-world except by facing (affronting?) and mounting an enormous struggle with the cultural fictions - myths, narratives, iconographies, languages - which heretofore have delimited the representation of women. And which are culturally and psychically saturating'.<sup>49</sup> As Gilbert and Gubar argue, it is a struggle which drives many women writers into madness, trapping them within an area fraught with paradox. Popular culture shows a preference for insane women writers who, like Carter's marionettes, are transformed into romantic icons celebrating the spectacle of female suffering. However, the issue is further complicated by the fact that the writer may begin to represent herself as mad within her own literature, thus creating a figure who embodies her own artistic impasse.

The characters of Julia and Rose Ellen demonstrate how the pressures of internal and external censorship - the wish to speak versus the urge to remain silent - may eventually mesh and cancel each other out, thus effectively silencing the female subject completely. The woman author's continued disappointment at being denied adequate access to discourse is transposed into the motif of the attic or the asylum, which physically endorses the marginal position of the 'mad' within society. As Elaine Showalter has observed, a substantial body of women's literature exists which employs the theme of institutionalisation as a metaphor for the cultural regulation of female behaviour.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, many of these novels, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* or Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water*, are semi-autobiographical, thus making the

link between madness and the female writer explicit.

Although Doris Lessing's life does not imitate her art in quite the same way, in her fiction, too, the figure of the woman artist and the figure of the madwoman are inextricably entwined. Elaine Showalter observes that Lessing has had 'a lifelong interest in madness and the unconscious', and quotes from an interview given in 1972, in which Lessing says that she has 'always been close to crazy people'.<sup>51</sup> It is an interest which is clearly reflected within Lessing's work, for many of her narrators are perceived to be (and indeed, often perceive *themselves* to be) mad. Lessing reinforces the links between insanity and the artist by means of a number of allusions to literature and madness that run throughout her novels. Probably the most immediately discernable of these recurring motifs is her satirical reworking of Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that the woman writer should no longer write 'in the common sitting room', but have a room of her own in which she would be free from all the interruptions that are a normal part of women's life, and thus hinder their literary production.<sup>52</sup>

Most of Lessing's heroines are searching for a room of their own - Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*, for example (whose surname significantly echoes that of her more famous literary predecessor) writes in her bedroom, the only room in the house in which she can be alone and be 'herself' (p.72).<sup>53</sup> In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown, after years of marriage, runs away from the family home and takes refuge in a shabby house in which, for the first time in years, she can be alone in her own room. The narrator of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* constructs her narrative from the solitude of her living room, whose wall is also the entrance to another world. Yet this Woolfian symbol, ostensibly so positive, acquires rather sinister undertones in Lessing's hands. After all, as will as being a successful novelist, Woolf, along with Sylvia Plath and Anne



Sexton, is also literature's most famous madwoman. She may have been the architect of a room of her own, but she also went mad in it. For Lessing, the ideal of the artistic refuge is always explicitly equated with that other space which is the special provenance of the artistic woman; the asylum, in which unconventional behaviour (and, specifically, unconventional *linguistic* behaviour) can be isolated and regulated.

Lessing's frequent allusions to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, another writer who is almost as famous for having suffered from mental illness as she is for her published work, supports this contention. Two of Lessing's novels in particular, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Four-Gated City*, recall Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), for they are all narratives in which the confinement of potentially creative women accelerates their descent into irrationality. The connection is particularly obvious in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in which the narrator lives in a world bounded by the walls of her flat. She dare not go out because of the tribes gathering outside on the pavement, and consequently develops an alternative existence inside her room, believing that 'there was a room behind that wall, perhaps more than one, even a set of rooms, occupying the same space as, or rather overlapping with the corridor' (p.11).<sup>54</sup> The wall motif is a particularly strong link with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which Gilman's heroine (who, like the Survivor, is nameless), locked into a room by her well-meaning husband after a nervous breakdown, becomes obsessed with the pattern on the wallpaper, discerning within it some kind of displaced version of herself:

This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then,

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so - I can see a strange, provoking formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design. (p.18)<sup>55</sup>

The Survivor expresses her experience in very similar terms, for both women read the pattern on the wall as a sub-text, which, if correctly deciphered, will provide them with a new perspective on experience.

Once there had been wallpaper. It had been painted over, but under the paint outlines of flowers, leaves, birds were still visible. When in the mornings the sun did fall on part of that wall, the half-obliterated pattern showed so clearly that the mind followed suggestions of trees and a garden into a belief that the wash of light was making colour - greens, yellow, a certain shade of clear shell pink, (p.14)

The narrators of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* both strive to attach significance to non-linguistic phenomena such as colour and the shifting relationship between light and shade, thus 'reading' a meaning into the random pattern on the wallpaper which is independent of the ordered, logical pattern of conventional discourse. This search for meaning beyond language is described by both Gilman and Lessing in terms which recall Julia Kristeva's definition of the semiotic as 'a state of disintegration in which patterns appear but which do not have any stable identity: they are blurred and fluctuating'.<sup>56</sup> Kristeva theorises that semiotic discourse has its origins in the pre-Oedipal state which precedes the evolution of the autonomous subject and the acquisition of language.

Unlike her contemporary Hélène Cixous, however, Kristeva refuses to identify the semiotic as a female form of discourse, although she does place it in a 'feminine' relationship to the 'masculine' symbolic order. She also acknowledges that women feel a certain sense of alienation within the symbolic, centred as it is around masculine drives, and thus experience language as 'something secondary, cold, foreign to their lives....As if language were a foreign body'.<sup>57</sup> However, for Kristeva, any attempt to claim the semiotic for feminist ends is doomed to failure, locking those who try it into speechless

isolation, for, existing beyond the boundaries of signification as it does, the semiotic is inherently incommunicable.

The narratives of Lessing and Gilman ultimately support this contention. Only in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* does the wall become a positive symbol, for Lessing characteristically drops any pretence of ambiguity at the end of the narrative, when all the protagonists actually move into the alternate world of the Survivor's utopian vision, thus proving its validity. *The Four-Gated City*, however, remains closer to Gilman's text, in that the importance of the pattern on the wall impotently remains within the realm of the narrator's imagination. The heroine of *The Yellow Wallpaper* eventually takes on the persona of the woman she believes to be trapped within the wallpaper - she 'creeps' ceaselessly round and around the room, tracing out the limitations of her confinement, but never escaping them. Lynda Coldridge, isolated in the basement that is her home, spends her days in the same way, moving

around the space between the two walls visible and invisible, with her back to the room. She moved slowly, staring, directing the pressure of her gaze up and down and around the area of wall she faced; and she pressed her palms against it in a desperate urgent way, as if doing this would cause it to fall outwards and let her step out of the room over rubble and brick. (p.501)<sup>56</sup>

The pattern on the wall, which gives the paper 'an irregularly smudged and rusty look' (p.500), is no source of inspiration, however, for it is a pattern Lynda herself has created in her endless battering against the walls of her prison with her bloody, bitten-down fingers. As in Adrienne Rich's poem 'The Phenomenology of Anger', both Lessing and Gilman show 'the freedom of the wholly mad' to be merely the ability 'to smear & play with her madness/ write with her fingers dipped in it/ the length of a room'.<sup>57</sup> In thus transcribing a hidden discourse of anger, futility and imprisonment, these writers record a story of

the dream of 'a room of one's own' turned sour. As for Kristeva, the soothing rhythms of the semiotic and the urge to reject an alien language in order to reintegrate oneself with the maternal, pre-Oedipal, space leads to the female writer's own ultimate defeat. As Elizabeth Grosz comments, women writers who attempt to integrate this sense of alienation into their work 'write as hysterical subjects, bound to the body and its rhythms, necessarily unspoken even if represented'.<sup>60</sup>

For Kristeva, therefore, any attempt to formulate a female discourse leads inevitably to silence, madness and, ultimately, death, for 'once the moorings of the word, the ego, the superego, begin to slip, life itself can't hang on: death quietly moves in'.<sup>61</sup> In 'About Chinese Women', she cites Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath as examples of women who, 'disillusioned with meanings and words... took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds', a decision which invariably condemned them to a 'silent departure from life'.<sup>62</sup> Kristeva's theories thus place women in an irresolvable dilemma by denying them any alternative to a linguistic system which suppresses and alienates them. Echoing the imagery of Sexton and Atwood, she states that 'estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak'.<sup>63</sup>

However, women's accounts of insanity and its treatment - even if, as in the cases of Janet Frame, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, such accounts originate from personal experience - do not necessarily see madness as originating from within their personal artistic dilemma, but instead frequently stress its function as an aspect of cultural censorship which is imposed upon them from outside. Their struggle towards an adequate expression of female experiences and perspectives puts them at odds with language and ordered discourse, confining them within the stereotype of the hysterical subject, and enabling them to be dismissed by society as insane. In this way, their female vision,

which challenges the stability of the phallogocentric, symbolic, order can thus legitimately be rejected, and the woman who refuses to remain quietly within the home can be forcibly detained within an institution. Janet Frame, for example, presents the asylum as a parody of the domestic sphere, in which the progress of the patient is measured by her efficiency at performing basic household tasks:

You learned with earnest dedication to "fit in"; you learned not to cry in company but to smile and pronounce yourself pleased,...You learned the chores, to make your bed with the government motto facing the correct way and the corners of the counterpane neatly angled; to "rub up" the dormitory and the corridor, working the heavy bumper on the piece of torn blanket smeared with skittery yellow polish.<sup>64</sup>

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, too, is a good example of how this process of marginalisation works, for it is Gilman's semi-autobiographical account of her own treatment for hysteria - an account which illuminates the way in which the very solitude and isolation for which Virginia Woolf yearned could in fact be used to curtail women's literary production. Treated by Weir Mitchell, a contemporary of Freud and Breuer, Gilman was sentenced to his notorious 'rest-cure', in which she was confined to bed and denied intellectual stimulation of any kind. She was sent home with instructions to 'live as domestic a life as possible', and, most importantly, to 'never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'.<sup>65</sup> According to Mary Jacobus, 'Gilman...believed that she only regained her sanity when she quit family life - specifically, married life - altogether and resumed her literary career'.<sup>66</sup> Like many women's narratives based around the twin themes of creativity and insanity, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is thus capable of both a positive and a negative interpretation. As Showalter comments, the story's conclusion encompasses both victory and defeat, for the heroine's 'triumph over the rest cure and its complacent guardians comes at the price of

her mind<sup>67</sup> - while the story itself constitutes Gilman's own cry of defiance against the therapist who unsuccessfully attempted to curtail her 'unfeminine' activities.

It is in the figure of the madwoman, therefore, that the forces of internal and external censorship combine, thus confining female creativity within a double silence. On the one hand, mainstream culture may diagnose the female artist as abnormal and separate her from society accordingly, curtailing her further literary production, and ignoring what she has already written. On the other, her own attempts to evade the restrictions inherent in phallogentric discourse may lead to the woman writer's rejection of herself as speaking subject, effectively locking her within an hysterical state from which no communication is possible. In either context, she is a symbol of negative, and ultimately self-destructive, rebellion; a means by which the artistic female can, in the words of Angela Carter, 'resurrect...her stillborn self-esteem in the privileged license of madness'.<sup>68</sup>

However, while writers like Russ, Atwood and Lessing all evoke the spectre of the solitary and isolated woman writer who, like Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, haunts the attics of the female imagination, they ultimately transform her into something else entirely. Although the stereotype of what Jacobus terms the 'artist-hysteric'<sup>69</sup> symbolises either the power of censorship or a frustrated attempt to evade censorship, Russ, Lessing, Wilhelm and Atwood transform her by drawing out the subversive implications of madness in a radical transmutation of the criteria by which such a symbol is judged. For example, while the link between hysteria and the semiotic is maintained, such an analysis stresses the disruptive potential of the semiotic within the symbolic order, rather than focusing on its inherent incommunicability.

This approach concentrates on another area of Kristevan theory, which explores 'certain historically, linguistically, and psychically significant moments' in which 'the symbolic control of the various semiotic processes' become 'tenuous and liable to breakdown or lapse'.<sup>70</sup> According to Kristeva, such lapses within the symbolic most frequently take the form of 'madness, holiness and poetry';<sup>71</sup> all of which are integral elements in the approach adopted by these writers in their attempts to discover a radical female discourse which will authenticate their voice both in history and art. It is an approach which is embodied in the archetypal motif of the quest, by which these writers seek to change not just society itself, but the whole symbolic tradition which allows women's search for discourse to be dismissed as inarticulate and insane. As the next chapter will show, the result of such a quest is the re-emergence of the artist-hysteric in a new form - that of (to use Russ' terminology) the 'female man', who, as a newly-empowered representative of the semiotic, will pose a profound challenge to the homogeneous, patriarchal, symbolic order.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

I turn your face around! It is my face,  
That frozen rage is what I must explore -  
Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!  
This is the gift I thank Medusa for.'

The best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth.<sup>2</sup>

Ann Swinfen defines the 'form of the personal quest' as 'the search of the individual for personal freedom or fulfilment, the achievement of a scheme of personal integrity or morality'.<sup>3</sup> Although the concept of self-discovery through the quest is a motif which is central to the work of many male writers, as such texts as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' demonstrate, the terms in which Swinfen describes this traditional narrative pattern makes it easy to see how such a form is capable of being adapted by women writers in order to function as an extended metaphor for a specifically *female* search for a secure sense of self-identity in a society opposed to the concept of the autonomous and creative woman.

Such a search may entail an actual journey or adventure, as in Atwood's *Surfacing*, where her heroine returns to her parents' cabin in the Canadian backwoods, or Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, in which Eve/Evelyn constructs a new female identity through a series of picaresque encounters. However, the protagonists of other novels, such as Anna Wulf in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, make equally valuable journeys of self-discovery while going no further than their own locked rooms. Yet, whether actual or imaginary, the quest inevitably involves the exploration of the self and the deconstruction

of the subject's hitherto unquestioned place within society.

Although in this chapter I intend to concentrate on these authors' utilisation of the quest motif, it constitutes only one aspect of these authors' general interest in myth, which *The Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* defines as 'stories of unascertainable origin or authorship accompanying or helping to explain religious belief....expressing some lastingly and generally satisfying account of the experience of man'.<sup>4</sup> This entry's conventional use of 'man' as a collective noun which both includes and conceals 'woman' is unintentionally revealing, for it echoes the criticism levelled at myth by nearly all the authors included in this thesis: that although women are present in myth narratives, they are nearly always passive and silent characters in stories which are generally about *men*. As Simone de Beauvoir says, women 'have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men'.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the writers under discussion fall into two distinct categories regarding their attitude towards myth, for Ursula Le Guin and Kate Wilhelm attach an intrinsic value to it which the other writers do not. Le Guin, for example, has stated her belief that myth is 'a living element, a symbolic constellation' which is 'primarily and ultimately a supra-rational given, a datum'. Her artistic duty, she writes, is to act as a 'witness' to the transcendental truth myth represents, creating 'a way, a thoroughfare, to and from it, by means of my art'.<sup>6</sup> Kate Wilhelm holds a very similar conviction, consistently portraying myth as an alternative version of reality which has been exiled by the dominant order. Such an attitude could be interpreted as being rather reactionary, were it not for the fact that Le Guin and Wilhelm are nevertheless capable of using mythic themes in a disruptive and subversive way. In novels written by both these authors, the eruption of mythic patterns within

the dominant order calls the validity of that order into question, thus opening the way for revolution and radical change.

For Lessing, Russ, Carter and Atwood, however, myth is not another version of reality, nor does it represent a transcendent reality. Indeed, their revision of myth is also an extremely stringent critique, for they all regard mythology to be reinforcing the prejudices of society in offering very limited opportunities to women, both as writers and characters. According to their argument, myth makes universal assumptions by distilling the complexity of human cultural experience into simplistic stereotypes. As Joanna Russ, for example, points out, this phenomenon is especially damaging to women, for it confines them to such roles as 'the devouring wife, the beautiful temptress, the seductive destroyer, the devouring momma,..[and] the healing Madonna'. Because 'none of these are persons in the sense that a novel's protagonist must be a person...none is of the slightest use as myth to the woman writer who wishes to write about a female protagonist'.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood echoes Russ in her statement that 'I am against WOMEN in capitals. Women are all individuals - not just "women". There are more than just the familiar three stereotypes - virgin, whore and mother. Why confine ourselves?'.<sup>8</sup> Angela Carter attacks myth for the same reasons, claiming:

All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. That is why they were invented in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem incongruous, therefore, that, having expressed such opinions, these writers nevertheless utilise mythic motifs. This is because, in spite of

being extremely critical of myth and the roles available to women within it, they also regard it as capable of being manipulated into the instrument of its own subversion. Adopting the view of Angela Carter that 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode',<sup>10</sup> the writers included in this thesis assiduously rework mythic conventions in order to formulate radically new mythological patterns which will both foreground and challenge the patterns of patriarchal thought. Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds this tendency to 'turn again and again to reinterpret, or reenvision classical myths and other culturally resonant materials, such as biblical stories or folk tales'<sup>11</sup> to be prevalent in the work of twentieth-century women poets, but the authors included in this thesis also adopt a similar approach. Creating narratives which mingle fantasy with realism, their technique echoes Gerald Martin's definition of magic realism as 'the juxtaposition and fusion, on equal terms, of the literate and preliterate worlds, future and past, modern and traditional', requiring 'the application of indirect discourse and the treatment of folk beliefs, superstitions and myths with absolute literalness'.<sup>12</sup>

The adaptation of the quest plot is an intrinsic part of this process of radical revision, since it is the quest, more than any other mythic motif, which perpetuates what de Beauvoir terms 'the myth of woman' as man's (inferior) Other,<sup>13</sup> as the work of the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp demonstrates. In *Morphology of the Folktale* he identifies the quest as a pivotal mythic motif, but in his enumeration of the *dramatis personae* essential to such narratives, he assumes the hero of the quest to be male, while the leading female character is simply categorised as the 'sought-for-person'.<sup>14</sup> As the object of the quest, not its instigator, the heroine's passivity contrasts with the active role of the hero; and their marriage, to use the terminology of Propp's fellow myth-critic,

Claude Lévi-Strauss, illustrates her function as an object of exchange between kinship systems.<sup>15</sup> Passing from her father to her husband, she is visible sign of a political negotiation which unites two families or kingdoms under a single patriarchal ruler.

The authors in this thesis, however, turn the traditional pattern of the quest upside-down, rewriting the myths in order to give women new stories in which they are not always condemned to play the powerless and passive part. As this chapter will show, such a project is usually achieved simply by making the questing hero female, an act which automatically throws into relief all the sexist assumptions of the original quest pattern. When, as in the case of such novels as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* or Carter's *The Infernal Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, the questor is male, he is systematically deprived of his heroic status. The efforts of Genly Ai and Desidero to claim the role of hero for themselves while actually having little or no control over events, is a source of much ironic humour in both novels.

The quest narratives created by such writers are therefore intended to disrupt the stability of the very phallogentric *status quo* which the traditional quest motif affirms. The female hero, unlike her male counterpart, cannot return to a stable position within an unchanged social order, for her very action of assuming the role of hero shatters all the assumptions upon which that order rests. Through the contradictory, iconoclastic figure of the female hero (or female man) the authors in this thesis challenge the very concept of the unified subject upon which conventional narratives rest. In an act of radical transformation, they exploit the conventions of the quest in order to focus attention on the subject in the process of deconstruction: an approach which automatically foregrounds the part ideology and history play in the formulation of the supposedly independent individual.

Such a commitment to the deconstruction of the subject may seem to be somewhat at odds with the concept of the quest as a voyage of self-discovery, for what is the point of searching for a 'self' which does not exist? Indeed, the feminist quest envisaged by these authors frequently begins with the overturning of the hero's sense of coherent subjectivity by subverting the conventional antagonistic relationship between 'madness' and 'sanity'. However, while the 'self' becomes something which is fragmented and constantly fluctuating, the subject's slide into insanity comes to paradoxically represent a stage in the formulation of a radically new identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the figure of the female hysteric is an essentially negative stereotype, implying defeat in the face of male censorship, a retreat into the impersonality of the semiotic and the subsequent nullification of language. The only possible alternative to this situation, as Mary Jacobus says, seems to be to conform to the demands of the phallogentric order and ally oneself with the Father and his law. However, the pattern of the quest allows the female artist to escape from the tyrannical symmetry of dualism by offering her a third alternative. Madness is no longer a closed door which cuts her off from discourse, but a means of entry into a revolutionary new conception of 'reality' which is independent of the restrictions of the dominant discourse of patriarchy.

The work of Joanna Russ is a good example of how insanity, seen from such a perspective, becomes a state to be celebrated rather than resisted. Adopting a very different approach from the frequently agonised narratives of writers such as Sylvia Plath or Janet Frame, Russ consistently portrays madness as the first stage of a feminist quest which will enable the female subject to break free from the constraints of patriarchal censorship. *The Female Man* is typical of her approach, in which she gleefully exploits the anarchic potential of the discourse



of insanity in order to resist the 'disease' of 'self-hate' (p.135)<sup>16</sup> which she believes characterises the feminine condition.

Significantly, her method of doing so deliberately parodies and thus transforms the classic treatment for schizophrenia: electro-convulsive shock therapy, or ECT. Elaine Showalter notes that 'the representation of shock treatment...makes use of archetypal patterns of masculine dominance and feminine submission';<sup>17</sup> and women's fiction which describes ECT almost invariably portrays it as a medical ritual which confirms the patient in her role as helpless sacrificial victim on the altar of scientific procedure. For example, the narrator of Janet Frame's novel *Faces in the Water*,<sup>18</sup> Istina Mavet, is 'engulfed with helplessness' (p.25) as she is forcibly pinned down to her hospital bed and wired up to the machines which will deprive her of 'the shape of...[her] identity and its position in space and time' (p.26). In *The Bell Jar* allusions to torture and imprisonment are even more strongly emphasised, for Esther is treated in a barred room where 'everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole and could be locked up' (p.151).<sup>19</sup> Like Istina Mavet, who believes she can evade her ECT treatment by passively submitting to the dehumanising regime of the mental hospital, Esther automatically interprets the procedure as a punishment, wondering 'what a terrible thing it was that I had done' (p.152).

In *The Female Man*, however, the grotesque contortions of the electrocuted madwoman no longer signify defeat, but the triumphant return of a uniquely female energy which is denied any outlet within the established order. In this case, the electrical current which sends the victims of ECT into helpless oblivion is the means which enables Joanna, one of the four narrators of the novel, 'to resolve contraries, unite them in your own person' (p.138), thus removing herself from the role of victim. Unlike Esther and Istina Mavet,

Joanna's exposure to the force of electricity is a voluntary act, for 'only by making yourself a conduit for holy terror and the ecstasy of Hell...can the wires heal themselves. Only in that way can they heal you' (p.139). From this deliberate acceptance of insanity, believes Joanna, will emerge the figure of the empowered woman - the female man.

Women are not used to power; that avalanche of ghastly strain will lock your muscles and your teeth in the attitude of an electrocuted rabbit, but you are a strong woman, you are God's favourite, and you can endure; if you can say "yes, okay, go on" - after all, where else can you go? What else can you do? - if you let yourself through yourself and into yourself and out of yourself, turn yourself inside out, give yourself the kiss of reconciliation, marry yourself, love yourself -

Well, I turned into a man, (p.139)

Russ' female man can be regarded as representing the eruption of subversive semiotic forces into the realm of the symbolic, a process which Elizabeth Grosz describes as 'the symbolization or representation of hitherto unspeakable or unintelligible phenomena, instances on the borders of the meaningful which reveal the coercive forces vested in the domination of the symbolic over the semiotic'.<sup>20</sup> Catherine Clément argues that that the concept of spectacle - in this case the dramatisation of the convulsions of ECT - is an integral part of such a semiotic emergence, when those who are denied a voice within discourse express themselves through bizarre and impossible action: 'Social life is "right side up" (not real social life but whatever the era's mythical image of it is). The festival is "upside down." Everything happens backward, and even bodies find a way to turn upside down'.<sup>21</sup> Within the contradictory configurations of madness, Clément maintains, 'is the systematic illustration of something that runs opposite to the Real. An Imaginary calculated according to orderly displacements of the proportions of the real world'.<sup>22</sup>

Russ' narrative is certainly designed to initiate such a disruptive spectacle, for the female man as Russ portrays her is violent, unpredictable, destructive and irrational, and an extremely problematic feminist hero. The image of Joanna's imagination finds its culmination in the last of the four J's to be introduced to the reader; the 'rosy, wholesome, singleminded assassin' (p.187) Jael. With her retractable talons and metal teeth, she is familiar with all the 'awful intimacies of hate' (p.181) that surround the relationship between the sexes. The figure of Jael recalls Sylvia Plath's Lady Lazarus, who achieves rebirth through her hatred of the men who have exploited and murdered her, rising 'out of the ash' in order to 'eat men like air'.<sup>23</sup> Like Jael, Lady Lazarus arouses mythic echoes, recalling the Furies and the Maenads of Greek mythology, who, according to Carolyn Heilbrun, are 'female forces' who 'are scarcely unbloody, gentle, or what we would today call "feminine"....represent[ing] the strongest deterrent against the male usurpation of female rights and powers'.<sup>24</sup>

The mythic role of the female man is most apparent in *The Adventures of Alyx*, in which Alyx, whose rebellion against her husband 'tosses the world upside down', transforming her into the same dark, mysterious and morally ambiguous figure as Jael. 'She thought, *I am going to give them a surprise*. She felt something form within her, something queer, dark, and hard like the strangeness of strange customs, or the blackened face of the goddess Chance, whose image set up at crossroads looks three ways at once to signify the crossing of influences' (p.34).<sup>25</sup> From the first, Alyx is identified with this goddess, Chance, who is the relic of an earlier matriarchal religion, which held that 'the first man, Leh, was fashioned from the sixth finger of the left hand of the first woman, Loh, and that is why women have only five fingers on the left hand' (p.9). Alyx, however has 'all her six fingers, and what is more, they all worked' (p.9). This carries the clear implication that she is a manifestation

of a pre-patriarchal order over which man has no power or control. This is confirmed in the very last of her stories, 'A Game of Vlet', in which Alyx remakes the world in her own image through the power of a magical game which influences events in the real world.<sup>26</sup>

However, with her irreverent sense of humour and love of games, this 'soft-spoken dark-haired, small-boned woman' (p.71) does not fit the stereotypical heroic mould. The character of Alyx demonstrates that the reader cannot afford to take the female man too seriously, in spite of her evident significance, for that would be to ignore Russ' distinctly satirical treatment of the entire concept. The dramatic extravagance of Joanna's speech in *The Female Man*, for example, is clearly mock-heroic, foregrounding the fact that the figure of the female man is a vehicle for humour of a particularly anarchic kind. The basis of the joke is, of course, that such a creature is only brought into existence at all through Russ' playful semantic manoeuvrings. In what Natalie M. Rosinsky describes as 'a maddened and self-mocking declaration',<sup>27</sup> Joanna maintains that 'if we are all Mankind, it follows to my interested and righteous and rightnow very bright and beady little eyes, that I too am a Man and not at all a Woman' (p.140) - a statement which reveals the erroneous line of reasoning which has led her to the concept of the female man. Quite simply, Joanna has taken the accepted definition of 'man' as a blanket term which includes all humanity, irrespective of gender, and forced it to its logical extreme. Of course, in so doing she ends up with an illogical conclusion, but one which nevertheless reveals the false line of reasoning upon which the entire assumption is based.

In this way, the whole argument is given a further twist by revealing that its superficial humour conceals a genuinely serious intention on Russ' part. By being purposely contradictory, the figure of the female man exposes the

complacent phallogocentric assumptions upon which the patriarchal system rests. Revealing that the accepted order does not represent some kind of transcendent reality, but is in fact composed of ideological and historical processes, she demonstrates that such an order is capable of being changed. For example, it is through the energy of her rage and the indulgence of her vengeful insanity that Jael has fought her way to a situation in which 'I come and go as I please. I do only what I want. I have wrestled myself through to...independence of mind....In short, I am a grown woman' (p.187). And at the end of the book, Jael reveals to a shocked Janet, inhabitant of a pacifist feminist utopia which has long ago rejected the murderous rage of the female man, that it was only through that anarchic anger that Whileaway was brought into existence at all: 'I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain' (p.211).

Paradoxically, therefore, these characters demonstrate Russ' central premise that it is through hysteria itself that the interminable cycle of hysterical reminiscence can be broken. The decision totally to abandon patriarchy and its demands upon the female subject is to achieve an escape from the past, and, in thus reclaiming the possibility of an autonomous future, gain a new control over the present. Esther in *On Strike Against God* describes such a resolution as an 'act of faith' which is

an act, an intention, a project, something that makes you, in leaping into the Future, go so far, far, far ahead that you shoot clean out of Time and right into Eternity, which is not the end of time or a whole lot of time or unending time, but timelessness, that old Eternal Now. So that you end up living not in the future (in your intentional "act of faith") but in the present. After all. (p.86)<sup>20</sup>

Catherine Clément maintains that 'to pass over into the act, making the transition to actions, moving to the inscription of the Symbolic in the Real, and hence producing real structural transformations, is the only possible gesture of departure from sorcery and hysteria'.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Russ' heroines demonstrate that an escape from madness can only be achieved when the subject enacts the rituals of her mania upon the outside world. The search for a cure, as the narratives of Sylvia Plath and Janet Frame demonstrate, does not solve anything, for the demeaning nature of the treatment itself, which assumes the female subject's own guilty complicity in her failure to conform, condemns her to a perpetual reenactment of her own subordinate position within the patriarchal order. Both Alyx and Jael evade entrapment within this cycle of self-defeat by openly accepting, not denying, the power of their own subversive, 'mad' desires, thus achieving an escape from the endless circularity of reminiscence.

In this context, Russ' female man can therefore be regarded as a paradigmatic figure representing all those who embrace the irrationality of madness as a means of achieving a new vision of both themselves and the world in which they live. By her very nature, the female man is committed to action, and in her implicit rejection of ahistorical, static archetypes of femininity, she can be regarded as a radical prototype of female transformation. While comparable characters created by other authors in this thesis do not always share the female man's anarchic rage, they too act as prototypes, exploring the interior space of their own insanity in an attempt to subvert what Toril Moi terms 'these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallogentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women'.<sup>30</sup> However, Russ' treatment of this theme differs from that of the other writers in one important respect. To a large extent, the formulation of the concept of the female man and

ability she represents to 'pass over into the act' is the sole object of Russ' feminist quest, while, with the ultimate aim of achieving a reunion with society and a way out of their hysterical experience, other writers venture further in order to explore this new figure's creative potential.

In spite of her iconoclastic talent for destruction, the female man certainly possesses such a creative aspect, which is based in her ability to break through conventional definitions of femininity in order to become a new 'self' which lies beyond the boundaries of gender. Characters like the narrator of Atwood's *Surfacing*, who perceives herself as 'a creature neither animal nor human....A new kind of centerfold' (p.190),<sup>31</sup> or Lynda Coldridge in Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*, whose anorexia makes her emaciated and sexless, deconstruct the concept of gender identity. As her very name suggests, the female man, in throwing off the limitations of the exclusively 'feminine', gains the ability to take on the characteristics of both sexes. Many critics regard such bisexuality as a particularly liberating concept for women. Hélène Cixous, for example, defines it as 'the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex',<sup>32</sup> and regards it as a state which is intimately linked with the creative process: 'There have always been those uncertain, poetic persons who have not let themselves be reduced to dummies programmed by pitiless repression of the homosexual element. Men or women: beings who are complex, mobile, open....It is only in this condition that we invent'.<sup>33</sup>

Cixous' comments recall Virginia Woolf's androgynous creation Orlando, who is both man and woman, and extraordinarily creative: 'She could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote' (p.174).<sup>34</sup> Woolf defines her as 'one of those monsters of iniquity who do not love' (p.176), but it is this very

selfishness that enables her to immerse herself in literary production. Having lived as a man, and therefore highly aware of gender as an artificial cultural construct, Orlando has no selfless Angel in the House to overcome as other women do. She, as well as the various female men created by the writers in this thesis, represent a new state of being described by Kristeva in 'Women's Time', in which 'the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical space where the very notion of identity is challenged?'.<sup>35</sup>

The prototype of the female man therefore has a special significance for the woman author, representing victory over the censoring pressures that prevent her from writing. However, the manic energy and rage of the madwoman must be channelled in order to achieve a reunion with the self which will enable the female writer to return to both society and history, albeit on very different terms. Paradoxically, however, if she is to achieve such a re-entry into discourse, she must begin a deeper descent into the realm of the individual psyche, entering into a metaphorical realm in which everything the protagonist encounters is charged with symbolic significance. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis says of Levertov and Rukeyser, 'they go deeper into themselves, not as an act of rejection or a declaration of autonomy, but from a belief that inwardness is one necessary path to social transformation'.<sup>36</sup> Nor is this journey a particularly pleasant one. Catherine McLay describes it as 'a movement downward...into nightmare. This latter world is marked by a break in consciousness, increasing restriction of action, isolation, imprisonment and even death, real or symbolic. The escape from this world involves a reversal of the spell: a revolt of the mind, a growing detachment...and ultimately a rebirth and a reaffirmation of society through ritual'.<sup>37</sup>



The more conservative exponents of the quest theme follow this pattern extremely closely. Ursula Le Guin, for example, admits in her introduction to *City of Illusions* that 'most of my stories are excuses for a journey. (We shall henceforth respectfully refer to this as the Quest Theme.) I never did care much about plots, all I want is to go from A to B - or, more often, from A to A - by the most difficult and circuitous route'.<sup>38</sup> Sarah Lefanu follows up this statement of Le Guin's by commenting that her most effective novels are those in which 'the moral and psychological development of the hero is secondary to his relationship to the terrain he crosses', and criticises those narratives, like *The Dispossessed*, where 'the landscape has been lost, battened down beneath what reads like Le Guin's feeling of obligation to show moral and psychological development'.<sup>39</sup> Other critics, however, regard Le Guin's use of myth as a weakness in her work. David Ketterer, for example, criticises *The Left Hand of Darkness* for 'the way in which the mythic structure rigorously, almost mechanically, determines the various turns of the plot'.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates Le Guin's skill at combining mythic elements with the conventions of science fiction, for the hero of the novel, Genly Ai, travels to another planet in order to begin his symbolic descent into a different order of reality. For Ai, 'alone...inside the walls of a dark palace, in a strange snow-changed city, in the heart of the Ice Age of an alien world' (p.23),<sup>41</sup> everything about Gethen, no matter how mundane, is charged with potential significance: 'Tibe....smiled again, and every tooth seemed to have a meaning, double, multiple, thirty-two different meanings' (p.15). Within this schema, Ai is a mythical hero who leaves the rational, everyday world behind and is immersed in an alternative world of immense symbolic importance, populated by androgynous 'female men'.

Like Russ, Le Guin undermines conventional distinctions between madness

and sanity in order to overturn her audience's perception of normality. Although Ai is certainly not mad in a clinical sense, he has been forced into a disjointed, almost schizophrenic, relationship with the society in which he is placed, for he is made continually aware of the degree to which his perceptions, like his sexuality, differ from the Gethenian 'norm'. However, Le Guin, like Russ, also shows that it is through Ai's seeming irrationality that change can be effected within the social order. Gethen's ancient religious cult, the Handdara, demonstrates the value of the schizophrenic vision, for in correspondence with Kristevan theory, which sees religion as being in a particularly privileged relationship with the semiotic, the Handdara represent the eruption of anarchic, semiotic forces within the symbolic order of Gethenian society. In a paradigmatic scene which prefigures his own archetypal descent, Ai encounters the 'old darkness, passive, anarchic, silent, the fecund darkness of the Handdara', which runs 'under that nation's politics and parades and passions (p.56), and which is inextricably linked to the discourse of madness. Significantly, the Handdara value the distorted perceptions of insanity, using 'zanies' as a valued part of their obscure ritual of Foretelling, which is the manifestation of the Handdara's semiotic power. Ai's suggestion that such schizophrenics could be cured within the Ekumenical order is met by the shocked response, 'Would you cure a singer of his voice?' (p.59).

As a mythic hero, Ai is destined to venture into this dark world of madness, ritual and legend, and eventually to become part of it; a process which Le Guin represents through her narrative structure. The stories the Handdara tell are reproduced within the text, creating a multi-layered narrative which intersperses Ai's narration with various Gethenian folk-tales and creation myths. The significance of these departures from the linear structures of the text is not at first clear, until, as Jean Murray Walker points out, 'the pattern of

exchange which the myths set up is repeated - sometimes with an ironic outcome, sometimes not - in the historical section of the novel'.<sup>42</sup> Mythic cycles never recede into the past on a planet where it is always the Year One, and nearly every action of Genly Ai and his companion Estraven arouses echoes within the novel's mythical structure, confirming Ai in his role as hero.

His task is superficially simple - to decipher the underlying meaning of the multiple images with which he is presented in this alien cultural context in order to achieve the integration of Gethen into the greater political whole of the Ekumen, thus bringing it into his own frame of 'reality'. However, as the reader becomes increasingly aware, this objective has a personal dimension. The biased nature of Ai's narration, which dismisses the people he encounters according to his own stereotyped gender-based assumptions, makes it ironically clear that he needs to reach a state where he can accept the Other, the alien, as his equal. This is achieved through the medium of Estraven, who is not only Ai's alien 'Other' whom he must learn to understand, but is also his guide through the ever-changing landscape of dark and light, snow and shadow into which he is cast.

Ai's metaphysical journey towards self-knowledge takes place alongside his physical travels, which follow a pattern which corresponds absolutely to McLay's description of the development of the quest. As his descent through the various strata of Gethenian society continues, Ai's autonomy becomes more and more circumscribed, ending completely in his imprisonment in a labour camp in the socialist state of Orgoreyn. This is his moment of symbolic 'death', for not only do the people of Gethen assume he has been killed when he disappears, but Estraven allows Ai's unconscious state to be mistaken for death in order to effect his escape. Ai's quest, however, is not over, for the culmination of the novel is the journey he makes with Estraven over the Gobrín Ice in order to

return to Karhide and re/union with the Ekumen. It is on the Ice that Ai and Estraven reach the object of their quest. In the mythical 'place inside the blizzard' (p.28) the union of self and other for which the Ekumen strives is finally attained:

I stepped out of the tent onto nothing, Sledge and tent were there, Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow, There was dull light all around, everywhere. When he walked on the crisp snow no shadow showed the footprint, We left no track, Sledge, tent, himself, myself; nothing else at all, No sun, no sky, no horizon, no world, A whitish-grey void, in which we appeared to hang. The illusion was so complete that I had trouble keeping my balance, (p.220)

As in the novels of Joanna Russ, the introduction of mythic elements into the text carries with it a historical implication, for the quest both transcends history and transforms it. Ai's experience in the heart of the blizzard juxtaposes the past with the present, since it echoes the action of ancient Gethenian myths, but it also carries with it the concomitant responsibility to rejoin society in order to share the knowledge gained from such a transcendental experience. Thus reunited with the passage of time, the consequences of Ai's encounter with myth will therefore also extend into the future. As the two companions travel out of the heart of the blizzard, dualism immediately begins to reassert itself, although now both Estraven and Ai have an understanding of an underlying principle of unity which no longer makes the concept a divisive one. As Estraven says, 'It's queer that daylight's not enough. We need the shadows in order to walk' (p.225). Accordingly, the rest of the narrative is centred around Ai's return to Karhide in order to signal Gethen's joining of the Ekumen, although Estraven, his symbolic function complete, dies before this objective is achieved.

Although the episode within the blizzard is undoubtedly the climax of Ai's

quest, what remains of his journey is extremely important in confirming him in his new role as prototype. Until now, he has been frozen into an archetypal role within the text, for his actions only repeat those of mythic heroes that have gone before. However, the new emphasis which is now placed upon the necessity for effective historical action frees A1 from such a static function. The imperative now placed upon him to call down his spaceship breaks with the eternal cycle of legend, for it is a genuinely new act which has never occurred upon Gethen before.

Patrick Parrinder, among others, has criticised Le Guin for her dependence on the characterisation of 'the autonomous human beings of liberal individualism', and makes the point that the metaphors of science fiction offer the perfect opportunity to put the concept of the liberal subject into question.<sup>43</sup> *The Left Hand of Darkness*, however, shows Le Guin exploiting the theme of the alien encounter in such a way as to undermine her hero's sense of autonomy, foregrounding the historical and social processes that form individual consciousness. A1's experiences have fundamentally changed his conception of self, for he no longer places rigid limitations upon gender-identity. It comes as a shock both to him and to the reader when he sees his fellow human beings for the first time in three years for, having accepted Gethenian androgyny, he has become a kind of female man himself. Like Swift's Gulliver, whose experiences on his travels lead him to regard humanity with abhorrence, Genly A1 finds his former Ekumenical comrades have become alien to him: 'But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species: great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer....They took my hand, touched me, held me' (p.249).

In a sense, A1, having become 'sane' according to Gethenian standards, now

no longer has a human perception of normality. This is his enlightenment; but it also renders his return from his personal quest highly problematic. It is this allowance for ambiguity and change in *The Left Hand of Darkness* which makes it Le Guin's most successful adaptation of mythic patterns, for it has an open-endedness her earlier quest novels, featuring less problematic heroes who search for (and find) stable identities which transcend history, do not possess.

Like Genly Ai, Kate Wilhelm's heroines also work their way towards a realisation that the reality they have been brought up to believe is incontrovertible is actually only one possible version out of many others. *Fault Lines*, for example, demonstrates Wilhelm's belief that it is only the dominant order which draws up the boundaries between one 'reality' and another, relegating the realities of other cultures, peoples and times to the marginal discourse of myth and legend, instead of acknowledging them as part of a greater whole. The novel's narrator, Emily, remembers accompanying her father on his geological expedition, listening at night to his stories of the Indians who once inhabited the area, and becoming aware for the first time of other modes of existence than the one offered to her by her father:

My father went on to lecture about the importance of preserving local myths and legends without at the same time succumbing to the temptation to add any trace of them to the fund of real knowledge men of science were constantly building. I listened, no longer understanding, and stared at the solid wall that separated the blackness from us where we sat close together, sheltered by the circle of flickering light.

And I thought the Klamth Indians were right; beyond that wall the ghost of chief Liao walked without a sound, leaving no trace that we would ever see. (pp.14-15)<sup>44</sup>

*Juniper Time* is the story of a woman's quest for such a mythic past, in which a linguist, Jean, leaves her own culture in order to live with an Indian tribe in the desert. Because of her training, she has been called upon to decipher a cryptic message believed to have been sent to mankind by aliens, a

task she eventually achieves only by leaving the limited perspectives of science behind. Guided and advised by the Indian wisewoman Serena, she learns to find her 'thinking place' which enables her to see beyond the limitations of language. She finally reaches an intuitive understanding of the message's meaning while travelling alone in the desert, already identified as 'the land of fairy tale and dreams' (p.231)<sup>45</sup> - a journey she later relates to the Indians using the narrative techniques of myth: 'She had talked as if the desert had opened a path for her, had sheltered her when she needed shelter....She had talked of a coyote keeping her company on the long nights' (p.237).

Jean's entire perspective upon reality is shown to have changed, for as she says, everything 'shifts' once she realises that 'I had been deluding myself. I'd let what I wanted take on a separate reality' (p.270). Moreover, her experiences have enabled her to achieve a view of the world and her role within it which is closer to that expressed in myth. The lesson the desert and her 'thinking place' teach her is that the message is literally meaningless, a product of her astronaut father's love of 'puzzles, limericks, games, tongue twisters' (p.91). In spite of this realisation, Jean eventually decides to present her father's game to the world as an authentic alien communication because, with her new knowledge of the power of myth, she sees the message to be of inestimable symbolic value. She thus allows it to become an instrument of unification, convincing the world that it must work together in order to prepare for a visit from outer space.

Such a conclusion neatly deconstructs the criterion by which mythology is judged by implying that myth and tradition are linked to a reality greater than that accepted by science and technology. Like Genly Ai's descent into the place inside the blizzard, Jean's desert quest influences the progress of history, for she has achieved an understanding of how to bring her father's words out of the

past and empower them to effect change within the present - an act which gives the world new possibilities for the future. This act also exposes the delusions by which the dominant order operates, for Jean's deception succeeds because, cloaked in the proper technical terms, it holds out the possibility of the technological future humanity, through such manifestations of popular culture such as 'UFOs, movies, books, even comic books', has 'been conditioned, or conditioned themselves, so long to believe' (p.265).

Unlike Russ or Carter, for example, who regard myth as trapping women the female subject within essentialist stereotypes, Wilhelm therefore sees it as providing both men and women with a potentially liberating discourse which will empower the individual to alter the course of history. In their return to society, her heroines do not leave the world of myth behind but bring it back into the social order, therefore destroying that order's claim to be the only standard by which reality can be measured. Such a process inevitably questions the concept of the liberal, autonomous subject, since the stable identity the individual works so hard to construct is revealed to be built on the shifting sands of subjectivity.

Wilhelm's preoccupation with the process of bringing the mythic past into the present is metaphorically represented by the quest of the individual for the figure of the parent. Typical Wilhelm heroines, such as Emily in *Fault Lines*, or Jean in *Juniper Time*, discover that the progress of the personal quest enables them to reassess the formative experiences of their childhood, healing long-forgotten traumas by bringing the memory of them into the present, where they can be healed by being reconciled with the individual's adult consciousness. Through such a process, the female subject can thus acknowledge herself to be her parent's natural successor within a historical progression which holistically unifies past, present and future. Unfortunately, however, this theme constitutes



a disturbing area of weakness in her work, and is an unsatisfactory element in her adaptation of the quest theme, throwing doubt on whether she has indeed succeeded in surmounting the essentialist bias feminists like Russ, Carter and Atwood believe to be inherent in myth.

As *Juniper Time* shows, Wilhelm's work is characteristically preoccupied with an exploration of father/daughter relationships. The wise, benevolent father figure is of central importance to nearly all of her narratives, and the heroine's reconciliation with him is always presented as an imperative. Even the fiercely independent Emily Carmichael in *Fault Lines* eventually accepts that her father is the most important person in her life. Although she questions his version of reality, maintaining that his 'truth...is as variable as spring weather', and that 'trying to keep and live by...[it] is as futile as trying to wear a smoke ring' (p.55), she ultimately attests to his positive role. The novel ends with Emily's literal descent into darkness, trapped in the ruins of her home after an earthquake. Underground, she contemplates her self and her personal history, just as Jean discovers her 'thinking place' in the desert, although, unlike Jean, Emily's subsequent return to society is doubtful since Wilhelm does not include an account of her rescue in the narrative. In a state in which dream, delerium and memory merge, Emily imagines herself to be at a party which is attended by all the people who have acted as her mentors throughout her long life. Significantly, the novel ends as she assigns her father the role of guest of honour, asking him to 'dance the first dance together' with her (p.195). Emily's maternal grandfather is the stern representative of the patriarchal authority against which she rebels, but her attitude towards her father fatally undercuts the symbolic force of that rebellion.

Characteristically, therefore, Wilhelm's quests do not ultimately remove her

heroines from the patriarchal order, and frequently bind them to it all the more securely. Such an approach contrasts with that adopted by Margaret Atwood whose protagonists eventually achieve a return to society having been profoundly altered by their personal journey. Unlike the science fiction of Le Guin and Wilhelm, however, whose work revises mythic patterns within an already fantastic setting, Atwood's novels have a superficial aura of realism, which they attain by usually being set within easily recognisable modern geographical locations - typically, Canadian cities such as Ontario and Toronto (*Life Before Man*, *The Edible Woman*, *Dancing Girls*); more unusually, Caribbean islands racked by revolution (*Bodily Harm*), or the unspoiled backwoods of French Canada (*Surfacing*). Even the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead, obviously fictional though it may be, is given 'its edge of realism'<sup>46</sup> by being set in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yet all these worlds are seen from the point of view of the principal character herself, and thus from a perspective that becomes increasingly skewed as the novel progresses.

This phenomenon is examined with reference to *The Edible Woman* by Catherine McLay, but her observations are actually relevant to any of Atwood's novels. She says that the action of *The Edible Woman* takes place in settings which 'exist in actuality...yet...suggest something beyond the surface', and makes the point that 'on closer examination, many of these settings approach more closely to surrealism. Like the fantasies of Henri Rousseau, they are simplified, abstracted, belonging to the world of dream or nightmare rather than to the everyday world of taste, touch, sight, and smell'.<sup>47</sup> The half-finished apartment block in which Peter lives, for example, is an echoing wasteland of 'shapes covered with dusty tarpaulins...and troughs for plaster and ladders and stacks of pipes', with 'the rough grey underskin of subflooring and unplastered wall-surface...showing, and raw wires dangl[ing] like loose nerves from most of the

sockets' (p.57).<sup>48</sup> On one level it functions as a perfectly realistic setting, but as the novel progresses, the apartment also becomes a metaphor for the sterile and incomplete nature of Marian and Peter's relationship, as well as being indicative of the ugly, hard-edged constructions (both mental and actual) which Atwood considers to be particularly characteristic of patriarchal societies.

Marian's progression towards mental autonomy is marked by a succession of such scenes. For example, the supermarket packed to overflowing with glossy consumer products, full of the sound of 'electric violins' (p.174) becomes a symbol of entrapment, and in the Egyptian section of the Royal Ontario Museum, as Catherine McLay describes, Marian 'moves into the world of death and negation', as her 'symbolic journey leads to the mummy room and to ancient Egypt, linked to the descent as "the land of death and burial"'.<sup>49</sup> She finally reaches the nadir of her quest when she undergoes an actual descent into a snow-filled ravine, thus reaching (rather like Genly Ai in the heart of the blizzard) a state 'close to absolute zero' (p.263) - the point from which only ascension is possible, represented by her decision to abandon the role of victim and confront Peter.

However, just as Genly Ai has a companion and a guide within the blizzard, so Marian encounters a figure who functions as her guide through the confusing and surreal landscape of her symbolic descent. This is Duncan, an enigmatic and not wholly attractive figure who nevertheless fascinates her. Appropriately, since her quest is linked with Egyptian mythology, Duncan bears a clear relation to Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the Egyptian underworld: "'I'm a changeling,'" he tells Marian. "'I got switched for a real baby when young and my parents never discovered the fraud....They kept telling me my ears were too big; but really I'm not human at all, I come from the underground....'" (p.141). That he is fascinated by the mummies in the museum is also apt, for Anubis was considered

to be primarily the god of embalming, responsible for the weighing of souls in the underworld. Marian, also, perceives him in terms of animal imagery - when they finally sleep together in a brief, passionless liaison, she feels 'his face pressing against her, nudging into her flesh, cool; like the muzzle of an animal, curious, and only slightly friendly' (p.254).

It is through Duncan's guidance that that Marian makes her final descent to the snow-filled ravine outside town where he deliberately shatters her final illusions about herself, forcing her towards the confrontation with Peter she is still desperately trying to avoid. She leaves Duncan in the ravine, 'a dark shape against the snow, crouched on the edge and gazing into the empty pit' (p.265), having fulfilled his mythic task. When he reappears, it is only as the adolescent, self-centred, student he always was on the surface.

In Atwood's fiction, as in Le Guin's, the figure of the guide acts as a signal that the female hero is descending deeper into the alternative perspectives of her madness. In many of Atwood's novels, however, the meeting with the guide is preparation for a further, more important encounter, which, while enabling the subject to return to society, will also give her a profoundly changed sense of her place within it. This encounter takes the form of reunion with the mother, an act which Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope see as being 'crucial to the female hero',<sup>50</sup> for, according to their argument, 'one destructive effect of the widespread reinforcement of the view of women as adjuncts to men has been the alienation of women from each other and, specifically, of mother and daughter'.<sup>51</sup> The rejection of the dominant order implied in the discovery of the anarchic spirit of the female man, who exists beyond all patriarchal definitions of femininity, has, in the words of Pearson and Pope, 'demythologized the patriarch',<sup>52</sup> thus freeing the female subject to transfer her allegiance from her father to her mother. This is an act with resounding implications,

since it shatters the eternal Oedipal triangle which persuades the subject into a false identification with her father and a reluctant denial of her mother. As Luce Irigaray argues, the result of the Oedipal crisis is 'the rejection, exclusion of a female imaginary', placing woman 'in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology'.<sup>53</sup>

According to Irigaray's analysis, the relationship between mother and daughter is inevitably problematic, and one which feminists frequently portray as inhibiting, not aiding, female literary production. Adrienne Rich, for example, says in *Of Woman Born* that 'it is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed. But in my landscape or hers, there would be old, smoldering patches of deep-burning anger'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the artist-hysteric very often places the blame for her situation explicitly on her mother, as Anne Sexton does 'The Red Shoes'. The shoes which represent her creative death-dance, she says, 'are not mine./They are my mother's./Her mother's before'.<sup>55</sup>

Atwood explores the ambivalent nature of such a relationship in her novel *Lady Oracle*, in which the mother of Joan Foster is both the object and guide of her daughter's personal quest. In a spiritualist meeting, the medium Leda Spratt introduces Joan to the apparition of her mother, who is trying to tell her "...what? She's very unhappy about something" (p.110).<sup>56</sup> Joan is understandably surprised by this event, as, at the time, her mother is not yet dead. Yet her mother's duplicate presence in her life foregrounds the ambiguous nature of mother/daughter communication as an amalgam of mixed messages which blend the urge to conform with patriarchal dictates with an urge towards revolution and transformation; an ambiguity summed up by the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*,

who recalls that her mother 'said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she also taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan'.<sup>57</sup> In reality, Joan's mother is, as Pearson and Pope observe, 'a typical, intensely bitter product of sexism',<sup>58</sup> whose 'bitterness at having sacrificed herself makes her into the potential murderer of her daughter'.<sup>59</sup> In her maternal role as what Nancy Friday terms 'the eternal no-sayer in her daughter's eyes',<sup>60</sup> Joan's mother strives to stifle Joan's sense of autonomy, trying in vain to force her daughter into an acceptable feminine role, urging her to lose weight, and to use make-up and clothes in order to create a glamorous, desirable image.

In her symbolic guise, however, she is Joan's muse, Lady Oracle, the subject of the poems that bring her daughter literary fame. However, it is only towards the end of the novel that Joan comes to see her as a figure who is mutely pleading for an end to a patriarchal process which dooms all daughters to an endless repetition of their mother's mistakes:

She'd never really let go of me because I had never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. 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. She couldn't stand the view from the window, life was her curse. How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. What was the charm, what would set her free? (pp.329-30)

With this realisation, the cycle of victimisation is broken, since Joan realises that 'her mother is not her daughter's possessor, nor is she a victim whom the daughter is responsible for freeing'.<sup>61</sup>

In rediscovering the figure of the mother, therefore, Atwood's female heroes also eventually demythologise her, since, like Duncan in *The Edible Woman*, she loses all her patriarchal, archetypal connotations on the heroine's reascent into the symbolic order. As the narrator of *Surfacing* learns, there is 'no total

salvation, resurrection, Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human' (p.189). Atwood's quests inevitably end with such a rejection of mythic stereotypes, however important they have been to the heroine during her period of insanity. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian effects her own return to normality by baking a cake in the shape of a woman, offering it to Peter as her 'substitute, something you'll like much better' (p.271). However, once it has fulfilled the role it was created for, freeing Marian from her impending marriage, the cake becomes 'only a cake' (p.273) once more.

Inevitably, Atwood's questors find that nothing has changed on their return to the symbolic order, for it is still a dangerous and uncertain place for a woman to be. However, as is typical of the returning mythic hero, they have undergone a period of personal transformation which has ensured their escape from such a cycle of victimisation. They correspond to Kathryn Hume's description of the returning hero who 'has gained mastery of two worlds, his own and the special world of his adventure. He wins the freedom to live in a manner that is better, higher, and fuller than that of his fellows....The ego's centering in the conscious is firmer than ever before, but the ego also has gained more control of the unconscious as well'.<sup>62</sup> For Atwood's heroines such enlightenment takes the form of an acceptance that, although life remains a risk, they can no longer afford to be permanently oppressed by their own fears. The narrator of *Surfacing*, for example, makes the decision 'to refuse to be a victim', identifying 'the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone' as 'a lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been' (p.191).

Fatalistic though this view might seem, it signals a renewal of possibilities for Atwood's protagonists. The woman who has returned from her

encounter with her mother is, by definition, a prototype of the future, seeking to redeem the past by effecting some sort of change within the present. On her (possible) return from St Antoine in *Bodily Harm*, for example, Rennie is overcome by the feeling that 'she's returning after a space trip, a trip into the future: it's her that's been changed but it will seem as if everyone else has, there's been a warp. They've been living in a different time' (p.300).<sup>63</sup> In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster decides to abandon the writing of Costume Gothics, deciding 'maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you' (p.345).

Atwood's belief in the necessity of a return from the quest is echoed in the work of Doris Lessing, who is equally concerned that the individual achieve such a reintegration with society upon achieving enlightenment. That Lessing takes this attitude is not surprising since, as Moira Monteith says, she 'has always looked for a communal rather than an individual purpose in her writing'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, such an opinion is rather at odds with Lessing's frequent adaptation of the pattern of the personal quest within her work, and may account for some of the inconsistencies evident in her approach.

On many levels, her quest narratives are directly comparable to those of Russ, Atwood and Le Guin. Like these authors, Lessing presents hysteria as an energising state which, in the words of Barbara Hill Rigney, serves as 'a rehearsal for the madness which will lead to enlightenment'.<sup>65</sup> In order to achieve such enlightenment, Lessing implies, the hysteric is required to reject scientific forms of psychiatric treatment, which only invite her to re-enter the cycle of reminiscence, and welcome the altered vision with which her insanity presents her. As such characters as Mother Sugar in *The Golden Notebook* demonstrate, Lessing suggests that, in order to be truly effective, the figure of the psychiatrist must merge with that of the mythic guide, thus achieving



R.D. Laing's ideal of the 'physician-priest' who is open to all the metaphysical possibilities insanity can contain: 'The proper function of the therapist "in a truly sane society," he maintained, is to act as the patient's guide in a menanoiac, or transforming, journey that is archetypally epic...a psychic pilgrimage more exotic and perilous than the voyages of Ulysses or Kurtz'.<sup>66</sup>

Mother Sugar is the supreme embodiment of this view, for she does not take the subjective, detached stance the conventions of her profession demand. Instead, she agrees with Anna's sense that people who 'are cracked across...split...are keeping themselves open for something' (p.460).<sup>67</sup> Although a qualified psychiatrist, Mother Sugar eventually attains a semi-mythic status far from her scientific calling, appearing in Anna's dreams as 'very large and powerful, a kind of amiable witch' (p.250). Anna fears her dreams, in which she is haunted by an anarchic manifestation of the female man which 'mocked and jibed and hurt, wished murder, wished death. And yet...was always vibrant with joy' (p.464). However, through Mother Sugar's encouragement, she realises that because this 'element' exists 'outside of myth, and inside another human being', it 'can only mean it is loose in me also, or can only too easily be evoked' (p.465). Having thus removed the anarchic principle from an objectified realm of myth and dream and recognised it as part of her self, Anna gradually becomes empowered to rejoin society as a productive and creative individual. Not only does she begin once again to write coherent, unfragmented narratives, but she makes the political decision to join the Labour Party, thus (in Lessing's terms at least) finding an effective voice for herself within history.

For Lessing, the quest must end by demythologising itself, for the subject must move out of her private world of solitary experience and reintegrate herself into the social mainstream. *The Four-Gated City* is a novel which strongly foregrounds this element in her work, for although Martha Quest and

Lynda Coldridge withdraw to their basement in order to guide each other towards 'glimpses of a new understanding' (p.388),<sup>68</sup> Lessing eventually moves the narrative firmly into a future where insanity is finally understood to be evidence of 'capacities above normal' exhibited by 'those people...in the main line of evolution' (p.540). By creating a world in which, as Elaine Showalter says, "'schizophrenia" is...a higher capacity of the female mind which has been suppressed by a ruthless psychiatric power',<sup>69</sup> Lessing achieves her ultimate aim of integrating the individual into the group by ensuring the inclusion of the isolated figure of the madwoman within the area of the dominant discourse. In both *The Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook*, the artist-hysteric is moved out of the role of solitary visionary and rationalised into a social, and thus communal, context.

This movement away from, but also eventually back to, the group also includes a consideration of relationships between women, and specifically between women and their daughters. Like Atwood, one aspect of Lessing's quest is a symbolic journey across what Irigaray terms 'the dark continent of the dark continent, the most obscure area of our social order'<sup>70</sup> which the mother/daughter relationship represents. In narratives like *The Summer Before the Dark* and *The Golden Notebook* Lessing approaches the issue from the mother's point of view, portraying her as seeking to escape from the restrictions imposed upon her by the pressures of family life, while in other novels her perception of the daughter's situation is very similar to Atwood's. In *The Four-Gated City*, for example, Martha Quest's progress through her madness is interrupted by a visit from her mother which, instead of signalling a reconciliation, is marked by a tragic series of misunderstandings, as each side timidly attempt to find some kind of common ground for communication, only to misinterpret the other's

intention and withdraw rebuffed. When Mrs Quest's visit is over, the two women part company having agreed only on the depth of their mutual incomprehension:

They chatted about small topics until the flight was called, then, as she vanished from her daughter's life for ever, Mrs. Quest gave a small tight smile, and said: 'Well, I wonder what all that was about really?'

'Yes,' said Martha, 'so do I.'

They kissed politely, exchanged looks of ironic desperation, smiled and parted. (p.299)

While the protagonists in Atwood's novels move on from such an emotional impasse in order to achieve eventual understanding, in Martha's case the expected reunion between mother and daughter simply does not happen. Nicole Ward Jouve convincingly argues that this section of *The Four Gated City* is full of unresolved narrative tension, for 'Mrs Quest pulls like unease, neurosis even, at the text. The mother is never chosen: she is avoided, rebelled against, fled from, even when she is actually closest'.<sup>71</sup> Although it may flirt with the idea, the narrative ultimately avoids reconciliation, thus successfully 'evading its own neurosis in relation to the mother'.<sup>72</sup>

In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Lessing finds a place for reconciliation within her fictional scheme, although her treatment of the theme, mediated as it is through the consciousness of the novel's narrator, is somewhat impersonal: thus achieving another kind of evasion of the mother. This character's primary role in the novel is to act as witness to the upbringing of Emily, the young girl whom she shelters in her flat. The scenes she observes taking place on the other side of her living room wall are almost invariably of conflict between the infant Emily and her mother, and they are linked together by the sound of 'a child crying. The miserable lost sound of incomprehension' (p.129).<sup>73</sup> Eventually, the child's sobs merge with those of her mother, uniting the two in a picture of inconsolable grief and mutual alienation: 'I heard the sobbing of a child, a

child alone, disliked, repudiated; and at the same time, beside it, I could hear the complaint of the mother, the woman's plaint, and the two sounds went on side by side, theme and descant' (p.131).

In this novel Lessing, like Atwood, shows mother and daughter to be trapped within a destructive cycle in which the only heritage transmitted through the matrilineal line is one of misunderstanding and self-disgust. Eventually, however, the adult Emily is reunited with her mother by going through into the world behind the wall, followed by the narrator, who also, as Pearson and Pope observe, 'symbolically finds her own positive mother' in 'the visionary woman who leads them to a new consciousness'.<sup>74</sup> However, the method by which Lessing achieves this reconciliation is neither as convincing nor satisfactory as Atwood's treatment of the same theme, for Lessing exhibits an impatience with the progress of the quest which sometimes leads to her direct - and disruptive - intervention in the text.

The ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is unsatisfactory in many ways, since it indicates Lessing acting as *dea ex machina* in order to force the narrative towards a resolution. While Atwood's characters follow the process of the quest, achieving eventual reunion with the mother by progressing through a series of ritual stages, Emily's reconciliation with her mother is attained by the simple act of stepping through the wall; a solution provided for her by Lessing herself. Such a hasty return to the group invalidates any sense of individual progression that might be present within the narrative, and clearly indicates Lessing's ultimate unease in focusing upon personal desires rather than general imperatives; an unease which is allayed in *The Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook* by ensuring her protagonists' eventual reintegration into a social order.

The concept of reconciliation with the mother, so important to Atwood, is

one which Lessing approaches with evident reservations. Lessing's ambiguous response to the figure of the matriarch is echoed in the work of Angela Carter, according to whose satirical analysis an understanding of the mother also entails a rejection of her. As in her rewriting of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter's use of mythic motifs is deliberate and overt, and novels such as *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* follow the archetypal pattern of the quest extremely closely. In both novels, the main protagonist leaves the realm of normal time and ordered logic behind, entering a strange and surreal fantasy world, in an obvious movement from the symbolic order to the chaotic, anarchic semiotic. Dr Hoffman's invention of his desire machines, for example, catapults Desiderio into 'the kingdom of the instantaneous....no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream' (p.18).<sup>75</sup> In a dimension of (un)reality where desire moulds reality into its own shape, the landscape becomes a metaphor of the hero's mind, just as, in *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/Evelyn finds in the desert 'a landscape that matches the landscape of my heart' (p.41).<sup>76</sup>

Against such backdrops, Carter's quest hero/ines encounter fantastic beings who, like the landscape itself, are manifestations of the desires of the central characters themselves. Within the quest structure of the narrative they function conventionally enough as guides and instructors on the protagonist's journey towards a new definition of the self. Carter makes it clear, however, that they exist only in order to be deconstructed, for, as Eve/Evelyn says, 'a critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives' (p.6). In correspondence with Carter's view of myth as 'consolatory nonsense', Eve/Evelyn not only crosses the boundary from one gender to another, but also debunks mythical female stereotypes in which, until his transformation, he has believed implicitly. This process is embodied in the 'mythological artefact', Mother, who performs the operation that

transforms Evelyn into Eve, an episode which satirises the entire pattern of the quest.

In an obvious reference to the descent of the archetypal hero, Evelyn is taken through 'convoluted passages' to the city of Beulah that lies beneath the desert. In an ironic reversal of the birth process, Evelyn perceives that he is travelling towards the mother, 'she who'd always been waiting for me, where I'd exiled her, down in the lowest room at the root of my brain' (p.58). The implication is that his journey is through his own subconscious, where he will encounter the figure of the matriarch which, as a man, he has suppressed and disowned. When Evelyn finally meets her, Mother fulfils all his expectations, for he says, 'when I saw her, I knew I had come home; yet a desolating strangeness overwhelmed me, for I knew I could not stay there' (p.58). From this point on, however, the entire episode deteriorates into farce, for this mother goddess, it turns out, is a product of science and surgery, having 'reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem' (p.60). In the face of this revelation, Evelyn's contention that 'I was at a shrine' (p.60) seems a laughable misconception.

However, like Russ' presentation of the concept of the female man, the comedy implicit in Evelyn's adventures in Beulah conceal a serious intention on Carter's part, for, through his transformation into a woman, he is forced into a genuine reconsideration of the woman's role in culture and society. Eve's journey ends at the sea (a landscape which exists in obvious opposition to the desert), where she undergoes a second descent and rebirth. This time, however, it takes her away from the Mother, who, she now understands, 'is a figure of speech' (p.184). When Eve re-emerges from her 'cave beyond consciousness' (p.184), it is into a world where time has reasserted itself, and where mythic archetypes no longer have meaning.

I emitted, at last, a single, frail, inconsolable cry like that of a new-born child. But there was no answering sound at all in that vast, sonorous place where I found myself but the resonance of the sea and the small echo of my voice. I called for my mother but she did not answer me.

"Mama - mama - mama!"

She never answered. (p.186)

Having lost her metaphorical power, Mother has metamorphosed into a mad old woman singing on the beach; her hair, 'like a nest of petrified snakes' (p.190), a pathetic echo of her former Medusa-like role as 'castrating female'.<sup>77</sup> Eve, who during her quest has been both virgin and whore, no longer needs to define herself according to such stereotypes, since she has been reborn into the world of time and historical progression. This means that the fact that the old woman whom Mother has become will 'soon die' (p.190) is a triumph, not a tragedy, for it signifies the beginning of a new order in which women have been freed from the mythic roles which men frequently force them to assume.

Eve's mythical quest, therefore, has led to negation of myth itself, a rejection which Carter sees as necessary if women are to function effectively within history. She reaches a conclusion which is very similar to that of Kristeva, who holds that the symbolic order, phallogentric though it is, is ultimately necessary to the female subject. As Toril Moi explains, 'we have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. There is no *other space* from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language'.<sup>78</sup> Although mythic motifs have value in their ability to 'allow the *jouissance* of semiotic motility to disrupt the strict symbolic order',<sup>79</sup> Carter always treats them satirically, deconstructing them with the ultimate intention of returning her protagonist to the world of time and of the symbolic, thus showing, as Waugh says, that 'freedom, harmony, human dignity and love lie not

in the realization of any 'essence' of the human individual but in the relationships with others which construct our *social identity*'.<sup>60</sup>

*Nights at the Circus*, however, foregrounds another element within her work which is also present in *The Passion of New Eve*, though not as strongly stressed. Although Evelyn/Eve has become wholly female by the end of the narrative, rejecting Leilah's offer to make her a man again, the fact that, like Orlando, she has experienced life from the perspective of both sexes, makes her a literal 'female man'. Although she re-enters the world of the symbolic, she cannot help but carry with her the insights bestowed upon her by the fluctuations in her gender-identity. *Nights at the Circus*, too, is centred around such a deliberate paradox, embodied in the figure of Fevvers, whose impossible wings may be genuine or a clever con trick. As an earthy, practical Cockney girl who is only concerned with material advancement and economic security, Fevvers would manifest female concerns within the symbolic, social order were it not for her wings. Because they deny any classification or rationalisation, they bring an element of semiotic disruption to the logical order of the text, and the tension they thus create is maintained by Carter throughout the narrative.

Even so, there are many episodes within the novel in which Carter engages in her habitual deconstruction of male definitions of women - because of her wings, Fevvers encounters many attempts to trap her within myth-inspired stereotypes. As a child living in Ma Nelson's brothel, she masquerades as Cupid for the clients, later graduating to the role of Winged Victory. Mr Rosencreutz, who kidnaps Fevvers in order to sacrifice her in a satanic ritual, regards her as "Azrael, Azrail, Ashriel, Azriel, Azaril, Gabriel; dark angel of many names", a mythic "presence, who, like Proserpine, comes from the Land of the Dead to herald new life!" (p.75).<sup>61</sup> However, Carter's heroine succeeds in surmounting all these ludicrous roles while still not being unmasked as a fake at the end of



the novel. Indeed, the reader is left thinking that her wings might very well be real, ensuring that Fevvers' semiotic, disruptive, function within the narrative is left intact. When Lizzie observes to Fevvers that "'it's New Year's Eve; we're on the cusp, my dear, tomorrow is another time-scheme'" (p.284), she signals Fevvers' entry into a new century of the avant-garde which will combine elements of both history and mythology, just as Fevvers does, thus bringing the disruptive powers of the female man into the world of time.

*Nights at the Circus*, like Carter's other novels, shows the principal protagonists engaged in the process of deconstructing the myths that form their cultural perceptions. However, the element of the fantastic contained in Fevvers remains unchallenged, with the result that a greater element of the semiotic is permitted admission to history, leaving the reader with an enticing glimpse of a radically new order in which the semiotic and symbolic are able to co-exist. Although Carter has always ridiculed the whole idea of reunion with an archetypal mother-figure, viewed from the perspective of Kristevan theory it could be argued that *Nights at the Circus* actually achieves such a reconciliation in a way that supercedes the limitations of mythology. Although Fevvers appears to have no biological mother of her own, through the very impossibility of her existence within the symbolic she has gained the ability to speak from the *chora*, the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic space which, according to Kristeva, is suppressed by the symbolic order.

Fevvers, therefore, can be viewed as the culmination of a process of mythic revision which has its origins in female anxieties of authorship stemming, as Gilbert and Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, from a male fear of female creativity. As Toril Moi says, 'the obverse side of the male idealization of women is the male fear of femininity'.<sup>e2</sup> It is this fear that, from the

nineteenth century onwards, became objectified in the image of the 'monster woman...who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell'<sup>63</sup> and projected upon the figure of the female artist, who duly internalised it and reproduced it within her own work.

However, modern feminist writers such as Atwood, Russ and Carter take this figure of the 'monster woman' and turn her into that ultimate saboteur of patriarchal institutions, the 'female man', who turns the very anger and fear which has inhibited female literary production back upon its male perpetrators. In her role as the representative of female liberation rather than female anxieties she is still monstrous, but is now a threat only to men. Through the creation of a new prototype of the empowered woman who has successfully shed the traditional trappings of her gender, and is thus no longer restricted by patriarchy and its phallogentric assumptions, the female subject is removed from a repetitive archetypal pattern of defeat and demoralisation.

Although Wilhelm, Le Guin and Lessing, less radical writers both in form and content, do not articulate anger so openly, their very adaptation of the quest motif proves that they, too, regard change within the dominant order as desirable. The figure of the female man may never be fully realised within their work, but they are nevertheless similar to Atwood, Russ and Carter in their critical rewritings of mythic material, which investigate the traditional archetypes that influence the construction of women's identity within culture.

Whether radical or moderate, therefore, all the authors in this thesis create narratives which stand at what Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes as 'the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation'<sup>64</sup> in order to mount 'an attack on cultural hegemony as it is, which necessarily has included a vision of gender'.<sup>65</sup> Their intentions are summed up in a poem by Adrienne Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck', in which, as DuPlessis says, 'the poet, as

an undersea diver, takes a journey down to an individual and collective past, where some mysterious, challenging "wreck" occurred....the personal and cultural foundering of the relations between the sexes'.<sup>96</sup> Like Rich, the authors in this thesis 'come to explore the wreck' of their creative and cultural traditions 'to see the damage that was done/ and the treasures that prevail',<sup>97</sup> in the hope of constructing new myths - if such a thing is possible - which will grant women a new, independent, identity. As Maggie Humm says of Rich, Mary Daly and Annis Pratt, the writers in this thesis employ a form of myth criticism which 'translates and constitutes latent meaning in mythical stories...[while] also, and simultaneously, constituting *new* knowledge about women'.<sup>98</sup>

Such a challenge to patriarchal perspectives, as prototypes like Fevers, Lynda Coldridge and Alyx demonstrate, has the potential to revolutionise discourse. In undermining the conventional balance between the semiotic and the symbolic, it enables the 'hysterical' ramblings of those who had rejected a subject position in the symbolic to be finally understood, for the semiotic is no longer 'the repressed condition of symbolically regulated, grammatical, and syntactically governed language',<sup>99</sup> but has now achieved enunciation in the fantastic spectacle of the female man. She heralds the 'New Age' envisaged by Hélène Cixous, in which 'the woman [who] has always functioned "within" the discourse of man' will 'dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of'.<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, although it certainly sets out to destroy cultural assumptions involving femininity and gender stereotypes, there is far more to the quest for new female prototypes than just the intention to deconstruct male mythologies. Instead, it is regarded as imperative that the myths that are discarded in the

demythologising process are replaced by a more liberating form of discourse. Even Joanna Russ, who throughout her work demonstrates an anarchic enjoyment in tearing down the texts and institutions of patriarchy, ultimately portrays myth in a positive light. In 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write' she envisages a reformed mythological system which, in offering women a variety of positive role models, would finally resolve their anxieties of authorship and reconcile them with their estranged creative impulses. The essay concludes with the hint that, in thus healing the traumas of the past, such a discourse would grant the female subject access to a future full of unimaginable possibilities:

Women cannot write - using the old myths,  
But using new ones?<sup>91</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE - NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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11. DuPlessis, p.105
12. Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), p.127
13. de Beauvoir, p.174. She defines the role of woman in myth as 'everything that...[man] is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*' (p.175), and argues that 'perhaps the myth of woman will some day be extinguished, the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvellous quality of the Other will die out in them. But today it still exists in the heart of every man' (p.173).
14. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.69. Propp reduces the elements in folk-tale to seven 'spheres of action', corresponding to their 'respective performers', number four of which is 'the princess (or sought-for person) and her father'. It is interesting that the leading female character does not even have a category to herself, but is explicitly linked to the figure of the patriarch from the beginning. Elsewhere in *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin, Texas: [n.pub.], 1968), Propp does in fact periodically refer to the hero as female - but he only ever does so with reference to what he terms 'victimized heroes' (p.36). These are characters who take on the role of hero by default (by being abducted, for example), and who have little control over what happens to them in the course of the narrative. When Propp refers to the more conventional 'seeker hero' (p.36), he is always assumed to be male, and the object of his quest is frequently a secondary female character.
15. See Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, for a summary of Lévi-Strauss' argument in *Structural Anthropology*. Lévi-Strauss says that what he terms 'the unit of kinship' is a basic element in all myths, 'a direct result of the universal presence of an incest taboo', according to which 'a man must

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PART THREE  
TECHNIQUES OF A FEMALE  
TRADITION

## INTRODUCTION

Marks of centuries-old entrenched power-realities, Measure of the heaviness of our task no longer to abide by them - to find and realise our various truths into truthful language.'

I wonder why fiction and reality get so intertwined in me, or at least in my writing, why I can't keep them separate. Everything mingles, the threads tangle, they wrap around my feet and tie me up.<sup>2</sup>

The conclusion of the previous section is that the feminist adaptation of the traditional motif of the quest can be interpreted as an attempt to counter a persistent tradition of female alienation and artistic negation. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in a series of critical texts, both nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century modernism defines 'woman' as a foil for male creativity.<sup>3</sup> She acts as the inspiration and the audience for male literary production, but is expected to remain silent and unproductive herself. Those women who do assume a claim to creativity not only write under the weight of two centuries of censorship, but, as Patricia Waugh argues, within modes which were never originally formulated to convey a female-centred discourse. 'In the dialectical relationship between traditional humanism and the postmodern anti-humanism emerging in the 1960s, women continue to be displaced. How can they long for, reject, or synthesize a new mode of being from a thesis which has never contained or expressed what they have felt their historical experience to be?'.<sup>4</sup>

While, on a thematic level, Le Guin, Lessing, Wilhelm, Atwood, Carter and Russ use the form of the quest in order to conceptualise such 'a new mode of being', they also have to formulate a discourse which will adequately convey their intentions. This section will be divided into two chapters, the first of

which will deal with language, and the second with narrative structures, in order to examine the methods by which these authors work towards a literary form which will escape the restrictions of the central genres of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In communicating the newly empowered female subjectivity which is the result of the quest, their use of language and narrative structures also define, to a large extent, the exact nature of this subjectivity.

This section aims to show that the authors included in this discussion all employ, to varying degrees, experimental forms and techniques that are characteristic of postmodernism; rejecting tidy resolutions and omniscient narrators in order to create texts in which the reader must actively participate in order to extract a (temporary and subjective) meaning. Even the most conservative among them in this respect, such as Le Guin and Lessing, achieve some degree of disruption in the traditional relationship between reader, writer and text. Raman Selden defines the broad characteristics of postmodernist thought as 'the questioning of all 'depth models', the decentering of the world and the self, the rejection of elitist aesthetics and experimental formalisms, the disruption of all discursive boundaries, the obliteration of the frontiers between high and low culture and between art and commodity, and the resistance to meaning and interpretation'<sup>5</sup> - characteristics which the fiction discussed in this thesis to a great extent shares.

Patricia Waugh argues that there are actually many points of contact between feminism and postmodernism, for both share a desire 'to disrupt traditional boundaries: between 'art' and 'life', masculine and feminine, high and popular culture, the dominant and the marginal', which leads to an examination of 'the cultural consequences of the decline of a strong sense of stable subjectivity'. Both modes of thought, she says, share 'a close relationship between theory and practice leading to an unprecedented aesthetic self-

consciousness and awareness of the problematic situation of the contemporary writer in relation to historical actuality and fictional tradition'.<sup>6</sup>

However, Waugh goes on to claim that postmodernism's rejection of the autonomous subject of classic realism has led to a preoccupation with what she terms 'impersonality' - a preoccupation which women, who have yet to share the experience of being 'a strong and coherent agent in the world', cannot share.<sup>7</sup> Other critics show that such a feminist unease can be traced back to postmodernism's precursor, modernism. Andreas Huyssen claims that a 'powerful masculinist mystique'<sup>8</sup> is enshrined at the centre of modernist discourse. Based upon 'the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued',<sup>9</sup> it is a form which is inherently inimical to women, both as writers and as subjects. Gilbert and Gubar, too, describe '(male-defined) modernism', as being characterised by 'its severe experimentation, its struggle to reconstitute a shattered *patrius sermo*, its anxieties about the past',<sup>10</sup> while Robinson and Vogel echo Waugh's criticism of postmodernism in their condemnation of modernism as a form which

seeks to intensify isolation. It forces the work of art, the artist, the critic, and the audience outside of history. Modernism denies us the possibility of understanding ourselves as *agents* in the material world, for all has been removed to an abstract world of ideas, where interactions can be minimized or emptied of meaning and real consequences. Less than ever are we able to interpret the world - much less change it.<sup>11</sup>

Toril Moi, referring to the above quotation, interprets the expression of such opinions as 'highlight[ing] the deep realist bias of Anglo-American feminist criticism. An insistence on authenticity and truthful reproduction of the 'real world' as the highest literary values inevitably makes the feminist critic hostile to non-realist forms of writing'.<sup>12</sup> It is true that Robinson and Vogel's failure to question fiction's ability to mirror an unproblematic reality appears

rather naïve from a poststructuralist perspective. However, Moi's criticism not only contains an implied dismissal of the possibility that modernism might pose genuine problems for women writers, but also refuses to consider that a feminist critique of modernism may not necessarily constitute a demand for a return to realism.

In fact, the authors included in this thesis dramatise the dilemma of those women writers who find both realism and modernism equally unsatisfactory. Realism, as Tom Moylan says, is a form which 'reinforce[s] the limits of the status quo'.<sup>13</sup> All six authors in this thesis explicitly identify the status quo as patriarchal, based upon the privileging of the male over the female voice. Although postmodernism, which sets out to disrupt and destabilise the autonomous realist subject, may appear to write a prescription for change, in making the automatic assumption that such a subject possesses a unified sense of self to begin with, it betrays its retention (inherited from modernism) of realism's phallogocentric tendencies. As Waugh argues, 'to ask 'who am I?' is to articulate a question which usually assumes an a priori belief in an ultimate unity and fixity of being, a search for a rational, coherent, essential 'self' which can speak and know itself'.<sup>14</sup> Women, who 'have not yet *experienced* this 'whole' or 'unitary' or 'essential' subjectivity'<sup>15</sup> are therefore as alienated from modernism and postmodernism as they are from realism.

However, as the increase in feminist writing in the twentieth century testifies, their exclusion from mainstream participation in literary forms has not prevented women from discovering a literary voice of their own. Additionally, many claim to benefit from their culturally peripheral position. Sneja Gunew argues that those who write from the margins are in an ambiguous situation, for 'as well as offering traditional sanctuary to the powerless, margins are also places of authority and coercion'.<sup>16</sup> According to a Saussurean

system of *différence*, she defines the centre as being dependent upon the very existence of the margin, since it is the margin that 'allows the centre to explain itself'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the writers in this thesis share Gunew's belief in the margin as 'the place of transgression, which...subverts hegemonic discourses',<sup>18</sup> and actively resist assimilation into the mainstream. Their use of the quest motif foregrounds this element in their work, because although the female subject retreats from society in order to formulate an empowered sense of self, she does not mimic the male hero of tradition in returning to be integrated into the cultural mainstream. Instead, she uses her new ability to affect historical processes in order to disrupt a discourse which, in Lacanian terms, is centred around the phallus of the Law of the Father.

In this section of the thesis, I argue that although in describing such a procedure of symbolic retreat and anarchic return these writers exploit many postmodernist techniques and attitudes, insofar as their ultimate aim is to build up, rather than break down, the self, their discourses actually proceed in the opposite direction from postmodernism. However, as Waugh argues in relation to Virginia Woolf, the self which is thus constituted is not the liberal subjectivity of realism, but one which 'foregrounds the construction of identity *in relationship*'.<sup>19</sup> Woolf, she claims, 'has accepted and fictionally embodied the recognition that differentiation is not necessarily separateness, distance and alienation from others, but a form of *connection* to others'.<sup>20</sup> The writers in this thesis follow Woolf in the creation of a literary mode which is deliberately situated on the margins of modernism and realism. Although it combines elements of both, it refuses to commit itself to either.

Writers such as Le Guin, Lessing, Wilhelm, Atwood, Carter and Russ thus inscribe a double discourse by setting up a conflict between two fundamentally incompatible literary forms. That section of their work which sets out their

attitude to patriarchy subscribes to realism, for it not only frequently appeals to a female audience's lived experience, but actively searches for a place within a historical process beyond the scope of the text. On the other hand, their attempts to escape from the restrictions of the dominant order exploits such non-realistic, 'marginal' forms as myth and utopian fantasy in order to construct an alternative discourse for which, as yet, there is no basis in a female reality. As this section will show, their work is thus pulled in two directions simultaneously; both towards and away from that self-reflexive, ahistorical world of the text which postmodernism portrays in terms which these authors find both threatening and seductive.

Such a project is comparable to that engaged in by another discourse from the margins - magic realism. As Stephen Slemon says, the term "magic realism" is itself an echo of its subversive intentions, for as

an oxymoron, ... [it] suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working towards the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other," a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences and silences.<sup>21</sup>

The writers in this thesis exploit the tension produced by such a combination of forms; purposely creating 'gaps, absences and silences' with the explicit intention of drawing the reader's attention to them. Their texts, which deliberately disrupt the forms and techniques of mainstream discourse by producing silences which may be more meaningful than speech, therefore act as paradigms for their cultural, as well as their literary, situation.

PART 3 INTRODUCTION - NOTES AND  
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## CHAPTER SIX

REFORMULATION ONE, Göedel's Theorem:

For any language, there are perceptions which it cannot express because they would result in its indirect self-destruction.

REFORMULATION ONE-PRIME, Göedel's Theorem:

For any culture, there are languages which it cannot use because they would result in its indirect self-destruction.'

I need a language to hear myself with  
to see myself in  
a language like pigment released on the board  
blood-black, sexual green, reds  
veined with contradictions<sup>2</sup>

In a review of Toril Moi's *Kristeva Reader*, Linda Anderson says that Kristeva's work operates around what she describes as 'a difficult but important ambivalence. On the one hand deconstruction could be seen as not going far enough, unable to account for the forces that disrupt language or the signifier and effect changes in the social structure; on the other it provides no space for the subject'.<sup>3</sup> With a slight adjustment in context, Anderson's remark is a very accurate summary of the dilemma faced by the writers included in this thesis with regard to language. They are remarkably unanimous in their criticism of language as an inevitably inadequate means of conveying meaning, although they are also equally aware that their profession itself is reliant on such linguistic structures, unsatisfactory though they might be. The situation in which these writers find themselves is therefore problematic, for although language needs to be disrupted if change is to be achieved, to progress too far along the deconstructive path might be to cut the ground away from beneath their own feet.

In this chapter, I propose to argue that the six authors under discussion can be split into two groups according to their reaction to this dilemma. While Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm cling to the notion of the subject at the expense of the deconstructive element in their work, Carter, Atwood and Russ systematically deconstruct the linguistic and narrative conventions that form their text, questioning the very existence of the subject as a concept. It is important to stress, however, that all six authors share a very similar basic attitude towards language, agreeing with Althusser that it is the site of the production and dissemination of ideology. In the words of Chris Weedon, they see language as 'the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested... it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is *constructed*'.<sup>4</sup> From this point on, however, distinct differences emerge between the two groups, grounded in these authors' differing attitudes towards subjectivity.

Although Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm show language participating in the construction of ideology, they do not portray it as a totally self-contained system, placing themselves in the contradictory situation of simultaneously foregrounding and resisting the ideological element in discourse. This attitude can be compared to the Saussurean distinction between *parole* (speech) and *langue* (language), a theory which combines a deterministic view of discourse as a phenomenon which, as Deborah Cameron says, 'effectively creates our perceptions of reality',<sup>5</sup> with a belief in a wider, fixed discursive system existing 'outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself'.<sup>6</sup>

Saussure's belief in 'a system of values'<sup>7</sup> which is more than the sum of signifier and signified is echoed by Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm in their evocation of some kind of transcendent truth which lies beyond or behind any

individual or social struggle with words and meanings. Their discontent with language is primarily grounded in the fact that it is unable to function as a transparent medium through which such a 'truth' can be communicated, a conclusion which leads them to a consideration of alternative, non-linguistic, means of perception. Accordingly, all three authors stress the importance of dreams, which they regard as a means of penetrating the restrictions of language and apprehending 'reality' directly. For Le Guin and Lessing, telepathy also serves this function, since it can convey meaning directly without being subject to linguistic distortion. While language is an oppressive system for these writers, it is a system which can be circumvented by visionary means, thus revolutionising the subject's perception of her cultural situation. At the same time, however, in allowing both character and reader access to a privileged, stabilising and, above all, *ideologically neutral* discourse, it places them within a humanistic order which affirms their integrity as autonomous individuals.

This approach contrasts with that of Carter, Atwood and Russ, all of whom adopt an inherently pragmatic attitude in their belief that there is no escape from language. Unlike Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm, the orientation of these authors is obviously post-structuralist in its presentation of language as 'a system always existing in historically specific discourses'<sup>10</sup>, and which therefore does not point to any 'truth' beyond itself. The concept of the dream or the vision is not central to their work; when it does appear, as in Atwood's novels *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*, it is usually with satirical intent. Because these authors do not appear to believe that they can appeal to any kind of transcendent reality, they have to conduct their struggle from within the linguistic system itself, for although language may be inadequate for their purposes, no other means of communication is open to them. This also means that the security of their own authorial identity is questioned, for if the self is

only capable of being defined through language, any challenge to language is also a challenge to subjectivity.

Another very important difference between these two groups of authors is their presentation of women's place within the linguistic system. Although Lessing, Le Guin and Wilhelm clearly consider that language has a role to play in the perpetuation of sexism, they tend to regard it as inadequate for *both* genders. Accordingly, they frequently show male characters (such as Charles Watkins in Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, or Charles Orr in Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*) having to contend with a linguistic system that is no more capable of containing or conveying their experience than that of women. Carter, Atwood and Russ are more explicitly feminist in their view that women are invariably placed in a subordinate relationship to men within discourse. For them, language has to undergo a radical transformation before it can be capable of authentically conveying female views. Inevitably, however, they have to contend with the same contradiction as that confronted by Adrienne Rich in her poem 'Burning Paper Instead of Children': 'this is the oppressor's language/ yet I need it to talk to you'.<sup>9</sup>

The work of Ursula Le Guin typifies the approach of those authors who see linguistic systems as mediating between the subject and 'reality', for all her characters are constantly striving to bridge the gulf between a concept and its expression in discourse. Such a struggle is important to Le Guin, because of her belief that it is not until an idea is represented within discourse that it can be communicated to others and acted upon. As she writes in *The Dispossessed*, 'it is in the nature of ideas to be communicated: written, spoken, done' (p.66).<sup>10</sup> She therefore assumes that ideas exist previous to language, and that the proper role of language is to act as a vehicle for those ideas. However, Le

Guin often portrays language in the process of failing in the task of conveying the 'truth', thus showing that the relationship between language and ideas is inherently problematic.

Although her recent work has shown an interesting shift in her opinions regarding language, in 1972 Le Guin stated the theory which has clearly motivated much of her work: that 'the universe is an orderly process'<sup>1</sup> and that 'the description of that order is the job of science. The celebration of it is the job of art'.<sup>2</sup> Such remarks echo the views of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács, who, as Raman Selden describes, argues that reality is not 'mere flux, a mechanical collision of fragments, but possesses an order which the novelist renders in an 'intensive' form. The writer does not impose an abstract order upon the world, but rather presents the reader with an image of the richness and complexity of life from which emerges a sense of the order within the complexity and subtlety of lived experience'.<sup>3</sup> Linked to this is a belief in the value of subjectivity, expressed by Le Guin in her essay 'Science Fiction and Mrs Brown': 'We are subjects, and whoever amongst us treats us as objects is acting inhumanly, wrongly, *against nature*' [my italics].<sup>4</sup> The artist's task, therefore, is to discover this natural, rational, ordered subjectivity which exists beyond all the vagaries of language, and then communicate it via the heightened sensibilities of his or her creative vision.

*The Dispossessed*, published in 1974, is an exposition of Le Guin's belief in such an inherent order of being. She examines this concept through the central figure of the scientist Shevek, who formulates a revolutionary temporal theory he calls the Principle of Simultaneity, which functions as a stable reference point for 'truth' in the text. He has no difficulty in working out this theory for himself, apprehending it through a semi-mystical process which blurs the distinction between intellect and intuition, and which does not involve

language: 'He dreamed vividly, and the dreams were part of his work....He got up and scribbled down, without really waking, the mathematical formula that had been eluding him for days' (p.99). Shevek's problems begin, however, when he tries to convey his work to others, for the 'reality' which he has perceived cannot easily be contained within the limited possibilities offered by linguistic structures. In direct contrast with the immediacy and authenticity of his dreams, he finds that 'nothing said in words ever came out quite even. Things in words got twisted and ran together, instead of staying straight and fitting together' (p.33).

The narrative traces Shevek's struggle to communicate his new concept via the differing political discourses of two planets, and failing at each attempt. Language, being founded in ideology, invariably fails in the struggle to communicate meaning, and is fundamentally unable to bridge the 'gulf of being' (p. 131) that exists between both individuals and societies. It is not until the intervention of the superior Hainish race at the end of the novel that the significance of the Principle of Simultaneity is made clear: it will enable the invention of a device that will revolutionise inter-planetary communication and, by making 'a league of worlds possible' (p.284), bring Le Guin's universe closer to her harmonious ideal.

However, although the appearance of the Hainish ostensibly solves the problem of communication which is Le Guin's central concern in this novel, it is an event which actually foregrounds the flaws in her argument. On the one hand, she maintains that 'truth' is a relative concept which is dependent on 'the hill one happens to be sitting on' (p.41): while on the other, she consistently appeals to a 'balance or pattern' which exists 'underneath the words, at the centre' (p.33). Imposed upon the text from the outside, representatives of a truth which cancels out all ambiguities, the Hainish would seem to constitute Le

Guin's final commitment to a transcendent, immutable reality which exists independently of the restrictions of language. Such a commitment, however, appears to be rather at odds with the novel's conclusion, in which Shevek's theory is welcomed by the members of the Hainish League as providing them with a means which will enable them to 'talk together' (p.285), since this means that Le Guin's adherence to a linguistic system which she has already portrayed as a divisive means of communication which cannot authentically convey 'true' meaning is also apparently preserved.

Le Guin's assumption that language should ideally function as a more or less transparent conveyer of ideas has been a frequent cause of weakness in her work, as my discussion of *The Dispossessed* shows. However, probably her most widely-discussed lapse occurs in *The Left Hand of Darkness* where she creates a detailed androgynous society, but persists in using the male pronoun throughout. In an essay entitled 'Is Gender Necessary?', published in 1976, Le Guin defends herself from 'the frequent criticism...that the Gethenians seem like *men*, instead of *menwomen*'. Although she agrees that such a criticism was to some extent justified, and that it 'rises in part from the choice of pronoun', she then states that 'I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she." "He" is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English....But I do not consider this really very important. The pronouns wouldn't matter at all if I had been cleverer at *showing* the "female" component of the Gethenian characters in *action*.'<sup>15</sup>

As novels like *The Dispossessed* demonstrate, Le Guin can be extremely critical of discourse as a disseminator of ideology rather than ideas. However, her emphatic denial in 'Is Gender Necessary?' that she herself is participating in the perpetuation of ideological assumptions shows her inability to apply such a critique to her own work. Such an inconsistency in Le Guin's approach sets up

a basic contradiction within her work between language as an abstract system which is open to criticism, and her personal use of language as a writer, which is not. When *she* uses language, she implies, she is reflecting a 'common sense' view of reality which is obvious to everybody. But as Catherine Belsey says:

common sense appears obvious because it is inscribed in the language we speak... [but] language is not transparent, not merely the *medium* in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things. On the contrary, it is a language which offers the possibility of constructing a world of individuals and things, and of differentiating between them.<sup>16</sup>

Belsey's argument that 'common sense betrays its own inadequacy by its incoherences, its contradictions and its silences'<sup>17</sup> is not only supported by *The Left Hand of Darkness* and its linguistic failure to convey the concept of androgyny. A basic perversity exists in all of Le Guin's texts, where her own smooth narrative flow automatically assumes its ability to convey meaning in an unproblematic way, thus remaining uninvolved in her general critique of language.

Although I think such a criticism can still be levelled at her latest novels, in an annotated version of 'Is Gender Necessary?', published in 1987, Le Guin shows that she has considerably modified her attitudes towards language. She now admits that she had not 'realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking', and attaches the self-mocking note 'place "him" in quotation marks, please' to a part of the essay in which she refers to the Gethenians as masculine. She also refers to modifications made to the original text when writing a screenplay of *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1985, eliminating the innate sexism of the original by referring to 'Gethenians not pregnant or in kemmer by the invented pronouns a/un/a's';<sup>18</sup> an action which, in echoing Marge Piercy's use of the gender-neutral pronoun 'per' in *Woman on the*



*Edge of Time*, shows her to be approaching language from an increasingly 'feminist' perspective.

'Is Gender Necessary? Redux' thus shows that, along with a more general change in her feminist attitudes, Le Guin has now, to some extent, become aware that her treatment of language has constituted a major area of weakness in her work. Later novels such as *Tehanu* echo this shift in focus, for here Le Guin associates the ancient Language of Making, of which male mages have only an imperfect understanding, with the female characters in the novel, Tenar and Therru. Tenar, who against all convention has learnt some of the art of magery, foregrounds such an association when she comments that learning the Old Speech 'was like learning the language I spoke before I was born', while 'the rest - the lore, the runes of power, the spells...- that was all dead to me. Somebody else's language' (p.89).'<sup>2</sup> However, the authorial voice is still not implicated in this new gender-based approach to discourse.

Nevertheless, Le Guin's attitude towards language can be demonstrated to have changed in response to the development of feminist and post-structuralist thought. In contrast, Doris Lessing, another writer who regards her art as a means of transmitting 'truths' which will change the way her audience views 'reality', has altered her ideas very little in the duration of her career. The majority of her narratives are based around her central premise that the artist must strive towards an accurate representation of experience in order to avoid any possibility of ambiguity or confusion becoming interposed between the text and its transmission.

However, Le Guin and Lessing differ somewhat as to the basic nature of the reality they attempt to convey through discourse, for Lessing does not share Le Guin's belief in a fundamental principle of order. Like Isabel Allende's Eva Luna, who regards reality as 'a jumble we can't always measure or decipher, because

everything is happening at the same time', and who writes in an attempt to 'put a little order in that chaos, to make life more bearable' (p.266),<sup>20</sup> Lessing interprets the role of the artist as being primarily didactic in function, imposing lucidity upon the disjointed impressions which make up the raw material of existence. *The Golden Notebook* is a good example of this conviction at work in Lessing's fiction, for it shows Anna Wulf using her art in an attempt to categorise her experiences and thus bring at least the illusion of order to her life - she has a blue notebook in which she records day-to-day experiences and her dreams, while a red notebook contains the record of her political life, and so on. When asked "'What would happen if you had one big book without all those divisions and brackets and special writing?'" she speaks for her author when she answers simply "'I told you, chaos'" (p.272).<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, as in Le Guin's case, a comparison can be drawn between Lessing and Lukács which foregrounds her ultimate commitment to realism.<sup>22</sup> Catherine Belsey summarises Lukács' statement in *Studies in European Realism* that 'what makes a writer great is 'sympathy with the sufferings of the people' in conjunction with a 'thirst for truth', a 'fanatic striving for reality',<sup>23</sup> and it is clear that Lessing shares the same Marxist-inspired orientation. She acknowledges, however, that there are many difficulties to be overcome in this striving for verisimilitude because, like Le Guin, she shows language, the only medium through which the 'truth' can be transmitted, as an imperfect system which ensures that the reader can only ever receive a distorted version of the writer's original message. However, she does not support the post-Saussurean view of language as a self-contained system which points to nothing beyond itself, but shares Lukács' empirical belief in a 'truth' that exists beyond any linguistic system, and which must somehow be communicated.

This is one of her major preoccupations in *The Golden Notebook*, in which

Anna Wulf is perpetually fighting to fit words and meaning together. As a writer, language is Anna's chosen medium of communication, but it is a medium which is constantly failing her: 'I am in a mood that gets more and more familiar: words lose their meaning suddenly. I find myself listening to a sentence, a phrase, a group of words, as if they are in a foreign language - the gap between what they are supposed to mean, and what in fact they say seems unbridgeable' (p.299). Anna's four notebooks are a reflection of her belief that all meaning is partial, and that only by analysing each part of her experience separately can she arrive at some kind of an approximation of the truth of the whole.

All Lessing's narrators are caught up in a similar process, finding that their experiences lose their force when filtered through the medium of language, in which there is never a word that expresses precisely what they want to say. They recall Lilly Briscoe's artistic impasse in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, in which she becomes convinced that 'one could say nothing to nobody....For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there?' (p.165).<sup>24</sup> Like Lilly, who finds that 'the urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low' (p.165), Lessing's protagonists frequently have to make do with words that are never quite the right ones. Rachel Sherban's frustrated comment in *Shikasta*, '*that is the wrong word. There is a right word, but I don't know what it is*' (p.280),<sup>25</sup> is repeated not only throughout her own narrative, but that of many of Lessing's other characters.

In spite of the development of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language, Lessing persists in looking towards an ideal linguistic system which could function as a transparent medium for a truth that transcends the limitations of language. Indeed, in *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen*

*Empire*, the final book in the *Canopus* sequence, she engages in a rather heavy-handed satire upon the structuralist view of discourse as the site of ideology. The entire novel is built around a critique of political rhetoric, which Lessing presents as a form of language that is able to mould reality to its own short-sighted, self-destructive ends. "There are those who exist on words", says Klorathy, Lessing's Canopean narrator. "Words are their fuel and their food. They live by words. They make groups of people, armies of people, nations, countries, planets their subjects, through words. And when all the shouting and the chanting and the speeches and the drunkenness of words is done, nothing has changed" (p.63).<sup>26</sup>

*Sentimental Agents* is probably the weakest novel in the *Canopus* series, characterised by its laboured humour and an interminable reiteration of a single theme.<sup>27</sup> It is all the more frustrating that Lessing's ideas continually hint at the possibility of their own deconstruction, adopting a post-structuralist attitude towards language even while dismantling such notions. For example, in a passage describing a character as 'float[ing] there on the power of the words he was using, or which used him' (p.62), Lessing echoes Lacan in showing the individual within discourse as possessing a sense of control over language which is merely illusory. In its portrayal of language as an ideological apparatus which exists to maintain a specific social structure, her polemic also bears many similarities to the Marxist theories of Althusser laid out in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the ever-present symbol of Canopus remains as a reminder of transcendent truths that the 'right' kind of language should signify, with the result that the novel's conclusion - a farcical attempt to eliminate 'rhetoric' from language altogether by bringing certain stock words and phrases to trial - is robbed of its satirical impact.

In other novels, Doris Lessing continues her quest for a 'better' kind of

language which is free of ideological taint; and in those which deal specifically with the issue of insanity, such as *The Golden Notebook* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, she achieves it rather more convincingly. Her schizophrenic characters are frequently presented as being on the verge of formulating a revolutionary mode of discourse which is based on figurative modes of signification, and even appear to challenge the stability of personal subjectivity. Entrance into this state is marked by a gradual move away from language; indeed, some characters eventually find themselves incapable of any kind of articulation. Charles Watkins in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, for example, is a university professor and an experienced manipulator of language, but as memories of his extra-terrestrial 'briefing' begin to break into his conscious mind, he finds that his utterances become overlaid by a type of fluid, non-linear discourse, in which 'another stream of words paralleled the stream of words that he was actually using' (p.162).<sup>29</sup>

This experience of alienation from normal language leads Charles to devise an onomatopoeic language for himself which is highly reminiscent of the stream-of-consciousness discourse of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. For Charles, the sound and the texture of words convey a significance greater than what they actually 'mean', resulting in the creation of a surreal and evocative discourse based around elaborate sets of puns: 'The Cape Verde Islands were to starboard - when? Last week. Last *when?* That was no weak, that was my wife' (p.12). Like Anna Wulf, who comes to the similar conclusion that 'real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words' (p.609), or Lilly Briscoe, who uses her painting to convey through colour and the spatial grouping of images on the canvas what she cannot say in words, Charles is portrayed as sincerely attempting to grope

his way towards a discourse which says exactly what it means.

Madness can therefore be seen to fulfil the same function for Lessing as the dream does for Le Guin, enabling the subject who does not wish to recreate the self within an ideological discourse to gain access to what Derrida has described as 'the silent and inuitive consciousness'<sup>30</sup> that exists beyond language. Both Anna and Charles subsequently attempt to incarnate that sense of immediacy within a new and revolutionary discourse that does not participate in ideology, thus representing Lessing's search for a genuinely new linguistic form. Such an endeavour frequently recalls the French feminists' search for *l'écriture féminine*, because the punning, figurative forms such characters finally adopt are reminiscent of Kristeva's description of the semiotic as 'the organisation of instincts by rhythm and intonation which precedes the imposition of the symbolic, a system of meaning created in language'.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, Lessing distances herself from an exclusively feminist interpretation of this element in her work, refusing to apply any gender definitions to her theories of language. Such a new, non-linguistic discourse is not contrasted with patriarchal structures, nor is the semiotic ever specifically described as 'feminine'. Additionally, in spite of the fact that Lessing's dissatisfaction with language leads her in a direction which roughly corresponds to that taken by many feminist theorists, her promotion of a transcendent 'metalanguage', as Nicole Ward Jouve notes, is often at odds with her commitment to realism. Referring to *The Four-Gated City*, another novel which deals with the reformation of linguistic structures through a process of personal breakdown, Jouve comments that the text 'never fully actualizes the crisis it is about' because 'the very fact that the more broken-down syntax' not only 'remains perfectly intelligible and syntactically correct' but is 'italicized and bracketed between...comforting indications'.<sup>32</sup> As she says, this 'takes the sting out of the

breakdown'<sup>33</sup> by showing that Lessing's abandonment of normal systems of signification is only an illusion, for the authority of the authorial voice is never actually lost.

The same thing happens in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The Golden Notebook*, in which Anna's and Charles' excursions into the realm of linguistic breakdown are strictly curtailed and compartmentalized. In the end, both characters rejoin the signifying system, thus enabling the narrative to resume its conventional linear progression and to reorientate itself around a stabilized subject. As Carolyn Furoli observes of *The Golden Notebook*, 'while the form of the novel may break with that of traditional realism, Lessing's language does not. And it is this firm basis in referential language which provides Lessing with the necessary authorial control over the novel's style and structure'.<sup>34</sup> While Lessing may regard referential language as being inherently adequate to describe the truth as she sees it, as Furoli argues, the ending of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* indicates Lessing's ultimate belief in 'the need to return to the social world and its language of communication, even at the risk of losing the valuable awareness of another world beyond the limits of language'.<sup>35</sup>

The separation between referential language and the vision is carried to its greatest extreme in the work of Kate Wilhelm, who, like Le Guin and Lessing, demonstrates a similar liberal humanist belief in the existence of a transcendent truth which can only be comprehended by passing beyond the boundaries of discourse. In Wilhelm's fiction, the image of the dream is a recurring motif of great significance which exists in direct antithesis to the concept of language. In 'The Uncertain Edge of Reality' she expresses her view that 'truth' is not fixed but in a process of continual change, and in her fiction she consistently presents language as a monolithic structure which can neither convey nor contain such fluctuations. The dreaming subject, however, is

freed from the logical constrictions imposed by discourse, and able to go directly to the source of a concept and grasp its ever-evolving meaning. In other words, Wilhelm presents language as inevitably presenting a partial view of whatever it is attempting to signify, while dream is a way of intuitively seeing things *whole*.

Throughout her fiction, Wilhelm constantly promotes the power of the vision which takes the dreamer beyond the realms of language. In *Fault Lines*, for example, Emily Carmichael, portrayed as a visionary who 'doesn't rely on words, on linear constructions to comprehend the world' (p.157)<sup>26</sup> undergoes a semi-mystical experience amongst Aztec ruins in Mexico. Her apocalyptic premonition that 'sooner or later it comes to this, ruins that other people trample over and study for clues about what happened, and how to avoid letting it happen again' (p.153) forms the metaphorical core of the book, for it is the moment in which she comes to a final realisation of the finite nature of civilisation and the arbitrary nature of reality. Her vision affects her profoundly, but she cannot describe her feelings to anyone because the true nature of the 'terror' that becomes her 'constant companion' is a concept that cannot be conveyed in language, unable to 'be talked about or mentioned because it was nameless' (p.157). Only another vision can bring about Emily's acceptance of death as a natural process when, in a dream, she sees the 'boiling furious motion' that lies at the centre of the world, 'at first meaningless, but gradually taking on a form that is almost understandable' (p.157).

With her commitment to an ever-changing reality, Wilhelm overtly criticises the belief that the cultural medium in which language functions is fixed and immutable, which she presents as a lapse which inevitably leads to patriarchy's failure to recognise language as a historically specific phenomenon. This aspect of her work supports Catherine Belsey's contention that 'if changes in signifying



practice are related to changes in the social formation, the notion of language as a neutral nomenclature functioning as an instrument of communication of meaning which exist independently of it is clearly untenable'.<sup>27</sup>

The visionary escape in which the majority of Wilhelm's central protagonists engage can be identified as a type of semiotic discourse: the articulation of all that which cannot be confined by the rigid linguistic structures of patriarchy. It is an operation which, in the words of Kristeva, 'conceives of meaning not as a sign-system but as a *signifying process*',<sup>28</sup> and, like Kristeva, Wilhelm links the semiotic with a non-specific interpretation of the 'feminine' as a concept which is not exclusively confined to women. Within Wilhelm's agenda, some kind of visionary perspective is vital for all marginalised groups, enabling them to discover a new position within discourse. The linguistic interactions that take place within a patriarchal culture only attempt to reinforce the illusion that language is capable of classifying experience, thus promoting a subjectivity which is both sexist and racist, but which purports to stand for the whole.

Throughout her work Wilhelm explores the dominant discourse's appropriation of the right to *name* objects, fixing them forever within a false representation of their 'real' selves, echoing Hélène Cixous' warning in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that "'Common" nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species'.<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm's preoccupation with this particular aspect of language foregrounds the fact that feminism is only part of her political concern. Not only women, but all those who are politically powerless are inevitably subjected to the naming power of the prevailing ideology. Wilhelm consistently portrays marriage as a great linguistic threat to women, since, as in the case of the principal character in the short story 'Somerset Dreams' who refuses marriage because she does not wish to 'become

Mrs. S.L. Wright, and forever and ever remain Mrs. S.L. Wright' (p.31),<sup>40</sup> it conventionally deprives the female subject of her name, and thus her identity.

However, as Emily's description in *Fault Lines* of the situation of American immigrants makes clear, it is not just women who live under the threat of being marginalised and falsely named: 'I remembered, passing a high-rise where Mr. Mirov's house used to stand. Mirov wasn't the name he left home with, but some immigration official hadn't been able to spell or pronounce that one, and on entering America he had become Mr. Mirov' (p.32). Wilhelm's concern with the linguistic manifestations of marginalisation and oppression is echoed by Marge Piercy in her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, in which Mexican immigrants like Connie Ramos and her niece Dolly are portrayed, like Mr. Mirov, as balancing on a 'fault line' between two cultures. With an imperfect grasp of American English, they forget, or never learn, the Spanish of their origins - Dolly, for example, can speak, but not write, Spanish, and is also inarticulate in both spoken and written English. Both Piercy and Wilhelm show how a displaced people thus become doubly alienated, at home in neither their original nor their adopted culture, and how language systems both demonstrate and perpetuate such a state.

In spite of her criticisms of language, Wilhelm, like Le Guin and Lessing, nevertheless regards it as an inescapable system. She acknowledges that it is the only tool for communication the subject possesses within this circumscribed reality even while she emphasises its limited capability to convey the ambiguous nature of authentic 'truth'. In a purely functional sense, those who have the vision to question the validity of the dominant discourse must make use of language if they are to have any impact at all, although such an agenda, Wilhelm suggests, may involve the creation of new linguistic formulations. This view of language as a phenomenon which is capable of subverting itself is a major theme in *Juniper Time*, which is a fictional reworking of Wilhelm's contention in 'The

Uncertain Edge of Reality' that 'we can change reality with immaterial ideas and symbols - language'.<sup>41</sup> *Juniper Time* emphasises 'the magic of words' (p.191)<sup>42</sup> and their ability to 'change the entire world, make it take a new direction (p.250) through the character of Jean, who single-handedly achieves a revolutionary upheaval in the patriarchal world-view through a manipulation of language. Although she is a linguist by profession, her real interest is in 'the hidden communications language made possible; how people used words understood by both parties to say things that had no connection with the spoken message' (p.61).

In fact, it is this very imprecision conveyed by the slippage between words and meaning that gives language its value in this novel. The rigid word structures of patriarchy criticised by the Indian wisewoman Serena, who comments that "'Your words mean such tight things, only this and no more, and there are matters that can't be described with such hard outlines'" (p.155), do nothing to close the gap between signifier and signified. For Wilhelm, such a gap suggests endless possibilities for ideological change; possibilities exemplified by the flexible language of the Wasco Indians, which is acknowledged to be a kind of verbal shorthand for explaining things that can be properly understood only intuitively. As Jean acerbically says, they 'make a word carry a lot of baggage' (p.161), although her own journey through the desert and into her own mystical 'thinking place' finally enables her to understand this semiotic concept of multiplicity, and to use it to deduce the real meaning of the 'alien' message she is attempting to decode. She has been unable to decipher its pictograms because she lacks a key which will provide her with a reference point. But, as she has already observed of mainstream discourse, the real importance of the message lies not in what it might say, but in what lies behind it.

*Juniper Time* clearly demonstrates Wilhelm's paradoxical attitude towards language. Like Lessing, many of the criticisms she levels at language invite the application of a deconstructive practice. Not only does she portray the dominant discourse as the perpetuator of ideology, she takes advantage of its gaps and hesitations in meaning in order to introduce a new kind of signifying system capable of conveying the constant fluctuations of the nature of reality. Nevertheless, although the reality to which she appeals is eternally changing, that does not alter the fact that it remains a transcendent truth which is capable of being perceived by a subject whose independence remains fundamentally unchallenged and unchanged.

However, it is also possible to regard Wilhelm as forming a link between the first group of authors and the second, for the feminist implications of her argument are echoed in the work of Margaret Atwood. For both authors, a critique of language necessitates acknowledgement of the phallogentric bias in culture, since it is language which perpetuates this imbalance. As Atwood states in her prose poem 'Iconography', it is man, not woman, who 'has the last word. He has the word' (p.52),<sup>43</sup> for only men are granted the power to name, using language to define and fix objects within the symbolic order. In *Bodily Harm*, for example, Rennie's friend Lora claims that women visitors to the island of St Antoine are subjected to an insidious form of linguistic intimidation by the police who 'look at your driver's licence. Then they use your first name. Not Miss or Mrs. or anything, your first name, and you've no way of knowing any of theirs. You ever have that happen to you?' (p.93).<sup>44</sup> Her appeal to Rennie highlights the fact that such an episode is intended to be read as representing general female experience in a society where language is used as a weapon against women in order to exile them to a realm on the margins of discourse

from which they are unable to retaliate.

Feminist theorists like Susan Gubar, however, see such a silence being turned to women's advantage, interpreting it as 'a female inner space [which] represents readiness for inspiration and creation, the self conceived and dedicated to its own potential divinity'.<sup>45</sup> Adrienne Rich takes a similar stance, drawing an explicit analogy between language and patriarchy in her poem 'Meditations for a Savage Child'. The 'savage child' of the title has never learned to speak, and the poet deplors the paternalistic efforts of male scientists 'to teach you names/ for things/ you did not need' (p.212).<sup>46</sup> For her, the child represents the ability to explore one's own primal beginnings, going 'back so far there is another language' (p.214), in which the hidden, but brutal, mechanisms of oppression can be fully identified and understood. As the scar on the child's throat testifies - it is described by the poet as 'a hieroglyph for a scream' (p.214) - this 'other language' is articulated not through speech, but silence.

Initially, at least, *Surfacing* appears to take precisely the same escape route, from what the novel's narrator terms 'the mirages raised by words' (p.164),<sup>47</sup> into what Rich (in an uncanny echo of Atwood) calls 'that part of the brain/ which is pure survival' (p.213). The heroine of *Surfacing* gradually withdraws from a position in culture as a speaking subject and comes increasingly to identify with nature, which for her represents the existence of some intrinsic essence which cannot be contained within linguistic structures. Believing that the men who first colonised northern Canada have left behind them 'their sign, word, but not its meaning' (p.126), she sees herself achieving the same resistance to classification, fighting free of the 'fragments and tatters' of words 'glued on' and now 'shredding away' (p.152) from the elemental female being she thinks she is becoming: 'I no longer have a name. I tried for

all these years to be civilised but I'm not and I'm through pretending' (p.163).

It is here that Atwood differs from Wilhelm, for her treatment of this theme parodies and subverts Wilhelm's belief in an extra-linguistic 'reality': a belief which is shared by Le Guin and Lessing. Although *Surfacing's* heroine is convinced of the existence of a truth beyond language, the gaps, inconsistencies and downright inaccuracies that are a feature of her narration undercuts the validity of such a view. Barbara Hill Rigney describes her as 'undependable, perhaps mad; certainly the reader cannot trust her judgement, based as it is on the lies, the 'alibis', that she tells both the reader and herself'.<sup>40</sup> No authorially-defined standard by which 'truth' can be defined exists within this text, for Atwood's voice is completely merged with that of her unreliable narrator, whose words rarely mean what they say.

Because she is committed to lying even before her narration begins, the protagonist of *Surfacing* enters the text already alienated from language, a fact which is metaphorically reinforced by her embarrassment at the fact that she cannot speak the French patois of the region in which she spent her childhood. As the novel proceeds, she retreats further and further from the practice of signification; a process which is reflected within the structure of the text which, at the moment of the heroine's greatest distance from language, itself becomes 'non-sense':

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word  
I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning (p.181)

The identity of the 'I' in this passage is constantly fluctuating and therefore very difficult to identify, for the speaker no longer regards herself as a 'woman', or even as 'human'. Although the audience can read statements like 'I am

a tree' as metaphor, they are not figurative as far as the narrator is concerned. For her, the process of signification has become completely arbitrary, since, as a subject who has abandoned a stable position in a signifying chain, her sense of an internal cohesion between signified and signifier has been lost. Language has become a kind of lucky dip from which she can select signifiers at random, for all are equally valid when applied to her.

As the text so graphically demonstrates, the narrator's rejection of language does not gain her access to an superior order of reality or truth. Instead, it cuts her adrift from any sense of a stable identity and condemns her to incoherence and confusion, thus enforcing the poststructuralist view that the subject does not exist prior to her articulation in language. Lorraine M. York has observed the tendency of Atwood's work 'to feature an inevitable - though often enlightened - return to the systems and games one is trying to escape',<sup>49</sup> a point which *Surfacing* demonstrates admirably, for it is clear that the narrator really has no choice but to re-enter discourse.

A more conventional narrative resumes once she decides to become 'separate again' (p.181), signalling the beginning of a process which will lead to the reassembly of the speaking subject. The concept of 'truth' remains no more fixed than before, for the heroine's narration still mingles delusion and reality. For example, although she subsequently describes encounters with both her dead parents, the authenticity of her visions remains dubious. Unlike Lessing or Le Guin, Atwood does not validate such mystical experiences, leaving it to the reader to decide whether they are real or merely hallucinations caused by hunger or mental disturbance. Nevertheless, the narrator has obviously gained a new, and necessary, commitment to language. Her belief that 'word furrows already' in the 'protobrain' of the baby which she might or might not be carrying (p.191) indicates a conviction that language is an inescapable part of

a cultural structure from which 'withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death' (p.191).

Such a seemingly fatalistic conclusion might imply Atwood's rejection of Gubar's concept of a 'female inner space', but a consideration of the rest of her work reveals that this is not the case. Although Atwood argues that language plays a vital part in the formation of the subject, she nevertheless postulates the existence of an individual sensibility which, in the words of Lorraine York, can find 'freedom even within the prison house of language'.<sup>50</sup> York makes a pertinent point when she argues that such balance of 'convention and transgression'<sup>51</sup> is represented in Atwood's work through the recurring symbol of the uniform, since Atwood habitually identifies the female body as the site of an assertion of such a sensibility, carrying with it the possibility of linguistic subversion.

For example, in a short story entitled 'Giving Birth', Atwood discusses how the act of childbearing exposes the phallogentric bias in discourse. Although it is a common female experience - a fact which Atwood emphasises in the story by describing the maternity ward as 'overcrowded' (p.232) - it remains one which is not encompassed by language:

No one ever says *giving death*, although they are in some ways the same, events, not things. And *delivering*, that act the doctor is generally believed to perform; who delivers what? Is it the mother who is delivered, like a prisoner being released? Surely not; nor is the child delivered to the mother like a letter through a slot. How can you be both the sender and the receiver at once? Was someone in bondage, is someone made free? Thus language, muttering in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing, that needs to be re-named. (p.225)<sup>52</sup>

Giving birth not only forces upon the mother a new awareness of herself as woman by asserting the fact of her biological difference, but gives her a uniquely female space from which to challenge the dominant discourse. This is



proved by the narrator, who systematically exposes the gaps and omissions that appear in language when it attempts to inscribe female experience. In a manner that is rather too obvious to be convincing, she claims that she will 'go ahead as if there were no problem about language' (p.226). However, in choosing to describe the feelings of a woman who is about to give birth to an unwanted baby, she inevitably runs straight into the very problem she ostensibly denies: 'The word in English for unwanted intercourse is rape. But there is no word in the language for what is about to happen to this woman' (p.230).

Motivated by a similar, if often unconscious, awareness of the subversive potential of the female body, many of Atwood's heroines articulate their rebellion by being unconventional in dress or appearance. Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* is obese, while Marian in *The Edible Woman* is anorexic. The friend of the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Moira, changes from uniform to uniform in order to subvert the strict dress code of the totalitarian regime of Gilead. In enacting a subversive discourse upon their own bodies, these female characters echo Adrienne Rich's assertion in her poem 'Tear Gas' that 'The will to change begins in the body not in the mind/ My politics is in my body'.<sup>53</sup>

Angela Carter's approach to the issue is analogous to Atwood's in that she too bases her critique of language upon the metaphor of the female body. Both these authors reproduce within their fiction the deconstructive procedures of such feminist theorists as Hélène Cixous and Mary Daly, who Maggie Humm describe as 'study[ing] the interaction of signifiers and signified, of texts and people in order to *explode* the unity of the sign'.<sup>54</sup> Cixous, for example, says that 'women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes'.<sup>55</sup> Like Atwood's heroines, whose size and/or costumes change with a speed and frequency which is often disconcerting, Carter's female characters are

portrayed in a state of permanent metamorphosis. Because their identity is constantly fluctuating, they can never be defined by a single, unchanging, signifier, and this undermines the concept of an unproblematic linguistic system where sign and meaning remain permanently fixed.

However, Carter does not advocate a retreat from language any more than Atwood does. In her view, 'women must work to develop a neutral language, without pain, shame or embarrassment' because 'language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation'.<sup>56</sup> She regards language as a valuable political tool, and argues that although 'you cannot make any statements which are universally true', only the speaking subject can deal with social issues because 'in order to think about these things you've got to have the language to do it in'.<sup>57</sup> Such an attitude is very reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's views concerning women's place in language. Like Carter, Kristeva sees in women the potential to resist the hegemony of the dominant discourse, writing that 'in "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies'.<sup>58</sup> However, neither does she condone the idea that women can rebel against language by simply withdrawing from it, dismissing such an action as typical of 'a certain type of romantic feminism...It can quite simply be an attempt to escape society and communication and to take refuge in a sort of mystical state which can be extremely regressive and narcissistic'.<sup>59</sup>

*Heroes and Villains* is a novel which dramatises the contradictions inherent in Carter's view of language as a system to be both supported and subverted, where a post-apocalyptic society polarises into two opposing groups whose very cultures are shaped by their linguistic attitudes. The Professors are traditionalists who hope to recreate the world as it was, and who build a whole society devoted to the task of research and reconstruction. Language is an

intrinsic part of their project, for they assume the existence of an exact meaning for every word. In contrast, the Barbarians do not treat words as conveyers of meaning within a larger linguistic system, but as objects which can be selected and discarded at will. For example, they use 'whatever forenames they found lying about, as long as they glittered and shone and attracted them' (p.32).<sup>60</sup> While the Professors' existence is dominated by the quest for their lost past, the Barbarians, who can neither read nor write, live in an eclectic culture which is blind to any perspective but the present.

The mediator between these two incompatible extremes is Marianne, a Professor's daughter who is kidnapped and forcibly married by the Barbarian Jewel. As a child, she is as obsessed with classification as her father, marking 'all her possessions with her name, even her toothbrush' (p.3). However, she gains a new insight into language when she discovers that her father's dictionaries 'contained innumerable incomprehensible words she could only define through their use in his other books, for these words had ceased to describe facts and now stood only for ideas or memories' (p.7). For Marianne, language thus ceases to be an uncomplicated means of reflecting 'reality', and becomes a far more complex, self-contained system which operates according to the Derridean concept of *différance*, where, according to Toril Moi, 'meaning is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers. The 'next' signifier can in a sense be said to give meaning to the 'previous' one, and so on *ad infinitum*'.<sup>61</sup>

In the society of the Barbarians, Marianne is tempted to take the process one step further and abandon signifying systems altogether, unable to find 'logic to account for her presence nor for that of the people around her nor any familiar, sequential logic at all in this shifting world' (p.106). This pull towards linguistic nihilism is embodied for Marianne in the figure of the former

Professor, Donally, who represents the postmodernist urge taken to its extremes: described by Patricia Waugh as 'the obsessive desire to displace human experience entirely by the substitution of intellectual categories and formal, 'impersonal' structures'.<sup>62</sup> Donally's unfeeling 'impersonality' is evident in his treatment of his mentally subnormal son, whom he forces to act in accordance with the label on his feeding dish: 'Dog'. In his seemingly random matching of signifier to signified he is conforming to the habits of the Barbarians, but his Professor's awareness of the operations of language give his word-games an added maliciousness. Although Donally's obtuse aphorisms are revered by the Barbarians as examples of gnomic wisdom they are, in fact, essentially meaningless, for his linguistic manipulation is merely mechanical and devoid of any authentic meaning.

Through the person of Marianne, the text itself strives to mediate between the two equally undesirable extremes represented by the Professors and the Barbarians. As Sarah Lefanu notes, *Heroes and Villains* invites the audience to read the characters as 'ciphers, images with no substantiality. Jewel is the 'sign of an idea of a hero', while Marianne...at her wedding that is a grotesque parody of a fairy-tale wedding, is 'a sign of a memory of a bride' (p.72). Meaning accrues only through reference to a culture and literature of the past'.<sup>63</sup> While on one level Marianne does participate in this signing process, she also stands outside it as the only character in the novel who gains the ability to manipulate this formation of meaning. Resisting both the Professors' urge to define everything and the Barbarians' insistence upon defining nothing, Marianne herself defies classification, for as a character who is both hero and villain in one, she cannot be fixed by any single signifier. The roles she plays in the text are changeable and inconsistent - she is both a dutiful daughter and a reluctant bride; a feminist rebel, yet also the passive victim of rape.

Carter's ultimate adherence to the concept of language appears to be affirmed towards the end of the novel, in an episode in which Marianne and Jewel, like Eve in *The Passion of New Eve*, journey to what Lefanu describes as 'the ultimate chaos of the sea, where form and language and artifice are all destroyed'.<sup>64</sup> Here, Carter presents the reader with a frightening vision of the failure of language. As Claudia Hampton says in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, a novel which is similarly concerned with the problem of linguistic classification, 'language tethers us to the world; without it we spin like atoms' (p.41).<sup>65</sup> Because the things of the sea-shore are no longer named, they have 'reverted to chaos, existing only to themselves in an unstructured world...becoming an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter surrounding the outposts of man' (p.136).

Like Claudia, however, who banishes the 'void' created by the absence of language by making 'an inventory of the room - a naming of parts: bed, chair, table, picture, vase, cupboard, window, curtain' (p.41), Marianne has a vision which counterbalances the insidious and threatening spread of un-naming. She sees a lion emerging onto the beach from the trees that line the shore, and although she has 'never seen a lion before', she recognizes it instantly because 'it looked exactly like the pictures of itself' (p.140). Typically, it is difficult to know how to read this episode, where signified and signifier match perfectly, restoring a sense of order to the text which is distinctly reassuring. But is Carter merely playing on her audience's desire for the illusion of stability classic realism provides?

*Heroes and Villains* therefore functions as an effective example of Carter's ambiguous attitude, both upholding and undermining the concept of language as a system which points to something beyond itself. Although Carter presents the postmodernist concept of identity as a phenomenon which is formed in and by

language, the figure of Marianne is able to manipulate discourse from a subject position outside it. The narrative ends with yet another deliberate metamorphosis on her part, when she decides to become the 'tiger lady' in order to rule the Barbarians 'with a rod of iron' (p.150). Using language, Marianne has carved out another role for herself in the text, enabling her to triumph over a society that has attempted to deprive her of social and linguistic autonomy. At the last minute, however, Carter cannot resist adding a further twist to the debate. Jewel's death is reported to Marianne by Donally's half-witted son, who, possessing neither the intelligence nor the vocabulary to describe the event adequately, finally gives up the unequal struggle and relapses 'into silence' (p.151). The final irony is that Marianne does not have the last word in this novel, which ends with the final failure of language.

In direct contrast with Carter's equivocations, Joanna Russ' opinions on language appear to be consistent and uncompromising. Her dedication of a collection of her essays, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts*, to the feminist linguist Dale Spender is indicative of her attitude towards this issue. Like Spender, Russ does not regard language as an impartial means of communication, but as a system which is controlled by men and which acts as the perpetuator of patriarchal ideology. Spender claims that:

Language is *not* neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas, It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity,...In this context it is nothing short of ludicrous to conceive of human beings as capable of grasping things as they really are, of being impartial recorders of their world, For they themselves, or some of them, at least, have created or constructed that world and they have reflected themselves within it. " "

If this is so, then the very grounds of discourse must be challenged before any kind of effective feminist political action can take place. Consequently, Russ' fiction is devoted to the exposure of the hidden ideological mechanisms she

believes to be constantly at work within the discourse of the dominant order. As Patricia Waugh says, Russ employs the same tactics as Atwood and Carter in creating texts in which 'the feminine subject is fragmented, dispersed, in an attempt to rupture or deconstruct the 'fixed' ego formed doubly in alienation',<sup>67</sup> thus undermining the humanist concept of the subject as 'fixed and unchangeable, an element in a given system of differences which is human nature'.<sup>68</sup>

Russ' linguistic anarchism is at its most challenging in *The Female Man*, a novel which Sarah Lefanu describes as 'break[ing] all formal rules of narrative fiction. It has no beginning-middle-end, no clear relationship between author and characters and, indeed, no clear relationship between text and meaning'.<sup>69</sup> *The Female Man* is an extended exercise in feminist subversion, persistently challenging the dualistic assumptions which Russ, like Hélène Cixous, believes to be characteristic of patriarchal thought. Cixous claims that such a system is founded upon a series of 'dual, *hierarchized* oppositions' which 'subjects thought...to a two-term system...related to "the" couple, man/woman',<sup>70</sup> and by telling her story through four disjunctive narrative voices, Russ proceeds to shatter the superficial unity of the sign 'woman' in order to render such a balance impossible.

The four J's are created out of this splitting of the signifier, revealing its inability to encompass the many aspects of female experience. The concept of 'truth' does not exist in this text where the narrative position is constantly changing, creating an elaborate multiple discourse which renders the whole concept of a stable subject untenable. Although clearly related, Janet, Jael, Jeannine and Joanna are also fundamentally incompatible, making it impossible to bring them together to form one 'complete' woman or a unified narrative voice. At the end of the novel all four go their separate ways, demonstrating Russ' consistent resistance to the fixing of meaning.

While, as in the rest of Russ' fiction, the male protagonists remain one-dimensional figures hardly worthy of the term 'character', her many-faceted heroine/s defy her/their linguistic subordination in a discourse which confines the female to a single, stereotyped signifier. In 'Sorties' Cixous states that patriarchal dualism is only maintained at women's expense - 'Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought'<sup>71</sup> - and that a female rebellion against this system would completely destroy all existing linguistic systems:

What happens to the subject, to the personal pronoun, to its possessives when, suddenly, gaily daring her metamorphoses...she makes another way of knowing circulate? Another way of producing, of communicating, where each one is always far more than one, where her power of identification puts the same to rout, - And with the same traversing, she breaks with explanation, interpretation, and all the authorities pinpointing localization,<sup>72</sup>

Although *The Female Man* (a text where certainly 'each [female] one is always far more than one') shows Russ to be in basic agreement with Cixous on this point, she does not follow her argument through to a formulation of an essentialist female discourse. Indeed, in a passage in which the Jael-narrator describes how 'my thoughts seep out shapelessly like menstrual fluid, it is all very female and deep and full of essences, it is very primitive and full of "and's"' (p.137),<sup>73</sup> Russ evokes both Cixous' style and her theory of *l'écriture féminine* with obviously ironic intent. Like Atwood and Carter, Russ 'writes' from the female body insofar as she subverts the fixed subject positions of phallogocentric discourse by foregrounding the multiplicity of subject-positions open to her female characters, although as her mockery of Cixous demonstrates, she also believes in the necessity of conducting her feminist rebellion from within the linguistic system.

While Spender believes women to be completely excluded from language,<sup>74</sup>



Russ portrays discourse as having the means of its own deconstruction already contained within it. Her characters are invariably preoccupied with the search for such subversive opportunities, since Russ shares Atwood's belief that women possess an innate awareness of the limitations of language, conscious that their subjectivity is not fully encoded within such a phallogentric system. In *On Strike Against God*, for example, Russ' narrator states that 'every female friend of mine...rolls that name "woman" over on her tongue, trying to figure out what it means, looks at herself in a full-length mirror, trying to understand, "Is that what they mean by woman?"' (p.18).<sup>75</sup> Waiting to be reclaimed, she argues, is a hidden feminist tradition which is already inscribed within discourse, proclaiming that 'It is very important, Boadicea, Tomyris, Cartismandua, Artemisia, Corinna, Eva, Mrs. Georgie Sheldon, to find out for whom you were named' (p.23). For example, a typically disruptive Joanna-voice interrupts Esther's narration in order to examine the etymology of Russ' own name. It is revealed to be 'very powerful indeed' (p.23), for it is shared by Pope Joan and Joan of Arc, both of whom were women who challenged male assumptions of superiority, while Esther's own name means 'star'. While 'stars, like women, are mythologized out of all reality' (p.24), women, like stars, possess an explosive potential.

Russ' statement in *On Strike Against God* implicitly invites her audience to apply such a reading to the rest of her fiction, for an examination of the names of many of her principal characters yields a similarly subversive interpretation. In *The Female Man*, for example, the assassin Jael shares her name with that of a Biblical character who was also a slayer of men, and one of the few female figures in the Bible who does not represent passivity. As discussed in Chapter Four, the reader again comes to be implicated in the formation of meaning, revealing Russ's approach towards language to be part of

her larger preoccupation with the re/construction of a gynocentric discourse in which the female subject - as writer, as reader and as author - gains both a voice and a history.

Although Russ' writing disrupts the unity of the traditional autonomous subject, her appeal to history and the political imperatives she places upon the act of reading show her to be engaged in the preservation of some kind of subjectivity which exists independently of the operations of language. In *Possession*, another novel which self-consciously plays with traditional and modernist notions of subjectivity, A.S. Byatt permits her principal character to articulate this dilemma: 'Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for a sussuration of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist'.<sup>76</sup> The work of both Byatt and Russ thus conforms to Waugh's definition of a feminist postmodernism which 'constructs a new subject, one who is necessarily 'dispersed' but who is also an effective agent, neither the old liberal subject nor the contemporary post-structuralist site of the play of signification'.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, through the narrative movement from direct to free indirect thought demonstrated in the above quotation, Byatt, like Russ, reaches out beyond the text in order to invite her readers to participate in her character's deliberations, recalling Waugh's argument that 'in order to function effectively, as 'selves', we need to discover our histories...a sense of agency...and to be able to reflect self-consciously upon what we take ourselves to be'.<sup>78</sup> Just as Byatt's heroine finds that her 'awkward body' gives her grounds for a resistance against reading herself as a 'matrix for...texts and codes', so Russ, Atwood and Carter all ultimately argue against the subject's complete containment in

language by appealing to a common reservoir of female experience based around the body. However, this appeal does not lead to the kind of withdrawal from language in which *l'écriture féminine* is implicated. Instead, these authors bring their unique female subjectivity into the linguistic system with the clear intention of disrupting and subverting patriarchal discourse for feminist ends.

It is therefore apparent that, to some extent, the impression that these six authors are polarised into two opposing factions is a false one, for although differences undoubtedly exist between them, they nevertheless end up in more or less the same theoretical position. While the first group adhere to the concept of an extra-linguistic truth, they are invariably forced towards a reluctant acceptance that language is inescapable. The second group may start from the premise that language is a self-contained system which points to no reality but itself, but they still finally arrive at a subjectivity which exists independently of discourse. Both groups, therefore, are united in the search for some kind of middle line which would preserve the concept of an independent subjectivity while enabling language to be radically redefined. Such an endeavour is summed up by the linguist Deborah Cameron, who says:

I do not believe that language is the first cause, and I see nothing wrong with asserting that meaning derives from something we might call experience, as well as from immediate context. However, that does not mean I believe in some central core of human nature...nor in the existence of an inner mental world untouched by social forces. There is no pre-existent and innocent subjectivity on which a layer of ideology is somehow to be super-imposed. On the contrary...our 'personalities', our desires, our needs, our ways of behaving, are constructed in our interactions with the world. These constructed elements are our real selves, and not just some kind of false consciousness that can simply be stripped away.<sup>79</sup>

From the point of view of literary theory, rather than linguistics, Patricia Waugh echoes Cameron in her argument that 'during the twentieth century...there

has been an increasing number of women writers whose work does not easily 'fit' into the dominant aesthetic categories of realism, modernism, or postmodernism'. Although 'some of these writers (Angela Carter, for example) have been influenced by post-structuralist theory and postmodernist experiment...all refuse the 'impersonality' central, in different ways, to this and other twentieth-century aesthetic theories'.<sup>90</sup> Waugh's argument makes it possible to interpret the two approaches to the issue of language discussed here as different ways of resisting the 'impersonal' in modernist and postmodernist literature, thus producing work which, as Waugh maintains, resides 'at the borders of 'life' and 'art''.<sup>91</sup>

However, in spite of the fact that these two groups of authors, motivated by the same desire, argue their way around in opposite directions to reach similar conclusions, it is the purpose of this chapter to show that one approach can nevertheless be privileged over the other. It is their differing treatment of the concept of subjectivity which encapsulates the differences that exist between Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm on the one hand, and Atwood, Carter and Russ on the other, providing a standard by which their success in constructing such a linguistic critique can be judged.

An analysis of Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm reveals that although their criticism of language is stringent, their commitment to a greater reality inhibits any urge towards a rigorous deconstruction of signifying practice. This is because any inadequacies inherent in discourse are counterbalanced by the truth that lies beyond it. Moreover, if, as all three authors suggest, such a truth is capable of being apprehended through visionary means, then an additional commitment to the existence of an unproblematic subject is essential, since the reader can only accept a vision of the truth as authentic by trusting the individual perception through which it is mediated.

Like Derrida's critique of Saussure, the work produced by these authors is open to an accusation of logocentrism, which Chris Weedon describes as the presupposition 'that the meaning of concepts is fixed prior to their articulation in language'.<sup>22</sup> An intrinsic part of logocentrism, Derrida argues, is 'phonocentrism'; the assumption that 'a spoken word, emitted from a living body...[is] closer to an originating thought than a written word'.<sup>23</sup> Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm retain a similar allegiance to such a 'metaphysics of presence' in their habitual reproduction of a privileged authorial voice through which their story can be communicated, without itself becoming implicated in the struggle with language experienced by characters within the text. Although, as the next chapter will show, such an approach does not preclude ambiguity and experimentation with form, it does lead to an inevitable dichotomy. These authors may write about problems with language, but their own usage inevitably remains unaffected.

The work of Carter, Atwood and Russ does not share such phonocentric characteristics. Although these authors are just as critical of language as Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm, they do not place themselves in the contradictory situation of criticising discourse while reserving a secure vantage point within it for themselves. Consequently, because they do not approach the issue from a position of personal disassociation, their handling of language is frequently less overt. Instead it is a debate in which they are intimately involved, both as authors and as women. This attitude inevitably has an effect upon their texts, which foreground the processes of their own construction by echoing their authors' own struggle with words and meanings. Such texts are thus inherently 'difficult' for the reader, who, if any meaning is to be extracted from the narrative at all, must also become involved in the linguistic dilemmas it poses. Writer, reader and text thus become united in a dynamic and ongoing process of

linguistic redefinition in which theory (especially poststructuralist and feminist theory) and personal subjectivity both have a valid part to play.

## CHAPTER SIX - NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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  74. Deborah Cameron argues in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* that Spender claims tradition to be formulated through language solely by men, and that women, who are excluded from language, thus lack any tradition of their own. Cameron says 'This is surely not true...that women have never had a tradition of their own. Of the thousands burned as witches, for instance, many were punished precisely because they possessed traditional knowledge which was denied to men' (p.111). I would argue that Russ assumes the existence of such a tradition, locates it within suppressed aspects of discourse, and sets out on an etymological quest to recover it.
  75. Joanna Russ, *On Strike Against God* (New York: Out & Out Books, 1980). All page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
  76. A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p.251
  77. Waugh, p.169
  78. *ibid*, pp.30-1
  79. Cameron, p.169
  80. Waugh, p.30
  81. *ibid*, p.32
  82. Weedon, p.53
  83. Selden, p.88

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Text of pleasure; the text that content, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss; the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions... values, memories, brings to a crisis his relations with language.<sup>1</sup>

Utterances have a double aspect; they can be seen as giving us an account of reality, or they can be considered as a discourse, that is to say an enunciation supposing a narrator and a listener or a reader.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of Le Guin, Lessing, Wilhelm, Atwood, Carter and Russ with regard to their treatment of language leaves them divided into two categories, one of which is more 'conservative' than the other, although both base themselves upon a critique of the dominant discourse. This chapter considers the possibility of a link between language and narrative structure, which would enable the divisions established in the previous chapter to be carried over into a discussion of the methods used by these authors in the construction of narrative patterns.

To some extent, it is useful to categorise the work discussed here according to definitions established by Barthes, who argues in *S/Z* (1970) that all literature falls into one of two categories according to the degree to which the reader is invited to become involved in the production of reading. What Barthes terms '*readerly*' literature relegates the reader to the role of passive consumer of a finished product in which, as Terence Hawkes says, 'the passage from signifier to signified is clear, well-worn, established and compulsory'.<sup>3</sup> '*Writerly*' literature, on the other hand, 'makes[s] the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'<sup>4</sup> because it is '*ourselves writing*, before

the infinite play of the world...is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system...which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages'.<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that, according to Barthes' criteria, Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm produce 'readerly' texts which force the reader to submit to an authorial definition of 'truth', while Atwood, Carter and Russ create 'writerly' texts which, in the words of Hawkes, are 'aware of the interrelationship of the writing and reading, and which accordingly offers us the joys of co-operation [and] co-authorship'.<sup>6</sup>

However, as the last chapter showed, the differences between these two groups of authors cannot be quite so neatly delineated. While the texts produced by Le Guin, Lessing and Wilhelm may contain more elements of the 'readerly' than those produced by Atwood, Carter and Russ, a very convincing case can be made for assessing such works as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Golden Notebook* and *Fault Lines* as examples of 'writerly' texts which initiate an active collaboration between reader and author. And, as I have already argued in the previous chapter, the free-ranging 'plural' elements of the texts created by Atwood, Carter and Russ are also somewhat compromised by their refusal totally to abandon the concept of the independent subject.

Patricia Waugh uses the term 'metafiction' in order to describe 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.<sup>7</sup> According to this definition, all the work discussed in this thesis can be termed 'metafiction' in that it exhibits a common sense of self-consciousness regarding its own fictionality. However, these texts vary in the extent to which this self-consciousness is revealed within individual narratives. Waugh goes on to argue that, because metafiction needs to retain a 'stable level of readerly familiarity', it may 'explicitly lay... bare the conventions of

realism' but 'does not ignore or abandon them. Very often realistic conventions supply the 'control' in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves'.<sup>2</sup> Metafiction, she says, is

an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions. There are those novels at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be explored...as in the work of Iris Murdoch or Jerzy Kosinski, whose formal self-consciousness is limited. At the centre of this spectrum are those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation (which constitute, therefore, a 'new realism'), as in the work of John Fowles or E. L. Doctorow. Finally, at the furthest extreme...can be placed those fictions that, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions, as in the work of Gilbert Sorrentino, Raymond Federman or Christine Brooke-Rose'.<sup>3</sup>

The work of the authors discussed in this thesis are situated at various points along the 'spectrum' of metafiction postulated by Waugh, varying not just from writer to writer, but from text to text. Broadly speaking, however, although Le Guin and Lessing both carry out a number of experimentations with narrative form, they also demonstrate a persistent tendency ultimately to assert their authorial right to impose order upon even their most self-conscious texts. Wilhelm, though, joins Atwood, Carter and Russ in creating narratives which invite their audience to adopt a deconstructive form of reading by self-reflexively commenting upon their own status as fiction, thus setting up a resistance to conventional notions of order and closure.

Ursula Le Guin's work has shown a steady progression towards an increased radicalism in both form and content. Her first three books, *Rocannon's World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966) and *City of Illusions* (1967) are all fairly straightforward science fiction adventure novels, although, as Peter Nicholls

says, 'all three show, well developed, the typical UKLG strategy of structuring a story around recurrent metaphors, which gain in richness and density as the action continues to juxtapose them in new patterns'.<sup>10</sup> However, it is in later novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* that Le Guin begins really to experiment with narrative structure, yet also to impose limitations on the extent of that experimentation. *Left Hand of Darkness* begins by self-consciously contemplating the circumstances of its own (fictional) creation, when Genly Ai addresses the reader directly in order to express his anxieties concerning his role as narrator: 'I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination' (p.9).<sup>11</sup>

Such an opening is characteristic of metafiction as defined by Waugh, who says that 'metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings', thus drawing 'attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins'.<sup>12</sup> The initial paragraphs of *The Left Hand of Darkness* set up precisely this situation. Through his exposition on the difficulties of making the raw material of experience conform to the structures of narrative, the reader is invited to regard Ai's voice as a possible framing device which will impose order on the text. Simultaneously, however, this authority is undermined, for by the second paragraph the reader is made aware that the frame provided by Ai's narration is inadequate and inexact:

The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story (p.9).

By submerging A1's already suspect narration beneath a variety of other, unfamiliar voices, the novel is in the process of continually foregrounding its own fictionality, for the narrator's strand of the story is regularly interrupted by 'transcripts' of Gethenian myths recorded by A1, but told in voices which are not his. As A1 has already explicitly handed over the responsibility for interpreting this textual jumble over to his audience, the reader is placed in an unfamiliar (and therefore unsettling) position of superiority over the story's own narrator.

However, as Jeanne Murray Walker points out, the 'historical' and the 'mythic' sections of *The Left Hand of Darkness* are actually skillfully linked by a patterns of recurring imagery and actions, enabling 'the patterns set up in the myths [to] serve as rules which guide and define the behaviour of characters in the historical section'.<sup>13</sup> The very adroitness with which this interweaving of narrative strands is achieved provides the opportunity to question the novel's status as metafiction by revealing the existence of a larger frame of reference which remains unchallenged. While the novel's *implied* narrator may undermine the distinction between fact and fiction within his own fictional frame, the *actual* author, Le Guin herself, retains an omniscient, and progressively obvious, control over her invention throughout. Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* toys with the idea of blurring frames, rendering 'truth' a matter of individual interpretation, the narrative increasingly conforms to conventional expectations by progressing steadily towards the re-establishment of an authorial definition of order.

The novel ends where it began, with the telling of a story; although this time it is not A1's, but that of 'the other worlds out among the stars - the other kinds of men, the other lives' (p.253). Although this can be read as an avoidance of resolution, leaving the text open in order to provide an access

point to other plots which it is unable to contain, I think this is just as much of an illusion as the novel's uncertain, self-reflexive beginning. The story that Ai is now being invited to tell is that of the governmental system he represents, the Ekumen, which recurs in many of Le Guin's novels as a didactic symbol of ultimate, incontrovertible order, against which Ai's personal *angst* is rendered insignificant. The mock-scientific chapter headings, which precisely contextualise each section of the novel's narration, indicate the role of Ekumen as a textual device which literally 'frames', and therefore limits, the text's experimentations with ambiguity.

Le Guin's evocation of the Ekumen enables her to toy with another metafictional device; that of intertextuality, which disrupts the reader's one-to-one relationship with the narrative by forcing her towards an awareness that, as Kristeva says, 'each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read'.<sup>14</sup> Barthes' description of the text as being 'woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages,...antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony....every text is...the text-between of another text'<sup>15</sup> is precisely the way the Ekumen operates within Le Guin's novels. However, this particular intertextual system is completely self-contained, since it does not attempt to link itself with any text which lies outside Le Guin's 'Hainish' cycle of novels. While each narrative synchronically charts the development of the Ekumen at a specific point in its development, as an intertextual referent it functions diachronically, placing each individual novel within a larger, but strictly defined, context.

Although both Barthes and Kristeva regard the concept of intertextuality as posing a challenge to realism, Le Guin's use of intertextual devices does not undermine her text's claim to authenticity. Instead, it attempts to reinforce it

by systematically building up a picture of a complete, 'real' world through a number of separate novels. Patrick Parrinder argues that science fiction in general very rarely takes advantages of the opportunities for 'estrangement' inherent in the genre, with 'the result that the familiar reality is replaced by an all too familiar unreality'.<sup>16</sup> Le Guin's 'Hainish' series supports Parrinder's comment, for its attempts to construct a plausible vision of the future consistently work against its metafictional, experimental elements. In this respect, these novels appear to align themselves more strongly with the kind of mainstream science fiction produced by Frank Herbert and Arthur C. Clarke, than with the idiosyncratic and extremist feminist fantasies of such writers as Joanna Russ, Sally M. Gearhart and Josephine Saxton.

While most of the metafictional speculation in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is confined to the mind of the narrator, thus confirming it as 'the most minimal form of metafiction',<sup>17</sup> in her more recent novels Le Guin has shown less of a tendency to anchor her texts in the kind of moral appeal to order that the Ekumen represents. For example, *Always Coming Home* (1985) is a narrative which poses a genuine challenge to textual structures and the practice of reading. It purports to be an archaeological reconstruction of the Kesh, a tribal society which exists in our future, but in the archaeologist's past. This means that the text cannot be fixed within a stable and unitary 'now', for it is uncertain at what point on the chronological scale the narrative is being assembled. Le Guin indicates this through the mixing of tenses in her note at the front of the novel: 'The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California'.<sup>18</sup>

The 'archaeological' narrator habitually speaks of the Kesh in the past tense, as if they were an extinct people; although in that case it is difficult to understand how the material for the book has been collected. Not only does it



include songs, poems and legends, many of which are transmitted orally, but also interviews with an 'anthropological' persona who cannot possibly be the same as the narrator who begins the book, for she shares the same time-frame as the Kesh, interacting with them from within their living culture. She, too, clashes with yet another authorial 'I'; that of the Kesh woman Stone Telling, whose personal narratives recur throughout the text without any explanation as to the reason or circumstances of their inclusion. Her story could be a transcript of historical, or even mythical, events, or be in the process of being told to the 'anthropological' narrator 'in person' - in other words, she could either be a character with a separate identity of her own, or have no existence beyond the duration of her discourse.

As Susan Bassnett notes, the text can be read in any order 'so that the reader can take the book up and leave off reading it wherever they choose'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Le Guin employs a number of devices in order actively to encourage her audience to engage in a non-linear form of reading. At the end of each section of Stone Telling's narrative, for example, is appended the page number on which it resumes, acting as an open invitation to skip the intervening sections. And in discussing the dramatic works of the people of the Valley, the author/editor/anthropologist suggests that the audience read the italicized 'peg lines' and 'skip...all the rest' (p.227). As in *The Left Hand of Darkness* the reader is being given responsibility for extracting coherence from the narrative, but, unlike the earlier novel, *Always Coming Home* genuinely encourages a new approach to the practice of reading. The different sections into which this narrative is divided really are disparate, while those in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are actually linked by an elaborate network of symbolism constructed prior to the reader's engagement with the text.

The metafictional element in *Always Coming Home* is represented, above all,

by the paradoxical figure of of Pandora, who periodically interrupts the narrative's other three narrators. Titles such as 'Pandora Sitting by the Creek' and 'Pandora Gently to the Gentle Reader' ensure that her sections are clearly marked out from the rest of the text. Nevertheless, however strongly signalled, Pandora's presence in the narrative is extremely ambiguous. Represented in both the third and the first person, she appears to be both a member of the Kesh tribal structure and an impersonal student of their customs. Although the first three personae all contribute to the overthrowing of a coherent time-frame and narrative continuity, they do not do so self-consciously, for they exhibit no particular awareness of their fictional function. Pandora, whose presence and function in the narrative are never logically explained, is always aware that she is appearing within a text. As she says in a section entitled 'Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses the Reader with Agitation', 'Do you take me for innocent, my fellow maggot, colluding Reader?' (p.148).

Through Pandora's extreme self-consciousness, the reader is invited to make a direct identification between her and the author. In sharing a name with the mythical Pandora, who opened the box that let evil into the world, she expresses Le Guin's personal sense of racial guilt - 'I know about war and plague and famine and holocaust, indeed I do. Am I not a daughter of the people who enslaved and extirpated the peoples of three continents?....Am I not a citizen of the State that fought the first nuclear war? (p.147) - and is also intimately involved with the construction of the text on an authorial level. This is demonstrated in her conversation with 'the Archivist of the Library of the Madrone Lodge at Wakwaha-na' (p.314), in which Pandora turns what is overtly an interview about the Kesh ways of storing and retrieving information into an auto-referential exchange which contemplates nothing more than the processes of its own creation:

PAN; This is the kind of conversation they always have in utopia, I set you up and then you give interesting, eloquent, and almost entirely convincing replies. Surely we can do better than that!

ARC: Well, I don't know, aunt. What if I asked the questions? (p.315)

Pandora, therefore, is an authorial persona who exposes the mechanisms of textual construction which more conventional narratives usually disguise. Her identification with Le Guin (which is made explicit at the end of the book, when Le Guin's actual collaborators are described as Pandora's 'friends'), she provides a link between the imaginative world of the Kesh and the reader's twentieth-century present, thus exposing the text's own status as fiction. While the narrative masquerades as anthropological fact, down to the maps and glossary at the back of the book, Pandora consistently works to falsify that sense of authenticity.

However, there is one sense in which *Always Coming Home* is prevented from being completely self-referential, for although it differs from *The Left Hand of Darkness* in that it does not appeal to a transcendent sense of order, it is still rooted in an extra-discursive context. The people of the Valley bear an obvious similarity to the Indian cultures which existed in California before the coming of European settlers, and the narrative, evoking what Susan Bassnett describes as 'an image of the lost golden age, the pre-conquest world of North America as it might have been',<sup>20</sup> is motivated by an overriding sense of social and political concern. In the end, the reader of this novel is not just invited to reconsider the processes of reading and writing, but to examine her own conscience as the representative of a culture which has created a present within which the Kesh have no existence beyond the discourse which speaks them. While allowing herself a much greater degree of freedom to experiment with both language and structure, Le Guin still resists the urge to create texts which are

focused on nothing beyond themselves.

Le Guin's earlier works which make up the 'Hainish' cycle bear many similarities to Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series in that both groups of novels are dominated by a didactic belief in the authority of the author which imposes limitations on the degree of disruption possible to the conventional narrative structure. Indeed, Lessing has a greater tendency than Le Guin to subvert all other elements within her narratives to her desire to preach to her readers, for hers is the obviously controlling voice in every text. Such blatant didacticism raises a problem for the reader of the *Canopus* sequence, as Katherine Fishburn is well aware, asking 'how does Lessing, herself a powerful "I" (eye) that has an urgent need to preach "we," do so without totally subverting the will of the individual "I's" (eyes) of her readers?'<sup>21</sup> Fishburn proceeds to argue that Lessing's narrators 'mediate' between the reader and Lessing herself, and that Lessing, 'by...distinguishing between her own authorial intentions and those of her narrators, allows us some...respite from the absolute authority of a text'.<sup>22</sup>

However, I would hesitate to ascribe such developed characterisation to the majority of Lessing's narrators, especially those within the *Canopus* series. While Le Guin gives characters such as Genly Ai at least an illusion of freedom by allowing an ironic gap to develop between her perfect control over the text and his anxieties concerning it, the implied authors of the *Canopus* novels function as fairly anonymous technical devices, whose shadings of character are never allowed to intrude between Lessing and her dialogue with her audience. These texts are bound together by a similarity in tone which is remarkable when one considers that each book has ostensibly been given a different narrator; and in the case of *Shikasta*, many different narrators, not all of whom are Canopean.

In many respects *Shikasta* is comparable to *Always Coming Home*, for both

novels masquerade as scientific reports and consist of a multiplicity of separate texts told in a variety of forms from many different points of view. The ambiguity in Lessing's novel, however, is minimal, since Lessing binds all the voices within her narrative to the dictates of the Canopean Necessity - in other words, her authorial intent. The recurring figure of Canopus serves as a kind of narrative anchor within the text, which excludes the possibility of much uncertainty.

A good example of Lessing's unsubtle approach can be found in another of the *Canopus* series, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, where the story is opened by an anonymous first-person narrator, one of the 'Chroniclers and song-makers' (p.11)<sup>23</sup> of Zone Three. It is only some distance into the story that this narrator acquires a somewhat tenuous identity in being revealed as Lusik, one of the heroine's 'Mind-Fathers'. This information, however, is fairly immaterial, for Lusik participates as a character within the text only very briefly; and as narrator persists in subordinating the 'I' of his individual voice to the 'we' of the plural mind shared by the Chroniclers and song-makers, of which he is only a single facet. This effectively renders him a transparent medium (or frame) through which Lessing (the pervasive 'we' of the text) can transmit her didactic message. It is this commitment to didacticism that leads Lessing to create narratives that are sealed, self-contained units relegating the reader to the position of a passive audience to be swayed by the power of the authorial message.

However, Lessing is not always quite as obviously intrusive as she is in the *Canopus* series, as many of her other novels demonstrate. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, for example, Lessing submerges herself in the voice of a narrator who is preoccupied with the problem of authentically conveying her feelings and experiences through the act of writing, thus deliberately permitting some degree

of self-conscious reflection on the processes by which such texts are constructed. Its very title foregrounds the novel's claim to be a retrospectively-written record of past events, opening (rather like *The Left Hand of Darkness*) with a general discussion on the problems inherent in the act of recollection. As the narrator muses: 'perhaps it wouldn't be out of place here to comment on the way we - everyone - will look back over a period in life, over a sequence of events, and find much more there than they did at the time' (p.7).<sup>24</sup>

Through the Survivor, Lessing examines the task of the artist, who must categorise experience and then transmit it through an ideologically-biased linguistic medium, and finds it virtually impossible. Like Virginia Woolf, who turned to her diary in a daily battle to capture the 'loose, drifting material of life'<sup>25</sup> in a form 'loose knit and yet not slovenly',<sup>26</sup> the Survivor attempts to formulate a narrative form which can accurately reflect events. However, as Lessing's mouthpiece, she also warns that the subjectivity of the writer, claiming 'I was there, you know. I saw that' (p.7), acts as a distorting force upon every narrative. The text records the Survivor's attempts to expunge her personal views from her narrative and to become an anonymous recorder of events in order to make her 'history' more 'truthful' (p.99): in spite of the fact that she has to cope with more divisions and dislocations within her experience than most.

This is, however, a history with a difference, since it not only has to achieve a balance between past and present experience, but alternate worlds as well. The novel charts the Survivor's narrative movement between the two realities separated by her living-room wall, as she strives to interweave the directly opposing strands of her experience, 'real' and allegorical, into a scrupulously truthful whole. As Betsy Draine explains, the wall is an important

factor in the ordering of the text, since the narrator's passage through it acts as 'a warning cue' that a transition between realities is about to be made, and is thus a means of keeping 'the two worlds distinct':<sup>27</sup> a necessary process for both the actual author of the text (Lessing) and its implied author (the Survivor), as well as for the reader. It is, of course, a technique that ultimately fails, as the figurative realm behind the wall looms larger and larger within the text and ultimately draws the Survivor and her world into it, into a place beyond language and narrative.

It is this conclusion which opens up the novel to criticism. Far from being what Patricia Waugh describes as 'a metafictional affirmation of the inadequacy of a mutually exclusive opposition of the concepts 'reality' and 'fiction',<sup>28</sup> the disappearance of the characters behind the wall indicates Lessing's imposition of her own subjectivity upon the text, cancelling out much of its previous ambiguity. Throughout the novel, the tantalising possibility exists that, like the narrator of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* whom she so much resembles, the narrator's perception of reality is somehow warped, lending a new ironic dimension to the whole issue of 'truth' with which she is so preoccupied. However, the conclusion of *The Yellow Wallpaper* shows Gilman's narrator as entrenched in the surreal perspectives of her madness as she was at the beginning, thus avoiding the imposition of a single definitive interpretation upon the text. In contrast, the ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is uncompromising in its resolution of such dilemmas, for it shows Lessing firmly asserting both the narrator's sanity and the validity of her vision.

Only one question remains - if the narrator has gone beyond the boundaries of the 'real' world and is thus freed from the restrictions of language, where exactly is she writing these memoirs from? Even this, however, is not the dilemma it at first appears, for it has an obvious solution. The

final disappearance of a fictional narrator from the space of her own narration leaves a vacancy which must inevitably be filled by the figure of the text's actual author, Lessing herself. *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in spite of its surface ambiguity and experimentation with narrative frames,<sup>29</sup> ends with Lessing's superior vision once again established at the expense of an audience which is only confirmed in its non-participatory role.

This phenomenon can be repeatedly observed throughout Lessing's work, which invites its readers to intervene within the text, only firmly to exclude them at the end by revealing any ambiguity to be merely illusory. Like the *Survivor*, the possible insanity of such characters as Lynda Coldridge and Martha Quest in *The Four-Gated City*, or Charles Watkins in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, adds an intriguing dimension of uncertainty to their narratives which is totally abandoned upon Lessing's revelation that their 'madness' is actually evidence of a greater than normal ability to discern a greater 'truth'. Nicole Ward Jouve's criticism of *The Children of Violence* series that 'there is a totalizing intention written into every line of the prose'<sup>30</sup> is one that can be levelled, it seems to me, at virtually every novel Lessing has written.

The way in which an initial vacillation between certainty and ambiguity, 'fact' and 'fiction', is almost always resolved by a concluding appeal to a transcendent reality is reminiscent of much of Le Guin's earlier work. Unlike Le Guin, however, Lessing's most challenging work in terms of narrative is not one of her most recent. In *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the novel which is most frequently cited in support of Lessing's status as an experimental or modernist author, she successfully resists the urge towards narrative closure and definite resolutions; even though, just like Le Guin in *Always Coming Home*, the text remains rooted in an extra-discursive social context.

The narrative traces Anna Wulf's attempts to impose some kind of order



upon her own fragmented consciousness, which is split into the many different controlling personalities she adopts as a self-protective strategy. Purporting to be a collection of Anna's journals within a loose narrative framework entitled, with conscious irony, 'Free Women', the novel makes few concessions to the reader, who has to piece together a coherent narrative out of the jumble of texts with which she is presented. This is quite a challenge, as they are written through a variety of different personae and have no coherent chronology, ensuring that the reader becomes drawn into an interactive relationship with the text and its implied author, as both work together to try to make sense of the raw material of Anna's experience. Lessing's familiar didactic voice is certainly present, but for once within the text itself, not speaking from some privileged position outside it. There is no absolute standard, such as Canopus, to which the reader can appeal in order to gain certainty, for the ending of the novel does not satisfactorily resolve the multiple, often incompatible, narrative strands of which the work is composed.

Many similarities exist, therefore, between Le Guin and Lessing, whose conservatism regarding linguistic experimentation is carried over, to a great extent, into their handling of narrative structures. Although their texts are almost always innovative and overtly self-conscious, calling into question common assumptions regarding time, space and perception, both authors share a tendency eventually to curb such radical elements in order to use their narratives to make didactic points. As argued in the previous chapter, Kate Wilhelm agrees with many of Le Guin and Lessing's reservations regarding the post-structuralist interpretation of language as a totally self-reflexive system. In spite of this, however, her narratives are frequently more comparable to those created by Atwood, Carter and Russ. While Le Guin's and Lessing's work, when surveyed as a whole, appears to be more strongly weighted in favour of

conservatism than experimentation, the opposite can be seen in Wilhelm's case, where her underlying caution concerning radical definitions of language does not prevent her from creating challenging and open-ended narrative patterns.

Although her work is not so obviously experimental as that of Margaret Atwood or Joanna Russ, and certainly not as idiosyncratic as the writing of Angela Carter, Wilhelm shares these authors' resistance to closure and the imposition of a sense of authorial certainty upon a text. Wilhelm's conscious foregrounding of the ambiguous, illogical elements within her narratives poses an inevitable challenge to the order of conventional discourse, undermining the concept of the unitary subject in a way that her treatment of language does not. In most of her fiction she sets up an opposition between the discourse of a dominant ideology which adheres to its own fixed definition of reality, and an alternative, subversive narrative which, in the words of Cora Kaplan, 'foreground[s] the inherently unstable and split character of all human subjectivity'.<sup>21</sup>

The most extreme example of this tendency in Wilhelm's work can be found in *Fault Lines*, where the consciousness of the narrator is as fragmented and unstable as that of the society in which she lives. This effect is primarily achieved by Wilhelm's use of the first-person, which recalls Lacan's theory concerning the formation of the unconscious, where entry into language causes a split between the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is the subject of the enunciation.<sup>22</sup> Emily Carmichael's consciousness is fragmented in precisely this way, for she is both the narrator and the subject of the text. It can, of course, be argued that her experience is by no means unique, for it must be shared by every first-person narrator in any text. Wilhelm, however, specifically foregrounds this split through Emily's repeated references to herself as 'her/me'.

The sense of linguistic dislocation such a technique produces is further reinforced by the subjective nature of Emily's entire narrative, which consists of her dreams and memories of the past during the night she is trapped in the ruins of her house following an earthquake. Through the use of free indirect thought, slipping into free direct thought when the narrative finally enters the present, Wilhelm makes Emily's divided consciousness the only unifying element available in an increasingly fragmentary and temporally dislocated discourse which, as the night wears on and Emily grows weaker and delirious, finally dissolves into an arbitrary conjunction of confusing images. With a narrator in a situation unlikely to promote coherent thought, there is no ultimate standard to which the reader of this text can appeal for verification: a fact which only serves to underline the novel's central preoccupation with the disruption of an accepted view of reality.

*Fault Lines* thus presents the reader with a narrative pattern which is edged in precisely the opposite direction from those created by Le Guin and Lessing. However arbitrary and confused they might initially seem, narratives such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* actually progress towards resolution and rationalisation. *Fault Lines*, on the other hand, resolutely proceeds away from such a logical conclusion. Through its dramatisation of the Lacanian dilemma, it frees both reader and character from the confines imposed by a strictly mimetic text, for as Catherine Belsey argues,

It is this contradiction in the subject - between the conscious self, which is conscious in so far as it is able to feature in discourse, and the self which is only partially represented there - which constitutes the source of possible change. The child's submission to the discursive practices of society is challenged by the existence of another self which is not synonymous with the subject of discourse.<sup>22</sup>

As a text, *Fault Lines* is characterised by its extreme self-consciousness, for its narrator is consistently and painfully aware of her dual role within the narrative. As the subject of the discourse, Emily is powerless and manipulable, but as its (fictional) originator, she possesses an awareness of her ability to influence its structure. Motivated by the desire to 'find a way to help that child I was, help her survive the many traumas and terrors of childhood, help her to grow up not too frightened, strengthened by a touch she can never understand' (p.87),<sup>34</sup> Emily attempts to exercise this sense of control in order to free her younger self from the stasis of her own discourse. As Emily becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea that her act of recollection is actually changing the structure of the past, Wilhelm abandons any logical presentational sequence within the narrative, enabling her to extend this possibility out of the realm of the theoretical and into a possible 'reality' where her protagonist can 'reach out through, or around, time and touch that child, reassure her/me somehow' (p.12). That decision in itself creates a tenuous kind of temporal unity, where past and future become one through the reconstitutive power of Emily's present, for if she can influence past events, 'is there a way one can reach into a dimly perceived future to order change there?' (p.87). The commonly accepted view of time as a process of linear progression is therefore subverted, contributing to the effect of infinite possibility promoted by the text.

*Fault Lines* exemplifies Wilhelm's tendency to create open-ended narrative structures which avoid the textual closure and sense of conclusion characteristic of 'writerly' narratives. Emily's story ends with only the possibility of rescue, for the narrator, the only definition of 'reality' available to the audience, drifts off into a state of delirium or death, not even sure that the sounds she hears from outside are real. Such a sense of suspension is not confined to Wilhelm's novels, either, for her shorter pieces

of fiction provide some of the best examples of her refusal to provide her readers with a wholly conclusive ending, as the last paragraph of 'Somerset Dreams' demonstrates:

Walking home again, hot in the sunlight, listening to the rustlings of Somerset, imagining the unseen life that flits here and there out of my line of vision, I wonder if memories can become tangible, live a life of their own, I will pack, I think, and later in the day drive back up the mountain, back to the city, but not back to my job. Not back to administering death, or even temporary death. Perhaps I shall go into psychiatry, or research psychology. As I begin to pack, the house stirs with movement. (p.45)<sup>36</sup>

This is a characteristically inconclusive conclusion, creating as it does a tentative awareness of possibilities not contained within the text ('Perhaps I shall go into psychiatry...'). What is also typical is the way the final sentence of the story ends with a sense of uncompleted movement, frozen the moment before it achieves a resolution ('As I *begin* to pack, the house stirs with movement'). The reader is not enlightened as to the source or direction of this 'movement', but it is sinister in its very obscurity. Whether malignant or malign, it automatically throws doubts on Janet's success in escaping the town of Somerset and its dreams of the past.

Not all of Wilhelm's novels have such inconclusive endings as *Fault Lines* and 'Somerset Dreams', but it is interesting to note that those that do - *Oh Susannah!* and *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, for example - are also the ones that lapse into essentialism and sex stereotyping. The ending of *Oh Susannah!*, for example, forms the overall pattern of the narrative into a closed circle, both thematically and linguistically. Following the predictable prototype of the conventional romantic novel, Susannah is reunited with her lover Brad after regaining the memory she lost following a car accident. Deciding to write a book about their adventures, they deliberately set out together to retrace their

former journey from San Francisco to New York exactly 'the same way as before' (p.253).<sup>36</sup> This enables the narrative to draw to a close with the novel's opening paragraph, naturally drawing the two ends of the narrative together to form a circle which is closed to any alternative possibilities. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* is similar, although admittedly the ending celebrates the endlessly evolving patterns of nature embodied in the new society founded by the novel's hero, which is described as 'opening' the 'fan of possibilities' (p.250)<sup>37</sup> for the future of the human race. The narrative structure itself, however, with its innate sense of completion and resolved action, weakens that assertion.

The majority of Wilhelm's narratives, however, actively invite the reader to engage in a process of textual deconstruction by self-consciously commenting upon their own fictional construction. She rejects the traditional role of the all-seeing, all-knowing author, adopting instead a subjective narrative stance in which she is no more privileged in the understanding of the text than the reader. Although such posturing is really no more than a game, for in actuality Wilhelm is as firmly in control of the production of her texts as Le Guin and Lessing, it succeeds in initiating an active collaboration between author, reader and the text itself. Together, they participate in a dynamic process of narrative re/discovery which refuses the illusion of completion and unity provided by the classic realist text and highlights instead the fragmentary and partial aspects of personal experience.

The same intention can be observed in the work of Margaret Atwood, whose narratives attempt to contain, yet communicate, an ambiguity which enables multiple, sometimes directly incompatible, points of view to co-exist without creating a paradox. Like Wilhelm, Atwood achieves this by allowing the reader access only to the internal perspective of a first-person narrator. While Le

Guin and Lessing do the same thing in novels like *Skikasta* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, their siting of these texts in the larger context of a series provides their readers with an external perspective upon events by which the reliability of the narrator can be measured. No such standard exists in the work of Wilhelm and Atwood, which exploits the tension generated by forcing the reader - who needs to construct some kind of frame of reference which will allow her access to the text - to rely upon the narration of a character whose reliability is obviously suspect.

In a typically paradoxical way, Atwood hints at such intentions in a short piece entitled 'Murder in the Dark'<sup>30</sup> which, although it begins as a description of the party game of the same name, evolves into a metafictional meditation upon the relationship between the writer and her audience. Atwood, as the author who invites her reader to 'play games with this game' (p.30), takes on the persona of the murderer, who 'by the rules of the game...must always lie' (p.30). The piece ends with the ironic query 'Now do you believe me?' (p.30). Such a question, when posed by someone who is committed to deception, cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. In fact, it sums up the dilemma of the reader in Atwood's texts - uncomfortably poised between belief and disbelief.

Atwood usually achieves this effect of estrangement by merging her authorial voice with a fictional one which is in some way situated outside the reader's own frame of reference. In *Cat's Eye*, for example, the majority of the story is told from a child's point of view, which inevitably disrupts and distorts the 'adult' world of which the reader is presumably a part. More commonly, however, in novels like *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman*, Atwood exploits the distorted perspectives of insanity in order to bring a self-consciousness into play within the narrative which does not share the audience's perception of normality, a tactic also adopted by Sylvia Plath, Janet Frame and

Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Although the narrators of such novels begin their stories rationally enough, evoking a view of 'reality' with which the reader can readily concur, a gap between the perspectives of reader and narrator begins to open up as the latter retreats from a position of objectivity into the traumatised subjectivity of her own mind.

In *The Edible Woman*, for example, Marian's rejection of food is rationally explicable as the symptom of anorexia nervosa. However, this interpretation does not appear within Marian's narration itself, where her refusal to eat takes on all the intensity of a religious ritual. It is not she, but an exterior influence who decides when a particular food becomes 'forbidden' (p.152)<sup>22</sup> to her, filling her with 'the quiet fear...that this thing, this refusal of her mouth to eat, was malignant, that it would spread; that slowly the circle now dividing the non-devourable from the devourable would become smaller and smaller, that the objects available to her would be excluded one by one' (p.153). Like the ceaseless 'creeping' of Gilman's narrator, or Istina Mavet's obsession with the small rituals of behaviour which she believes will ward off ECT treatment, Marian's obsessions can be objectively understood as a manifestation of her illness. Atwood, however, like Frame and Gilman, does not allow the reader a rational standpoint from which to make such a judgement. Mediated through the warped subjectivity of the narrator's mind, such phenomena become imbued with a sense of frightening reality.

In spite of switching from the first to the third-person in the central section of *The Edible Woman*, Atwood does not actually impose a wider authorial perspective upon Marian's point of view, giving the reader a sense of objectivity which is purely illusory. The result of such a complete submergence of authorial authority in the mind of her character is that the 'fantastic', irrational elements within the text are allowed to proliferate without restraint.



As Marian becomes increasingly estranged from the consensus view of normality, so quite normal experiences become defamiliarised and distorted. Her reflection in both her bedroom mirror and bathroom taps becomes a bloated, tripartite creature when seen through her eyes, while she views her pregnant friend Clara as 'a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower' (p.32). In Marian's dreams, too, her fiancé Peter is transformed into a malignant, threatening presence, culminating in her unshakeable conviction that he is the mysterious obscene phone-caller known as the Underwear Man.

However, by ensuring that this pervasive strand of irrationality is never satisfactorily integrated into a 'common-sense' view of reality, the text does not permit such defamiliarised visions to become refamiliarised. Even Marian's return to normality is achieved in an illogical way, through the baking of a (literally) edible woman whom she offers to Peter as a form of ritual appeasement. Such a conclusion confirms the text's refusal to confine its fantastic content within a rational framework, leaving the reader with no standard by which, even retrospectively, to assess Marian's thoughts and actions.

Indeed, *The Edible Woman*, like most of Atwood's fiction, demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of itself as a game taking place between author and reader, playing with the reader's tendency to anticipate closure and the re-establishment of 'normality'. While baking the cake that supposedly marks her return to sanity, for example, Marian appears to be briefly aware of the reader's scrutiny, experiencing 'a swift vision of her own monumental silliness, of how infantile and undignified she would seem in the eyes of any rational observer' (p.270). The authority of such a 'rational observer' is, however, denied just as swiftly when Marian decides that 'that wasn't the point', and makes the cake anyway.

The same pattern of self-conscious advance towards and retreat from refamiliarisation and closure can be seen in *Surfacing*, another of Atwood's novels which exploits the perspectives of insanity as a means of gaining the fantastic access to the text. The narrator is conscious that 'from any rational point of view I am absurd' (p.169);<sup>40</sup> but by going on to state that 'there are no longer any rational points of view', she abandons her audience within a text within which nothing is as it seems, and where even language fails in the effort to convey meaning.

Like Wilhelm's 'Somerset Dreams', *Surfacing* ends an instant before it reaches a resolution, balancing on the knife-edge of an uncompleted movement which confirms the central role of ambiguity in the text. The tendency of many critics to assess the novel on the basis of the completion of that movement, thus reading an ending into the narrative which it simply has not got, demonstrates the frustration experienced by an audience which is cheated of an anticipated resolution. For example, Barbara M. Rigney concludes that *Surfacing* is a work of 'ringing affirmation', in which the heroine 'chooses instead a new life and a new way of seeing...carr[ying] a new child, a new messiah'.<sup>41</sup> Sally Robinson mounts a critique on the basis of a similiarly anticipated ending, for while acknowledging that 'in *Surfacing*, the protagonist's metamorphosis "diverts the linearity" of the narrative project by allowing multiplicity to enter', she also maintains that 'the novel ends in a polarization, an either/or choice that the protagonist must make - the moment of closure'.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, we do not know for sure if the heroine has conceived a child, for even she admits to a feeling of uncertainty; and the end of the novel only opens 'the possibility of her return to the world. Instead, she waits in the undergrowth listening to Joe calling her name, in the process of deciding whether or not to respond. Although sentences like 'I tense forward, towards the

demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet' (p.192) [my italics], invite the reader to complete that process of return, I think to do so is to deny the text's fundamental ambiguity, for at the point of conclusion the narrator still has a choice. As Atwood satirically comments in 'Happy Endings'<sup>43</sup>, death is 'the only authentic ending'. Other endings, she warns her readers, 'are all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism' (p.40).

Although *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman* both contain resolutions of a kind, any attempt to apply a *definitive* pattern of order to such texts is as doomed to failure as the 'reading' of the pattern on the yellow wallpaper in Gilman's story. Stating her determination to 'follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion' (p.19),<sup>44</sup> the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* sinks into madness and obsession in the impossible attempt to find a rational framework into which to fit the 'sprawling outlines' and 'slanting waves of optic horror' (p.20) inscribed upon her walls.

Atwood's work thus challenges the realist supposition that 'art' reflects 'life' by rebounding its own self-consciousness back upon its audience, foregrounding the role of the reader in the construction not only of meaning, but of reality itself. Such an approach, as Patricia Waugh says, carries with it the implication that 'reality' is to...[some] extent 'fictional' and can be understood through an appropriate 'reading' process'.<sup>45</sup> However, a paradox central to Atwood's work is that the formation of what Linda Hutcheon describes as a 'reading process that mirrors the dynamic creative act of the writer' carries with it 'moral and aesthetic dimensions'<sup>46</sup> which extend beyond the fictive boundaries of her texts. Hutcheon argues that, 'while directing the reader's attention to the fictive world of the novel', Atwood 'will nevertheless not allow him to evade its moral implications. The reader of Atwood's novels can

never be passive; he must accept responsibility for the world he too is bringing to life by his act of reading'.<sup>47</sup>

However, Hutcheon's definition of the reader as masculine constitutes a serious misreading of Atwood's extra-textual intentions. Although, unlike Russ, Atwood does not explicitly exclude men from her audience, the consciousness the reader is required to enter in reading such novels as *Surfacing* and *Bodily Harm* is that of a woman in rebellion against an order inevitably identified as patriarchal. As Lorna Irvine points out, self-conscious allusions to the act of writing in Atwood's work are often metaphorically represented through images of female mutilation, disguise and evasion.<sup>48</sup> The games Atwood plays in her narratives, therefore, specifically invite the reader to participate in a creative process which is clearly motivated by feminist concerns.

The creation of texts which forego the strictures of narrative closure in order to accommodate a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations is regarded by feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray as a phenomenon which is inextricably linked to gender. Cixous argues that, in order to achieve an authentic narrative reproduction of female experience and desire, women writers must break down the confines of phallogentric discourse. *L'écriture féminine*, she says, 'can only keep going, without ever describing or discerning contours',<sup>49</sup> in order to inscribe 'the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death'.<sup>50</sup> Irigaray maintains that women's texts are the reflections of a female sexuality which is 'always at least double...in fact plural',<sup>51</sup> resulting in a discourse which 'is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized'.<sup>52</sup>

Such a resistance to fixture and immobilisation is evident in the work of Angela Carter, whose baroque texts foreground, even more strongly than Atwood's,

the processes of narrative game-playing. Carter has stated that 'the derangement of views of reality is a recurring theme of mine':<sup>53</sup> an objective she achieves in her narratives through the subversive use of intertextuality, rapid and often contradictory switches in narrative points of view, and the maintenance of a sense of ambiguity which extends beyond the endings of her texts. Natalie M. Rosinsky links Carter, amongst others, to a tradition of modern women's writing on the basis of her use of such narrative devices, arguing that 'the fluid reconfiguration of perceived physical reality, validating temporal simultaneity and spacial relativity is redolent of the "feminine consciousness" deliberately articulated by such earlier twentieth century writers as Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and Rosamund Lehmann'.<sup>54</sup> Carter uses narrative experimentation as a vehicle through which she can mount an attack upon various phallogocentric institutions. In such novels as *Nights at the Circus*, *The Infernal Desire*, *Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, she questions the validity of a 'reality' which she believes to be constructed at the expense of the female.

If Atwood defines herself as a murderer who lurks in the dark corners of her texts with sinister designs upon her readers, then Carter is a confidence trickster who succeeds in dazzling and deceiving her audience even while making no secret of her intention to do so. Indeed, she has defined the heroine of *Nights at the Circus*, whose wings remain a matter for speculation throughout the text, as 'a celebration of the confidence trick'.<sup>55</sup> Such openness can, however, be deceptive, for even Fevvers' 'revelation' to Walser at the end of the novel - "'To think I really fooled you!'" (p.295)<sup>56</sup> - is actually no revelation at all, since the nature of the deception itself has never been made clear. Has Walser (and the reader with him) been fooled into thinking Fevvers' wings were real when they were fake, or fake when they were real? *Nights at the Circus*

demonstrates Carter's tendency to entrap her readers in narrative mazes within which an apparent disclosure does not lead to resolution, but only reveals another layer of fiction behind the first. Although Fevvers' admission may superficially appear to resolve the confusion generated by the text, it actually only increases it, for no concrete referent exists to which her statement can be attached.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a more blatant example of the same narrative 'confidence trick', for it is a novel whose very form promises eventual explanation and closure. Like Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, this work is presented as an autobiography, and Desiderio's statement at the beginning of his narration, 'I must gather together all that confusion of experience and arrange it in order, just as it happened, beginning at the beginning' (p.11),<sup>57</sup> recalls the Survivor's preoccupation with the formation of a conventionally-structured discourse which will fit the raw material of recollection into rational framework. The novel's status as memoir automatically presupposes that, however chaotic and illogical the events Desiderio describes, they will eventually be resolved within the stability of his authorial present.

However, Desiderio's claim to be 'immune' to 'the tinselled fall-out from the Hoffman effect' (p.13) which produces the temporal flux of Nebulous Time, is only superficially supported by the novel's structure. Although it attempts to arrange the events of the younger Desiderio's journey in strict sequential order, ending with old Desiderio's contemplation of the book he has just completed, there are hints throughout the text that Desiderio's material is on the verge of escaping his control. For example, as David Punter says, Desiderio 'gives us the the conclusion of the story ahead of its natural place, and himself bemoans the fact: "but there I go again - running ahead of myself! See, I have ruined all the suspense. I have quite spoiled my climax."' (p.208)<sup>58</sup>

It is the brief, final sentence of the novel, 'Unbidden, she comes' (p.221), that definitively defeats the struggle towards unity and closure, for like Fevvers' "'I fooled you!'", it is a statement which is subversive in its defiant ambiguity. If, as seems likely, 'she' refers to Desiderio's dead love Albertina, then her presence in the text at this point presents the reader with a paradox which, in its subversion of 'any single, unified utterance',<sup>59</sup> reinstates the chaos of Nebulous Time. Until now, the dominant - indeed, apparently the only - voice within the novel has been that of Desiderio himself; but the source of this final sentence remains unclear. The possibility exists that it is issuing from a place outside the scope of Desiderio's narration, thus posing an incontrovertible challenge to its claim of absolute authority. Thrown back into the maze of fictionality, the reader is therefore forced into an assumption of responsibility for narrative interpretation.

Carter's celebration of ambiguity and ambivalence in such novels as *Nights at the Circus* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is typical of 'carnavalesque discourse';<sup>60</sup> a concept defined by the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin and expounded upon by Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Word, Dialogue and Novel'. Bakhtin describes carnival as a mode which 'proclaims the jolly relativity of everything',<sup>61</sup> and which is wholly dedicated to the subversion of meaning and order. According to Bakhtin's definition, the traditional realist novel is 'monological', prohibiting a proliferation of meaning by insisting on the correctness of a single, definitive, interpretation. In contrast, the 'dialogical' discourse of carnival adopts what Kristeva describes as 'a dream logic',<sup>62</sup> which defies definition and the imposition of order.

Carter's texts frequently foreground their participation in this mode of discourse by situating the narrative within the context of a fairground or circus. *Nights at the Circus* is an obvious example, in which, as Paulina Palmer

says, 'Ma Nelson, the Madame of the brothel where Fevvers spends her childhood, is described as 'The Mistress of the Revels' (p.49); Buffo, the chief clown, is 'the Lord of Misrule' (p.117); and God is represented as 'the great ringmaster in the sky' (p.120).<sup>63</sup> However, the realm of carnival recurs in the majority of Carter's narratives in a variety of sometimes surprising forms. In *The Passion of New Eve*, for example, Hollywood takes on that status, represented by the 'shifting perspectives' (p.113)<sup>64</sup> of the house of mirrors and glass inhabited by the ambiguously-gendered movie-star Tristessa.

Carter also frequently uses the concept of carnival as a means of self-reflexively commenting upon the formation of her texts. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, for example, Desiderio's travels lead him to a travelling fair where he encounters the Acrobats of Desire, whose fantastic gyrations reach the heights of impossibility when they juggle with parts of their own dismembered bodies. Their 'demonstration of juxtaposition and transposition' (p.114) is an obvious metaphorical representation of the way in which the text exhibits its commitment to the politics of subversion in the dismantling of its own narrative structures, foregrounding the fact that Carter's texts are a patchwork re/construction of bits and pieces of other texts.

Kristeva identifies intertextuality as an important feature of carnivalesque discourse, in whose structures, she says, 'writing reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis'.<sup>65</sup> The wide range of the sources from which Carter borrows ensures that her use of this device is doubly subversive. Not only does it disrupt the assumption, fostered by the realist novel, that there is a one-to-one relationship between a text and its author, but also overturns accepted hierarchies of artistic value, for as Palmer observes, Carter's 'skilfully



contrived exercises in intertextuality'...unite...the serious and the comic, high and low'.<sup>66</sup> The dividing line between 'art' and popular culture becomes indistinguishable in novels such as *Nights at the Circus*, in which references to such established members of the modern literary canon such as 'Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Ibsen and Joyce'<sup>67</sup> mingle with allusions to less 'respectable' forms such as folklore, the Victorian music-hall, and the films of Mae West.<sup>68</sup>

However, Carter's most important single source is probably the Gothic romance. As she acknowledges in the afterword to a collection of her short stories published in 1974, *Fireworks*, she draws from the Gothic mode her fascination with the 'profane' which is the foundation of many of her basic narrative strategies.<sup>69</sup> Rosemary Jackson's description of the Gothic novel as being motivated by a fascination with disorder, 'opposing fiction's classical unities (of time, space and unified character) with an apprehension of partiality and relativity of meaning',<sup>70</sup> is extremely reminiscent of Carter's work. Also, because it is primarily motivated by the desire to shock and mystify the reader, the Gothic is an inherently self-conscious mode which is always assessing the affect of its narrative techniques upon an audience.

Narratives which wish to evoke the atmosphere of the Gothic novel have therefore to adopt that same self-consciousness; even if, as in the case of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, they do so with satirical intent. In one episode in Austen's novel, for example, Catherine Morland nervously examines a large and mysterious cabinet in the corner of her bedroom, only to find in the cold light of day that the manuscript she has strained to decipher all night is merely a laundry list. In her pastiche of the work of such popular writers of Gothic novels as Mrs. Radcliffe, Austen deliberately parodies their tendency to play on the perceptions of their audience. She relates the entire incident from the point of view of the highly excitable Catherine, through whose eyes innocent

phenomena gain a sinister intensity.

However, in deliberately deflating the Gothic's dramatic effects, Austen ultimately asserts the value of the *status qua*. Although Carter shares the same delight in the deliberate misleading of her audience, she also exploits the anarchic fantasy that Rosemary Jackson claims to be central to the Gothic genre; that of the 'absolute negation or dissolution of cultural order'.<sup>71</sup> Carter's subversion of conventional narrative expectations and interrogation of the 'real' is not done merely for its own sake, however, but with the intention of initiating an critique of phallogentric forms and institutions. In contrast to the Gothic novel, whose attack upon order leads to pessimism and death, Carter uses humour as an intrinsic part of such a project in a way which indicates her commitment to an intention beyond the text. As a writer and as a feminist, she exhibits a basic optimism that the sense of infinite potential expressed in the very form of her narratives prefigures a radically changed cultural order which is receptive to new artistic, political and social possibilities. As Michael Worton and Judith Still point out, there is also

a deeply serious side to the carnivalesque challenge to official linguistic codes, which is to be contrasted with the kind of parody which upholds what it mocks or attempts to exist without any kind of law. The correlational (non-causal) logic of the dream or the carnival, which persistently refers to sex and death, is a revolutionary refusal of existing hierarchies, and of social and political codes.<sup>72</sup>

The subversive use of humour for feminist ends, however, arguably reaches its apotheosis in the work of Joanna Russ, the most overtly self-conscious of the writers discussed in this thesis. It is true that Atwood and Carter share a similar sense of self-consciousness concerning their authorial roles: while Atwood envisages herself as a murderer laying in wait for the unsuspecting reader, Carter plays the role of the confidence trickster who simultaneously

deceives and entertains. However, both are personae which stress the value of concealment, meaning that the full range of their subversive activities within their texts, although considerable, can only be completely unearthed by the adoption of a rigorously critical reading practice. Russ' work, however, does not so much *invite* deconstruction as *demand* it, frequently outraging all conventional considerations of form and content - even typography and design - in the urgency of transmitting its central feminist message.

While such didacticism may recall that exhibited by Le Guin and Lessing, Russ expresses her authorial message in a way which is essentially dynamic. As already discussed earlier in this chapter, the imposition of Le Guin's and Lessing's authorial point of view has the effect of excluding the reader from participation in the text, while the reader always has an active part to play in Russ' didactic project. Although Russ is an obvious presence within her texts, she adopts a number of narrative strategies to ensure that the reader does not assume that the authorial voice they encounter is the omnipotent and omnipresent guide of classic realism. It is made obvious to the reader from the beginning that, if she is to arrive at any understanding of the text at all, she is going to have actively to participate in the construction of meaning. Like Luisa Valenzuela's claim in *The Lizard's Tale*, her 'biography' of the Argentinian politician López Rega, that 'there's an affinity in the voice as I narrate him, sometimes our pages are indistinguishable' (p.126),<sup>79</sup> Russ frequently conflates the distinctions between author and character in such a way as to create the impression, not of an authoritative character, but of a confused and uncertain author.

Russ' exploitation of tense plays an important part in achieving this effect. While Patricia Waugh argues that 'third-person narrative with overt first-person intrusor allows for metafictional dislocation much more obviously

than first-person narratives',<sup>74</sup> (the tactic adopted by Valenzuela) Russ increases that degree of dislocation by creating first-person narratives within which the number of 'I's multiply to the point of potential incoherence. Because many of Russ' texts are narrated from the point of view of a 'Joanna' character whom the reader is implicitly invited to identify with Russ herself, the author, too, is made part of this process of anarchic deconstruction. For example, the principal narrator of *The Female Man* is not only called Joanna, but shares Russ' occupation of English professor. The narrator of *On Strike Against God*, Esther, may not bear Russ' name, but, like Joanna, she has the same profession. This cancellation of the distinction between actual and implied author lends a deceptive impression of unity to the text which is soon shattered, for no sooner has such a link been established than it is subverted by Russ' deliberate division of the authorial persona. Joanna's narration is broken up and scattered amongst the contradictory voices of the four J's, while the tenuous unity of Esther's narration is irretrievably disrupted by the intrusion of a 'committee' (p.23),<sup>75</sup> all of whom claim to be the writers of the book.

Like much postmodernist fiction, Russ' narratives thus define the figure of the 'author' as a fragmented creature who is incapable of responding to the reader's appeal for verification within the text. Valenzuela, for example, eventually challenges her principal character's control over the text by ceasing to write his story: 'By being silent now, I think I can make you silent. By erasing myself from the map, I intend to erase you. Without my biography, it will be as if you had never had a life. So long, Sorcerer, *felice morte*.' (p.227). The fact that, bereft of her overt participation, the narrative carries on regardless, creates the illusion that it has indeed escalated beyond the author's control. Similarly, Russ strands the reader within an incomprehensible fiction and leaves her to generate meaning from the text without the aid of any

authorial guidelines.

Paradoxically, this sense of confusion is only increased on Russ' adoption of an authoritative authorial persona, just as Valenzuela's intervention within her text only adds to the narrative chaos. Periodically, Russ indulges in 'the ironic flaunting of the Teller'<sup>76</sup> which Waugh regards as typical of metafiction, when a voice distinguished by its confident sense of control over the action emerges from behind that of the dispersed and disenfranchised narrator. Such a voice is a highly ironic foregrounding of the indisputable existence of the *real* author, because in spite of its claim 'I'm the spirit of the author and know all things' (*The Female Man*, p.166),<sup>77</sup> it does not intend to be any more reliable than the other authorial voices within the narrative. In *The Female Man*, this 'spirit of the author' does not in any way function as a unifying figure within the text. Instead, it is a discordant presence at its very centre, persistently inserting small pieces of information it would be impossible for either reader or implied narrator to know within a 'logical' narrative: 'She [Jael] took us topside in the branch elevator: the Young One, the Weak One, the Strong One, as she called us in her own mind. I'm the author and I know' (*The Female Man*, p.165). This technique is particularly obtrusive in *The Female Man*, where the unsubtlety of such an intervention succeeds in considerably unsettling the reader, who is kept in a state of constant uncertainty as to which 'I' is the narrator at any point in the text.

Russ, by revealing the authorial machinations which take place in every text, but which are normally concealed, makes her readers aware of the implications contained in the act of reading, ensuring they become as self-conscious as the narrative itself. It is this self-consciousness which, motivated by the common desire to extract meaning from a discourse which seems to be constantly on the verge of spiralling out of control, unites reader, author and

text in an alliance which is never anything less than uneasy. Jonathan Culler argues that 'to read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for'.<sup>78</sup> However, such advice does not much aid the reader within a text which uses its own understanding of the operations of (its own) literary discourse in order to play with and subvert such assumptions.

Self-conscious though Russ' work might be, however, it is not completely self-reflexive, for the motivation which causes such novels as *The Female Man* and *On Strike Against God* consistently to work against narrative and grammatical convention lies beyond the area of the text itself. Russ' feminism is no mere literary exercise, for her subversion of the rules of narrative is carried out with the evident intention of challenging the dominance of the patriarchal vision within the cultural order at large. The reader's recognition of her own manipulation is an essential part of Russ' narrative strategy, as Sarah Lefanu argues when she claims that 'Russ' position on authorship is radical in two ways. First, she insists that books have a political life and that her own work, and the work of other women, are effective texts. Second, she constitutes the reader as someone who can, and indeed must be affected'.<sup>79</sup>

Lefanu goes on to make an important point when she observes that Russ always 'constitutes the reader as female',<sup>80</sup> for it demonstrates how the role of the reader in Russ' fiction forms an essential part of her feminist agenda. While the other authors discussed within this thesis are aware of the presence of an audience, they do not *specifically* assume it to be an exclusively female one. In spite of the fact that their texts frequently deal with feminist issues, Le Guin, Lessing, and Wilhelm share a commitment to moderation which would not permit them to alienate a male audience. And although Atwood and Carter may

purposely set out to unsettle male perspectives, they do not explicitly prohibit men from access to their narratives.<sup>1</sup>

However, in an act of savage satire, Russ turns the normal definition of sexism upon its head by ensuring that men have absolutely no effective part to play in her work, either as readers or as characters. When, as often happens, she addresses the female reader directly, she treats her as a co-conspirator in a dialogue from which men are excluded. Any male reader of Russ' work is thus dismissed as an ineffectual spectator of a conversation which is not addressed to him. This sense of alienation is further reinforced by Russ' periodic inclusion in her work of hostile diatribes against a masculinist culture, in which she alternately challenges, mocks and issues ultimatums to a phallogentric order inimical to her feminist aims. Such deliberately inflammatory tactics ensure, in the words of Lefanu, that 'the operation of the text itself, and the reading of it, become political acts'.<sup>2</sup>

The link between Russ' feminism and the practice of reading is obvious in such novels as *On Strike Against God*, where as the narrative becomes increasingly conscious of its own textual construction, eventually tailing off into a series of footnotes 'without a referent' (p.107), its political implications also become more overt. Near the end of the novel, Russ herself steps into the text in order to contemplate the frustration of those who dislike her avoidance of resolution, postulating the existence of a 'hapless liberal [who] sees the end-papers approaching and has started looking frantically for the Reconciliation Scene' (p.101). Stating that that the text can accommodate 'a perfectly beautiful reconciliation scene', so long as 'you write it' (p.101), Russ does not deny this hypothetical reader her desire for closure so long as she carries out such a project herself.

*Her* narrative, meanwhile, abandons all textual cohesion in order to proceed

towards the expression of a lyrical and allusive form of female discourse; an *écriture féminine* which, in the words of Cixous, 'is launching forth and effusion without return'.<sup>33</sup> Meaning plays a minimal role in this form of discourse, which considers the shape and the sound of words to be as important as what they say, and the text's joyful proclamation of its freedom from the restraints of patriarchal linguistic and narrative structures is manifested through a bizarre and colourful juxtaposition of images and ideas: 'We should all trade poems, we should all talk like mad and whoop and dance like mad, travelling in caravans and on camel-back...and elephant-howdah and submarine and hot-air balloon and canoes and unicycles and just plain shanks' mare towards that Great Goddess-Thanksgiving Dinner in the sky' (p.106).

*On Strike Against God* demonstrates how Russ denies her readers the luxury of passivity by consistently assuming them to be functioning within the text on an equal level with the author. In stressing how readers always 'write' their own cultural assumptions into the texts they study, Russ implies that reading is also a form of authorship, supporting Waugh's argument that 'the most fundamental assumption [of metafiction] is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's own 'reality''.<sup>34</sup> By systematically breaking the frames that separate the invented world of the literary text and the 'actual' world of the reader, Russ' narratives force their audience toward assuming responsibility for 'authoring' not only the fictions which they read, but the larger 'reality' in which they live.

This chapter therefore demonstrates that a discussion of narrative largely recreates the same patterns of unanimity and division discussed in the previous chapter. The same authors who adhere to a belief in an unproblematic 'reality' which language must strive to communicate, formulate narrative structures which



demonstrate a conservative tendency towards thematic and didactic closure. Those writers who hold the more radical view that reality itself is defined by language produce narratives which are genuinely open-ended and susceptible to multiple, often contradictory, interpretation. The only author who crosses from a conservative view of language to a radical treatment of narrative form is Kate Wilhelm, whose texts experiment with ambiguity and fluctuations in subjectivity in a way which is more comparable to the work of Atwood, Carter and Russ.

A detailed examination of these authors from the point of view of their treatment of narrative, however, reveals these divisions to be somewhat simplistic. Although Le Guin and Lessing both demonstrate a preference for making their own didactic opinions evident within their texts, they nevertheless exploit many experimental narrative strategies; dramatising problems of narrative construction, allowing characters to contemplate their own status within the fiction, or switching between narrative points of view which may contradict each other. In the majority of their texts such tactics do not challenge the notion of subjectivity in anything more than the most abstract way, for the writer's own authorial presence remains unaffected by the implications of such narrative experimentation. However, novels such as Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* pose a genuine challenge to the conventions which govern the world both inside and outside the text, demonstrating that the metafictional elements in their work are not always stifled by the imposition of an authorial subjectivity.

On the other hand, writers such as Wilhelm, Atwood, Carter and Russ create dynamic narratives which, in forcing the reader to participate in the construction of a meaning which is always partial and subjective, dismantle the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'fictional'. But while this may appear to lead inevitably to a systematic deconstruction of the traditional concept of the

liberal, autonomous subject, these authors do not abandon subjectivity altogether, any more than they reject language. Although the narratives of Wilhelm, Atwood, Carter and Russ may be more radical in both form and content than those created by Le Guin and Lessing, the two groups share common extra-textual interests which ensure that none of them, no matter how radical, completes the slide into complete self-reflexivity, where 'there is no 'subject' and no history in the old sense at all....only a system of linguistic structures, a textual construction, a play of differences'.<sup>25</sup>

I have already discussed the wide range of feminist opinion expressed by the authors in this thesis, from Wilhelm's and Le Guin's treatment of women as only one group among many who are relegated to the margins of the dominant culture, to Russ' radical separatism. Nevertheless, it is this shared political concern which ties them to a world beyond the scope of the text. All these authors, no matter how subversive, are motivated by their feminist opinions to assert the existence of some kind of subjectivity, for feminism itself, as Waugh says, 'seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture'.<sup>26</sup> The more radical the feminist commitment, the more it becomes reflected in the very patterns and processes of textual construction; but these very processes also predicate the re/construction of an autonomous sense of self.

The way in which feminism must necessarily modify the self-reflexive elements in postmodernism is demonstrated by Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, *The Woman Warrior*, which subverts the conventions in its experimentation with narrative perspective (in some places, for example, the voices of the narrator and her mother are virtually indistinguishable), but which is more than just a play with words. In its consideration of the social and cultural situation of expatriate Chinese women, this novel implicitly assumes the existence of an

individual sensibility which is not constructed purely through the operations of discourse. The many legends which are interwoven with the text have a practical as well as a disruptive function, for in putting the narrator in touch with her cultural traditions, they help her to identify 'exactly who the enemy are' (p.50),<sup>97</sup> and thus resist social and economic exploitation both as an immigrant and a woman.

It is on this basis that I categorise the narratives within this thesis as 'metafiction', a form which stresses the importance of the novelist even while it may also deconstruct the term. Although metafiction is an aspect of postmodernism, it resists postmodernism's leanings towards the complete negation of the self, for as 'self-conscious' fiction it presupposes the existence of a 'self' which is capable of some kind of 'consciousness'. However, metafiction does not reproduce the unproblematic, unified subject of traditional realism, for the form's preoccupation with the breaking of narrative frames and the blurring of the boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction' initiates a radical questioning of the accepted conceptions of the self, as both reader and writer. Subjectivity in the novels of Carter or Russ, for example, is dispersed and fragmentary, defined as more a state of 'absence' than 'presence'. Nevertheless, the larger political motivation that lies behind such texts constitutes an outer frame which prevents them from becoming completely absorbed in the processes of their own word-games. As Waugh argues, metafiction 'does not abandon 'the real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination....In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'".<sup>98</sup> And if all reality is fiction, it is capable of being changed in order to accommodate female experience and history.

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experience of the reading relations of the text, as a male reader, is bizarre (p.37), he makes the brave admission that 'as a male reader, I find myself the victim of illusions. Although I am aware that Carter is a woman...I nonetheless find that the first-person narration of Evelyn/Eve appears to me throughout, no matter what the overt sex of the new Messiah at the time, as a masculine narrative' (p.38).

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## CONCLUSION

Well,  
 she's long about her coming, who must be  
 more merciless to herself than history,  
 Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge  
 breasted and glancing through the currents,  
 taking the light upon her  
 at least as beautiful as any boy  
 or helicopter,

poised, still coming,  
 her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo  
 no promise then;  
 delivered  
 palpable  
 ours.'

This thesis, then, follows six authors - Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, Kate Wilhelm, Doris Lessing, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood - on the course of a metaphysical and metaphorical journey towards the far side of patriarchy and the formulation of a new female subjectivity. I have based my discussion on the premise that women live in a society which, as Hélène Cixous says, still keeps women 'separated from the world where cultural exchanges are made...to be the nonsocial, nonpolitical, nonhuman half of the living structure'.<sup>2</sup> Within the present order, female creative drives and sexual desires are largely repressed, and in their place arise ideologically-generated images of 'femininity' which attempt to reconstruct women as objects of male consumption and exchange. Consequently, it is vital for women to formulate new ways of defining who they are and what their place in the world should be. The authors whose work I have chosen to discuss in this thesis all engage in such a project of redefinition,



using their fiction in order to work their way towards a utopian space where, in the words of Adrienne Rich, 'there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored'<sup>3</sup> - that of the female subject who is free to become whatever she wishes to be.

In Part One, I began by examining the range of feminist responses to the dominant order these authors represent. In identifying such an order as patriarchal, they share a similar conviction that women experience alienation as an intrinsic part of the female condition, and that this alienation is not only from other women, but also from the self. The more moderate of the six authors would add that women also suffer from being alienated from men, although this is a point on which they differ.

Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood both see the differences between men and women as intrinsic and inescapable, viewing any possibility of gender reconciliation as extremely problematic (Atwood), if not downright impossible (Russ). Le Guin and Wilhelm, however, as well as Atwood in her later work, regard sexism as only part of the problem. For them, the figure of the patriarch is not just male, but white, Western and heterosexual as well, providing the standard by which groups other than women are excluded from full cultural participation. Both Le Guin and Wilhelm regard any idea of feminist separatism with extreme distrust, taking for granted that, within a transformed social and political order, men and women will engage in a new relationship as equals.

Of all the authors discussed in this thesis, however, the approach adopted by Doris Lessing and Angela Carter is potentially the most problematic from a feminist perspective, for both of them, although operating from very different motives, regard the patriarchal principle as in some way inescapable, or even as necessary. Lessing, in spite of her established place in the feminist literary canon, has frequently attempted to play down her identification with the

feminist movement. While the work for which she is probably most widely known, *The Golden Notebook*, is certainly driven by social concerns which are rooted in society's treatment of women, and thus is open to a feminist reading, many of Lessing's other novels preserve an adherence to the principle of patriarchal authority which makes it seem both inevitable and inescapable. In contrast, Carter's feminist leanings are never in doubt, although she makes a vital distinction between patriarchy as a social construct and men as individuals which allows the sexes to work together towards the formation of a new cultural order.

In Part Two, I discussed how these authors not only use their art to examine the cultural space available to them as women, but also venture to explore their particular situation as women who *write*. Echoing the work of such feminist critics as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter and Catherine Clément, they paint a convincing and disturbing picture of a tradition of female frustration and censorship, where the creative female has experienced an intensified form of the repression experienced by all women in a dualistic order weighted in favour of the male. By the very act of writing she raises the possibility of female intellectual and economic independence, and in an attempt to stifle that urge towards autonomy, she has been consistently represented both to herself and to society at large as an abnormal phenomenon: the unfeminine, strident 'Other' who must be repressed and silenced.

The feminist critics cited above have graphically demonstrated the pervasive force of such false representations of the artistic female. In the nineteenth century she was cast in the role of 'monster' or 'fiend'; a repulsive, yet fascinating, phenomenon which went beyond the bounds of nature.<sup>4</sup> In the scientific context of the twentieth century she was recast as a hysteric or a schizophrenic, but still conveyed the same mixture of repulsion and fascination.

Through their creation of a number of narratives which are focussed on the figure of the woman writer - such as Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, and Kate Wilhelm's *Fault Lines*, the authors in this thesis show a special concern with the way in which female artists themselves become co-opted into the perpetuation of this myth, and by their own efforts provide a masculinist culture with the means by which women's writing can be marginalised or ignored.

While exhibiting a common desire to break with such a repressive tradition, all these writers adopt the same tactic, proceeding into the myth of the artist/hysteric in order to dismantle it from the inside out. In the words of Carol Pearson and Catherine Pope, they conceive of this deconstructive project 'not in terms of linear progress, but as a centering in',<sup>5</sup> taking on the role of madwoman which is their literary heritage, while at the same time foregrounding its subversive possibilities. For them, as for Catherine Clément, 'the feminine figure who crystallizes around herself the swirling glances of a threatened culture' is 'not far away...[from] revolutionary myths, the figure of liberty'.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the fiction discussed here, the altered perspectives of insanity enable the individual to formulate a potentially liberating discourse based upon a redefined female subjectivity, who is able to conceive of new possibilities for the self outside the confines of the dominant order.

This progress away from patriarchy and towards the transformation of the female subject is commonly represented by these writers in the form of a quest; an ironic adaptation of a mythic motif which, in its conventional form, exists to uphold and perpetuate the myths by which a patriarchal society lives and thrives, and of which the myth of the artist/hysteric is also a part - the unquestioned assumption that the male gender is *inherently* superior to the female. As Hélène Cixous says, 'Night to his day - that has forever been his

fantasy. Black to his white. Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning'.<sup>7</sup>

The inevitable outcome of the quest, therefore, is the overturning of a dualistic system which traps elements in a state of perpetual opposition, destroying the conventional relationship not only between 'male' and 'female', but 'madness' and 'sanity' as well. Part Three examined how this anarchic project becomes extended into the discursive realm with the interrogation of yet another dualistic opposition: that between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Using the forms and techniques characteristic of postmodernism, the writers in this thesis reconstruct patriarchy itself as a fiction which is capable of being rewritten. While classical realism is conceived of as a mirror reflecting an uncontested reality, the majority of the texts discussed here are a dense and difficult mixture of allusions, opinions and barely-concealed narrative strategies which all, to varying degrees, render 'truth' a matter of individual interpretation.

These authors show there to be a double outcome to this deliberate unsettling of narrative and linguistic structures. Firstly, it writes a liberated female subjectivity into discourse by providing her with a voice and form to call her own. Secondly, in so doing, it also writes the female subject out of the tradition of what Gilbert and Gubar term 'the male-inscribed literary text'<sup>8</sup> in which she has been entrapped. In spite of the far-reaching implications of this process of deconstruction, none of the writers included in this thesis actually rejects her literary past. Instead, all point to the presence of a history of covert female transgression which has always run parallel to the tradition of patriarchal repression, thus emphasising that their struggle against male texts and male discourses is actually nothing new.

In a discussion of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, for example, Mary Jacobus reads into the text many of the subversive tactics I have discussed here 'with

relation to twentieth-century authors. Jacobus claims that in this novel 'the narrative and representational conventions of Victorian realism are constantly threatened by an incompletely repressed Romanticism',<sup>9</sup> in which elements of the fantastic 'challenge the monopolistic claims of realism on "reality" - to render its representations no less fictive and arbitrary than the Gothic and Romantic modes ususally viewed as parasitic'.<sup>10</sup> The terms in which Jacobus describes *Villette* is reminiscent of the modern feminist project I have outlined in this thesis: although, according to Jacobus' psychoanalytic approach, Charlotte Brontë was not consciously in control of the subversive strand of angry feminism running throughout the novel. This is a point of contrast with the novels discussed in this thesis which, as I have already shown, are thoroughly informed by feminist theory and politics.

However, although they may openly articulate their grievances against a patriarchal culture, rather than relegating them to a semi-concealed subtext, these writers do not privilege themselves over their literary predecessors, but stress that they regard themselves as participating in the same struggle against male literary forms and patriarchal prohibitions. Joanna Russ is a good example of this, for although no other writer in this thesis is more open than she in expressing feminist rage, her frequent inclusion of references to and quotations from the work of past women writers demonstrate her conviction that she is involved in the continuation of their fight for the right and ability to speak.

So, where do these writers perceive women as being when this fight finally comes to an end? I think this question can be answered by invoking Cixous' distinction between 'masculine' and 'feminine' economies. She defines the 'masculine' economy as being organised around the 'law of appropriation', where 'the opposition appropriate/inappropriate, proper/improper, clean/unclean,

mine/not mine...organizes the opposition identity/difference.' A 'feminine' economy, on the other hand, expresses 'a self proper to woman....her capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without "end," without principal "parts"; if she is a whole, it is a whole made up of parts that are wholes, not simple, partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change'.<sup>12</sup>

Although not all the writers in this thesis would concur with Cixous' theories, which tie a female practice of writing to the libidinous drives of the female body, her description of *l'écriture féminine* as a discourse which exists in a state of continual contradiction and flux is comparable to their own attempts to create narratives which resist closure and definition. They challenge phallogentric structures not only in the themes about which they choose to write, but also through the very forms in which they choose to express those themes. Echoing Cixous' definition of a 'feminine' economy, the female utopia envisaged by these authors is not related to a definite time or place, but exists as a space without boundaries.

As an expression of their resistance to the fixed structures of male-dominated discourse, ambiguity is a central element in these authors' evocation of utopia. While both male and female writers of science fiction create future societies which, however innovative and inspiring, still masquerade as 'reality', the authors in this thesis, writing from the margins of several different literary modes, have the flexibility to remain open and uncommitted. This approach is exemplified in Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, where the character from the all-female society of Whileaway is not the triumphant precursor of a radically new order, but only 'the Might-be of our dreams, living as she does in a blessedness none of us will ever know' (p.213).<sup>13</sup> The narrator's vague vision of future freedom remains undescribed, for 'until then I am silent; I can no

more....the ribbon is typed out' (p.213). Ultimately, this novel only defines utopia in negative terms: it will only have occurred, says the narrator, when *The Female Man* itself is 'no longer understood' (p.214).

Tom Moylan's statement that 'Whileaway is not the answer, but rather the vision which provokes change'<sup>14</sup> is also relevant when applied to the utopian practice adopted by other authors in this thesis. Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* hesitates on the verge of a new century, full of unimaginable possibilities. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the narrative ends at the exact point between the death of the old order and the institution of the new - whatever it might be. Margaret Atwood's vision of the future is similarly equivocal, for, in most cases, all her characters can be certain of is uncertainty. In *Life Before Man*, for example, the only revelation offered to Lesje is that 'she is not an immutable object....some day she will dissolve' (p.169).<sup>15</sup> What change such a vision will provoke - if any - is left to the reader to decide. In Kate Wilhelm's novel *Fault Lines*, too, the situation of the city of San Francisco, poised precariously above the San Andreas Fault, becomes a metaphor for the state of humanity. According to Wilhelm, the nature of reality itself is mutable, which means the future can never be predicted with certainty.

Although I have argued that other writers included in this thesis, such as Doris Lessing and Ursula Le Guin, fail to maintain such an ambiguity, it is important to stress that although their visions of 'utopia' are more strongly delineated than in any of the other works I discuss, in many cases they still strive to retain a sense of uncertainty. Although Lessing's *Shikasta* series is an alarmingly absolutist vision of a future which, according to her rendition, no-one will be able to avoid, another of her novels, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, is reminiscent of Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* in leaving the principal characters on the point of departure from the world of the known to the world

of the unimaginable. That such a tactic does not entirely work in her case is due to the fact that she persists in dictating the reader's approach to the text at the very point when authors like Carter surrender such an option.

In a similar way, Le Guin's stress upon the 'ambiguous'<sup>16</sup> nature of her utopian visions is not usually convincing for, as Sarah Lefanu says, 'her fictional resolutions, striving for harmony out of conflict, allow the reader to escape with beliefs unchallenged and position as reader left secure'.<sup>17</sup> Only her most recent novels abandon traditional narrative schemas in order to create elusive and fascinating pictures of possibilities which, to paraphrase Moylan, stand alongside Russ', Carter's, Atwood's and Wilhelm's presentation of utopia not necessarily as *place*, but as *practice*.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of the works by these writers, therefore, place the reader at the junction of what Cixous terms the 'time of reversal [where] everything is two-faced: one face still looks towards the old order; one face envisages the new power'.<sup>19</sup> If the reader wishes to look any further into the future, she must create it herself. Whereas the text deconstructs a reality which purports to be monolithic and unchangeable, the reader is invited to reconstruct reality as fluid and multiple and, above all, personal. Slightly to alter a famous statement of Kristeva's, if everyone is free to imagine their own ideal, there will be as many utopias as there are women.<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to note how frequently feminist writing explicitly links hope for the future with the practice of individual female artistry: of whatever kind. In her essay 'Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self', Alice Walker emphasises that the future will only contain possibilities for the 'beautiful, whole and free'<sup>21</sup> woman who has learnt to love her self; an action she metaphorically represents as a dance. In 'The Writer's Kitchen', the Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré draws an extended analogy between writing and cooking.



Disingenuously claiming that 'the secret of writing, like the secret of good cooking, has nothing to do with gender. It has to do with the skill with which we mix the ingredients over the fire',<sup>22</sup> she brings an occupation which has not always been an approved occupation for women into a realm which has always been considered theirs; thus subversively appropriating it for her own.

In this context, the concept of utopia becomes a metaphor for a female creative endeavour which transforms an entire history of female censorship and stifled rebellion. While T.S. Eliot summed up the sense of fatalism which underpinned the male modernist movement when he stated that 'all time is unredeemable',<sup>23</sup> it is a conclusion with which none of the writers discussed in this thesis concur. For them, time is eminently redeemable through the institution of a utopian practice centred upon a reinvented female subjectivity, imagined in the midst of the process of becoming.

## CONCLUSION: NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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6. Catherine Clément, 'The Guilty One: Sorceress and Hysteric', in Cixous and Clément, eds., pp.3-59 (p.26)
7. Cixous, p.67
8. Gilbert and Gubar, p.15
9. Mary Jacobus, 'The Buried Letter: *Villette*', in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp.41-61 (p.41)
10. *ibid*, p.48
11. Cixous, p.80
12. *ibid*, p.87
13. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (London: Women's Press, 1985). All page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
14. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.57
15. Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man* (London, Virago, 1982)
16. This is an allusion to *The Dispossessed*, which is subtitled (although not in my edition of the novel) 'An Ambiguous Utopia'. See Moylan's discussion of the novel in *Demand the Impossible*, where he analyses Le Guin's success at maintaining such a state of ambiguity.
17. Sarah Lefanu, 'Popular Writing and Feminist Intervention in Science Fiction', in *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*, ed. by Derek Longhurst (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp.177-191 (p.188)
18. Moylan, p.89
19. Cixous, p.109
20. Kristeva actually stated that 'I favor an understanding of femininity that would have as many '*feminines*' as there are women' [my italics]. Quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.169.
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