

Margaret Atwood's "Cat's Eye":
Re-Viewing Women in a
Postmodern World

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ALTHOUGH ONE FINDS evidence of postmodernism in the manipulation of popular forms such as the Gothic in *Lady Oracle* and science fiction in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* is Margaret Atwood's first full-fledged "postmodern" work. Always the wily evader of critics' pigeonholes, Atwood, in a recent interview,¹ has denied the classification of her work as "postmodern." She expresses her own amused disdain towards the critical-academic world for its attraction to "isms"² in the discourse of *Cat's Eye* when Elaine Risley visits the gallery where her retrospective show is to be mounted. Risley dismisses the paintings still on display: "I don't give a glance to what's still on the walls, I hate those neo-expressionist dirty greens and putrid oranges, post this, post that. Everything is post these days, as if we're just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own" (90). At the same time, this novel is clearly Atwood's most postmodern in its play with form — the fictional autobiography — and in its continual self-referentiality as a text.

At the centre of this postmodern text is Atwood's complex use of her own past. Few writers have spoken out so vehemently against readings of their work as autobiography. As her interviews indicate, she is very aware that her audience is bent upon biographical readings of her fiction.³ With obvious amusement she tells how in question-and-answer sessions following her public readings she has often just finished disclaiming autobiographical roots for her characters when someone in her audience asks if she

was overweight as a child like Joan in *Lady Oracle* or anorexic as a young woman like the unnamed narrator of *The Edible Woman*. For Atwood, there are clearly gender implications here since, as she has argued, women have traditionally been thought so imaginatively impoverished that all they could write about was themselves.

At the same time, although there is no Atwood biography — and she would be one of the last writers to authorize one — she is among the most interviewed contemporary writers. Thus, as she herself must know, serious readers of her work are familiar enough with the outlines of her family and her early life⁴ to be enticed into seeing the painter Elaine Risley — that stereotyped persona of modernist fiction — as at least partly her own reflection. Obviously she is not; and yet she *is*, despite the curious warning on the copyright page which reads in part as follows:

This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. . . . with the exception of public figures, any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author's.

It is easy enough to see that Atwood is attempting to protect herself from potential legal action generated by former friends or associates who might choose to see themselves as models for the less appealing characters in *Cat's Eye*. However, the attempt to deny *any* connection with Elaine Risley must encourage the reader to suspect that the lady doth protest too much. In this way, part of the enjoyment of this text involves a shifting back and forth between invention and the facts of the inventor's past.

Atwood has provided her audience with so many of those facts of her early life that it is next to impossible for the informed reader to dismiss as coincidental the roots of Elaine's childhood in Atwood's. She has told her interviewers, for example, about the summers she spent as a child living in tents and motels while the family accompanied her father, an entomologist, doing research in the Canadian north. On more than one occasion she has described to her interviewers how she and her brother would help their father collect insects he shook from trees. In this context, given the writer's having gone on record as frustrated with her audience's

misguided autobiographical readings of her earlier work, it is difficult not to conclude that *Cat's Eye* is, among many things, a highly sophisticated expression of play with her audience's expectations. Atwood may plead ignorance of contemporary critical theory, but she is undercutting the conventional notion that autobiography privileges an autobiographical fiction as more truthful than other forms of fiction. She shows us in Elaine Risley, a painter/writer who may seem in a conventional sense to be exploring the truth of her past but who in a truer sense is creating, or writing, a past as she chooses now to see it, rather than as it might have once existed.

The novel begins with a definition of time, justified perhaps by Risley's having returned to Toronto, her home, for a retrospective exhibition of her art. She dismisses linear time in favor of "time as having a shape . . . , like a series of liquid transparencies. . . . You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (3). In the story she tells of her youth, Elaine offers a retrospective of the woman she has been and the women who have been important to her as she now sees herself and them. That past is very much seen through the cat's eye marble into which Elaine looked at eight and saw her future as an artist. The image of the cat's eye is central, since it represents a world into which she has been allowed access; at the same time, it is a world of inevitably distorted vision. Thus, the truth is not an entity to which we struggle to gain access so much as a way of looking and, in the process, creating the text of that truth.

Elaine Risley's retrospective allows her to re-view the people and relationships that have been important to the first fifty years of her life. In reconstructing her past — or the critical years from age eight to young womanhood — Elaine Risley is in large part deconstructing that past. The consequences of that deconstruction — what turns out to be the novel itself — is a complicated series of transformations through which the persona discovers that the past is only what we continue to reconstruct for the purposes of the present. And perhaps beyond that, Elaine Risley discovers that of all her relationships — with the opposite sex and with her

own — the most important may have been the strange friendship with her tormentor/double Cordelia. By the end of the narrative, the persona will have finally exorcised the spirit of an alter ego who was perhaps primarily *that*, another self whom she no longer needs to fear, hate, or even love.

The focus of the early chapters is the very young Elaine Risley's struggle to find models in the two women who are crucial to her formative years. She begins her retrospective with her eighth birthday, a not surprising age for the onset of consciousness. For Risley, like Atwood, this was the time of her move to Toronto, and for Risley at least the end of happiness. Through the move to Toronto, a backwater of civilization in the 1940s, but still civilization, Elaine as a child is suddenly forced to confront "femininity." Having lived in tents and motels, she and her mother must don the costumes and the roles appropriate to their gender and put away their unfeminine clothes and ungendered roles until the warm weather when they return to the North. Overnight Elaine feels like an alien from another planet. The future of painful socialization is represented by the doorway in her new school marked "GIRLS," the doorway which makes her wonder what the other one marked "BOYS" has behind it from which she has been shut out (49).

We might expect Elaine to cherish the memory of a paradise lost of relatively ungendered life as a child in nature. Instead, she feels guilty for being unprepared to operate in a world of mothers who are housekeepers preoccupied with clothes and labour-saving devices. Although the mature Elaine mutes the resentment, the child Elaine suspects that her mother has failed her as the role model needed to help her find her way in a world of "twin sets" (54) and wearing hats to church. The young Elaine's inability to fault the mother she loves forces her to internalize as guilt her sense of inadequacy. If she is suffering the pain of being out of place, it must be something that is wrong with *her*; certainly it cannot be anything wrong with the definition of womanhood embodied in the mothers of her friends, Cordelia, Carol, but especially Grace Smeath.

Clearly Mrs. Smeath is the Bad Mother that Elaine suspects her own mother of being for not having prepared her for socialization.

In the Smeath household, Elaine and her friends are involved in that socialization; they study to be future housewives by cutting out pictures of "frying pans and washing machines" to paste into scrapbooks for their "ladies" (71). A more important aspect of that socialization is represented by regular attendance at church. When the Smeaths invite Elaine to join them for the first of what eventually seems an endless series of Sundays, Atwood describes the interior of the church through the eyes of the young Elaine who might as well be a creature from Mars. One feature that becomes crucially important to Elaine are the inscriptions under the stained-glass pictures of Jesus — "SUFFER·THE·LITTLE·CHILDREN" (102) — and of Mary — "THE·GREATEST·OF·THESE·IS·CHARITY" (103).

Because she feels radically incapable of fitting into the world outside her home, Elaine becomes the victim of Cordelia's sadistic punishments for her incompetence as a student of womanhood. These punishments, which range from reprimands and shunnings to being buried alive, culminate in the scene of Elaine's almost freezing to death in a nearby ravine where Cordelia has thrown her hat. This is a ravine where "men" (51) lurk to molest careless little girls. It is Elaine's victimization at the hands of other little girls, not those mysteriously dangerous men, which leads her to the nervous reaction of peeling the skin off her feet and hands, almost as though she is studying to become a child martyr by flaying herself alive. She is saved, she convinces herself, not so much by her own mother as by the apparition of the ultimate Good Mother, the Virgin Mary.

Mrs. Risley and Mrs. Smeath function then as variants of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother. Elaine's mother suspects that Cordelia and the other girls are tormenting her daughter, but she assumes that Elaine can tell her the truth and she never notices the marks of Elaine's flaying herself. Mrs. Smeath, on the other hand, *knows* that Elaine is being tormented but does nothing. In fact, Mrs. Smeath even *knows* that Elaine has overheard her saying that Elaine *deserves* to be punished for being at heart a graceless heathen. It is not until Elaine almost dies that Mrs. Risley acts. Somewhere down in the pool of the past lurks the monster of resentment against this Good Mother who should have

known and acted sooner. Mrs. Risley becomes the representation, like her husband, of the well-intentioned, virtuous, but not terribly effective liberal humanists who *sense* that evil exists but refuse to acknowledge it, since a knowledge of evil would force them to find a place for it in their world.

Mrs. Smeath, on the other hand, is much easier for Elaine to deal with. Even as a child, Elaine can clearly see Mrs. Smeath's evil in the transparent world of that cat's eye which will be the emblem of her insight as an artist. She comes to see the crucial difference *within* Mrs. Smeath as a woman who professes to be a Christian — "SUFFER·THE·LITTLE·CHILDREN" and "THE·GREATEST·OF·THESE·IS·CHARITY" — yet believes that the greatest charity to little children who happen to be "heathens" is to make them indeed suffer. And, it is very much to the point that the individual who functions as Elaine's Muse is Mrs. Smeath, *not* Mrs. Risley. This variety of the Bad Mother, more in line with Freud's reality principle, generates a whole series of paintings through which Elaine vents her anger, hatred, and malice. Mrs. Smeath as the bad mother may very well represent much of what she finds most despicable in the conventional notion of Woman. At the same time, it is an evil which generates art and it is that art which liberates her from a self enslaved in anger towards and hatred of that image of "Woman."

That same indeterminacy is evident in Elaine's bizarre relationship with Cordelia. When she declares her independence, following Cordelia's move to another school, Elaine becomes powerful, assertive, verbally aggressive, and Cordelia fades into powerlessness, into the kind of silence which was Elaine's position early on in this power struggle veiled as a friendship. Elaine's enjoyment of a new facility with words, as though her tongue has been empowered by her earlier victimization, makes it clear how important the element of the retrospective is in this text. Told in a traditionally chronological fashion, Elaine's empowerment through language would have led the reader to anticipate that she would become a writer, rather than a painter.

In this symbiotic relationship, Elaine's friend/persecutor is given the name Cordelia. Most readers sense the irony in Atwood's borrowing the name of one of Shakespeare's innocent tragic hero-

ines, but there are also implications of a transfer being transacted here. In the years following the Second World War, *King Lear* became one of our most attractive cultural myths in part because Cordelia reminds us how the innocent are swept up in the destruction of war and civil disorder and perhaps also that the innocent embody the redemptive power of love. At the same time, it is the refusal of Lear's single faithful daughter to speak, just as much as her sisters' hypocritical flattery, which sets in motion the machinery of conflict and destruction by which she and her family are overwhelmed. In this sense, Elaine, perhaps following her mother's example, is somewhat like Cordelia, choosing silence and martyrdom rather than risk the anxiety and guilt of self-assertion. Eventually, anger and resentment find their sublimated or socialized modes of expression, first in her verbal assaults on the imperfections of others and finally in her art, so often a visualization of her anguish at the hands of her tormentors.

More than anyone else, Cordelia is the one from whom she must free herself by acknowledging not only difference but kinship. Cordelia is a "secret sharer." Like her readers, Elaine keeps expecting her former tormentor to show up at the gallery, the most appropriate ghost to appear in this retrospective. Cordelia, however, does not need to appear: Elaine has already exorcized much of the guilt, hatred, and anger generated in her relationships with Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia through her art, conveniently brought together so that the artist, like her audience, can read this retrospective as a testimony to the transformative power of art. When Elaine returns to the bridge, the power of her creative consciousness calls up an apparition of Cordelia from the deeps of that pool of time with which we began. She tells us:

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were.

I am the older now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late.

I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now.* (443)

In a strange and unexpected sense, Cordelia has become her name. Just as Elaine earlier was rescued from physical death in the icy stream below this bridge, this time she acknowledges another variety of rescue. She confirms what this retrospective has been moving toward all along — the recognition that her art has rescued her from the spiritual death of a lifetime wasted in anger and resentment. Having recognized the power of Cordelia within herself, Elaine can at last release the Cordelia she has made to appear in the final hours before she prepares to leave home again. Perhaps she recognizes also that she and Cordelia had identities less distinct from each other than it seemed in childhood, that each had been fashioning the other in the image of a self she could not otherwise confront. Now Elaine herself can be a variety of the “Good Mother” and simply send Cordelia home before she freezes to death in “the wrong time” (443).

In the end, *Cat's Eye* is postmodern in several interrelated ways. Atwood offers the informed reader the lure of a few well-known features of her own childhood and then proceeds to invent an autobiography which is the experience of Elaine Risley, a character who may bear only the most superficial similarities. Autobiography, even when intended, is obviously enough only another form of fiction. By offering us, in the words of the novel's preliminary note, a work of fiction whose form is that of an autobiography, she gives us a text which confirms that truth by showing how Elaine Risley has invented herself, constructed an autobiography, through her art. Elaine is even allowed to be amused by her critics' (mis)readings of her painting, one of whom writes of Risley's “disconcerting deconstruction of perceived gender and its relationship to perceived power, especially in respect to numinous imagery” (406).

In addition, this text raises questions about the representation of women, about writing as a woman, about autobiography, and about mothers and daughters. As Barbara Johnson has argued, autobiography and its reflection in autobiographical fiction are a

supplanting of the mother, a kind of giving birth to oneself through the creation of the text. Using the classic text of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Johnson argues that what a woman writer (the very term "woman writer" has traditionally been conceived of as a "freak of nature") creates has conventionally seemed a "monster." Johnson asks: "Is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?" (147). In telling us the story of her life, Elaine Risley foregrounds Cordelia as a monster only to show how she freed herself from Cordelia to become as a young woman monstrous in her own way, and appropriately through *language*, with her "mean mouth" (247). She offers us in Mrs. Smeath, the Bad Mother, whom she subsumes psychologically in her art, a kind of monstrosity which exorcizes the monstrous complicity of Mrs. Smeath in her persecution by Cordelia and the other girls. And she offers us in Mrs. Risley, the Good Mother, a failed guide to the intricacies of femininity in the outside world and, therefore, a mother who must be killed off before Elaine can achieve selfhood at fifty.

Why, we might ask, has it taken Elaine so long to give birth to herself, the sort of act managed by the Paul Morels and the Stephen Dedaluses of modernist fiction by their twenty-fifth birthdays? Part of the answer is obvious in the question. Elaine Risley is a female rather than a male character. In this context, a good analogue is Virginia Woolf who was well aware that she could not begin work on *To the Lighthouse*, dealing in part with the loss of her mother, until she was in her forties. As we have learned from sociologists like Nancy Chodorow, women must struggle to achieve a sense of self separate from others, in part because they are "mothered" or nurtured primarily by women (93). In this vein, Chodorow argues, mothers see themselves as continuous with their daughters:

Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-à-vis daughters. (109)

In these ways, the retrospective of her art is partly an invention to allow Elaine to achieve a sense of self, distinct from both Mrs. Risley and Mrs. Smeath. It is also a belated recognition of her mothering herself as the child and the young woman Elaine as well as her mothering of Cordelia whom she now can release from her hatred and her love. Having completed this retrospective of her life and given birth to herself, Elaine can acknowledge the separateness of her "daughters" — both the girl she was and Cordelia as her "other." At the risk of increasing Atwood's anxiety with yet another autobiographical reading of her fiction, it might be recalled that *Cat's Eye* is the revision and completion of a manuscript she began in her mid-twenties (Hubbard 205) and finished as she approached her fiftieth birthday. Despite Margaret Atwood's disclaimer that the novel is not autobiographical, it is a text performing itself as a text, a text of the author's own struggle to achieve selfhood as a woman and as an artist.⁵

NOTES

- 1 Unpublished interview with Deborah Weiner and Cristina Bacchilega, 1987.
- 2 Atwood indicates her disdain of deconstruction: "What it also means is that the text is of no importance. What is of interest is what the critic makes of the text. Alas, alack, pretty soon we'll be getting to pure critical readings with no text at all" (Interview, Hancock 208).
- 3 Atwood says: "I am very tired of people making autobiographical constructions about my novels, all of which until that time [*Life Before Man*] had been first-person-singular novels. And I just get really tired of answering those questions: Are you the person in *Surfacing*? Are your parents dead? Did your father drown? Have you ever been anorexic? Have you ever been crazy? All those autobiographical questions" (Interview, Draine 376).
- 4 Atwood tells Joyce Carol Oates the story of her family following her father into the Northern bush (Interview, Oates 70). She tells Elizabeth Meese about rebelling against her parents and going to church with her friends (Interview, Meese 182). In the Bonnie Lyons interview, she talks about the culture shock of moving to Toronto as a girl and suddenly being forced to wear dresses (Interview, Lyons 221).
- 5 This article is based upon a paper presented in the Margaret Atwood Society session at the Modern Language Association Convention, Washington, D.C., December 1989.

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