

“Mobility is the Key”:
*Bodies, Boundaries and Movement in
Kate Grenville’s “Lilian’s Story”*

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KERRY GOLDSWORTHY ONCE pointed out the paradoxical dilemma of the feminist text for the feminist critic. When responding to a work of fiction in which feminist politics and preoccupations are pivotal, the feminist critic is faced with “the problem of what . . . to do . . . apart from read [such novels] with silent approval” (506). I find myself in that position in relation to Kate Grenville’s novel *Lilian’s Story*—especially as it concerns the getting of a very different kind of wisdom than that which can be learnt in the quadrangles and enclosures of the university, where “the men [and women] in tweed would never change, and would always take themselves seriously” (209). Lilian Singer though is happy to receive deficient responses to her as tributes. Perhaps then the feminist critic can engage in a process of tribute and dialogue with the feminist text.

Lilian’s Story is a book about many things: the fragility and heroism of human lives, the creation of meaningful lives out of the stuff of everyday existence, the invention of history, and the search for love and wisdom. But it is also a book about bodies and freedom. It is strikingly intelligent about the body. And when the film was released in 1996, actress Ruth Cracknell, who played the older Lilian, is said to have described Bea Miles, on whom the character of Lillian is based, as a woman who had the freedom of the city. These two responses I would like bring together in this paper.

Lilian’s Story is a very “bodily” novel, not only in that it explores issues about the body and uses the body as a key metaphor but also in that the writing is *positioned* phenomenologically. Characters are described as they would be *experienced* by others. Father,

for example, is experienced in the narration as a collection of disjointed fragments rather like the facts he collects in his study. He is first described as “that man of moustaches and excessive ear wax” (3) and later as “a man of moustaches and of shiny boots that squeaked when he walked.” His boots fill the house; his hand grips the banister (5). Grenville uses metonymy to build up his character in a way that suggests the fearful child’s point of view. Mother, from the child’s view, is a set of associations, like colours and smells: “Mother was a woman of pale colours: lilacs and lavenders and the grey of galahs” (5). Cook is presented as a succession of sounds emanating from the kitchen. The narration describes Aunt Kitty as “tinkling” and “chiming” from the necklaces and earrings that hang off her; when Lilian describes her as a chandelier (itself a beautiful image of light and sound), she responds, “Try how it feels” (10). Thus the novel not only describes bodies but also evokes them phenomenologically.

The book also explores “flesh” and “body” conceptually. Grenville ably demonstrates the way in which the body functions as “a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 23). She shows us the violence wrought by Cartesian thought. In *Lilian’s Story*, flesh is never simply the inert counterpart to the spirit nor a mere container. Rather, Grenville understands the thoroughly social functioning of bodies and bodily processes. Food, for example, plays a major symbolic role. Much of the family’s interchange takes place at the dinner table—“over the lamb,” in fact. Both Lilian and John learn to use food as consolation and strategy—a way of surviving the oppressive and authoritarian household ruled by the domineering Father. For Lilian, food soon becomes something given surreptitiously as reward, taken as consolation (84) or refused in penance (7). Throughout the novel, food functions in complex social ways: as distraction (71), pleasure (92), token of loyalty (151), asset in the fight for schoolyard friendships (46), or marker of shifting affections. For Lilian, cream pies and greasy stew provide solace for the social ostracism that follows, ironically enough, from her tactical use of food, which has left her fat and marginalized. For John, food is an escape mechanism. He chews noisy foods like carrots and

celery in order to block out Father's voice and his own misery. These noisy foods give way to the pleasures of meat during Father's illness and sadly reemerge on Father's unwished-for recovery. Meat becomes a symbol of raw power; in scene after scene, Father slices at it with his sharp knife. (Characters' teeth too are described recurringly.) In a novel in which the adequacy of words to the task of conveying the truth of things is held up to question, food frequently functions as the vehicle for subterranean communication, whether it is Mother's consolatory gifts of chocolates or the chocolate cakes John brings to the asylum: "All John's buried love surfaced in those gaudy cakes" (151).

Lilian's fatness initially is the inevitable result of her adopted strategies but eventually becomes a conscious choice. Obesity gives her an identity ("Now I was fat. *I am a fat girl*, I whispered in bed" [17]), a mode of avoiding the inescapably constraining futures that await pretty bourgeois girls. It is also, crucially, a bulwark against the tyrannical authority of Father: "There was too much flesh now for Father" (18). Fatness then is revealed in its complexity: reviled by many, laughed at good humouredly by Lilian/Grenville, despised by Father, and envied as strength and possibility by Aunt Kitty: "If I had only been fat enough, I could have done so much" (166).

The body can be also a place of hiding. Lilian sits under the sideboard and pretends to be invisible (15). John does this in his own body. Hiding, unseeing, behind his glasses, he longs to be deaf, wrapping himself in the warm embrace of the tuba when things become too much to bear, or dizzying himself till he vomits after one of Father's outbursts (67). Mother becomes "a woman who lived behind a curtain drawn across her face" (75). She retreats into illness and eventually into a comfortable madness, believing, against all evidence, that a mother's work has been done. Like the crustaceans with whom they are metaphorically compared, the members of the family seek solace from their unspoken misery in shells of their own devising. In moments of misery, the body can serve as the prison-house of the soul (131), but it is also the place where the soul can hide in self-preservation: "Whatever had happened . . . had happened to a mass of flesh called Lilian, not to me. I cowered in that flesh, my

self shrunk to the size of a pea" (121). After the rape, Lilian locks herself away in her body. Protected by an "impermeable envelope of skin" (150), her incarceration is later literalized by Father and she is locked in an institutional "shell."

This defensive rupture between body and "self" underscores the phenomenological violence wrought by Cartesian logic. One of the awful things about rape—or the fear of it—is that it drives a thoroughly Cartesian wedge between "self" and body. Women often live with a fear (perhaps submerged) of having their body invaded—their intimate space violated. Those who have managed to escape such fears still live with the knowledge that there is a class of crime that singles women out by dint of something about their bodies. The final logic of this is that women can end up feeling subconsciously that there is something about their bodies that makes them vulnerable. Thus, for women, not feeling safe at night in the city is about, among other things, the fear that one's body might betray one. It is the unhideable femaleness of one's body that puts one at risk (or makes one feel at risk).¹ So in addition to its physical cruelties, rape is also psychologically cruel: women cannot be at home in their bodies, since their bodies threaten always to betray them, to point to their potential vulnerability. In semiotic terms, the female body is the marked term. In a patriarchal society, women's bodies mark them in certain contexts (for example, the city at night) as potential victims of violence. Of course, research on rape shows that the statistical reality does not match these myths about rape, but the internalization of this mythology helps render many women's own bodies alien to women themselves. In *Lilian's Story*, this is certainly the new relation to her body and her sense of self that Lilian endures after she is raped: "My mouth and tongue were someone else's now and even the words that rose into my mind had nothing to do with me" (121).

The novel is greatly preoccupied with the location of one's sense of self, and not only in relation to the rape that forms its cataclysmic centre. For Lilian, viewing oneself from the outside is a crucial survival strategy but also the key to potentially ecstatic communion with the natural world and with the life of the city. In order to understand this, we need to consider the function of boundaries in the novel's metaphorical schema.

Prison and protection, constraint and mobility, the inner world and the outer—these are some of the key metaphorical polarities that structure the novel. Mary Douglas's work on bodily boundaries and ritual pollution, and Julia Kristeva's development of Douglas's work into a theory of objection provide a useful frame for thinking about bodies and boundaries in *Lilian's Story*. Both Douglas and Kristeva argue that the human body is a crucial site for the symbolic or ritual working out of such separations. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, Douglas contends that the body is a key symbol for most social formations (115). Between the inner and the outer lies the thin boundary that keeps the symbolic order—what Kristeva has called "identity, system [and] order"—stable. Borders are intrinsic to a sense of identity: "How can I be without border?" (4). Most systems of meaning or identity are structured around sets of oppositions—between nature and culture, self and other, human and non-human, natural and supernatural, dead and alive, male and female, and so on. The abject is that which cannot fully be contained within such oppositions—a border state that "threatens to destroy life and also helps to define life" (Creed 46): "it does not respect borders, positions, rules. [It is] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). The fear that such oppositions might collapse is a fear about the loss of meaning and identity. According to Kristeva, this idea is compelling, since it hints at the condition of possibility of our own identity; thus the abject is both disgusting and seductive. It is both "a precondition and a threat to subjectivity" (Grosz, "Language" 110).

Douglas identified four kinds of "pollution" or "danger" that might seem to threaten a society (or, by extension, any social body or "bounded system"):

danger pressing on external boundaries; . . . danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system; . . . danger in the margins of the lines; . . . danger from internal contradiction, when some of the basic postulates are denied by other basic postulates, so that at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself. (122)

It is interesting to think about the abject in the novel in relation to these different categories of "social pollution" (122). Family

ties can be discomfoting, as the close kinship relationship is one of intimate Otherness or strange familiarity. In these terms, Lilian is a "danger" to Father; neither fully self nor Other to Father, she threatens him from both "outside" and "inside."

Kristeva discusses the ritual and mythological elements in the development of individual subjectivities. Her work focuses on the mechanisms by which the proper, clean, obedient, "good" body is produced out of the raw material of flesh. How does unruly flesh ("mere matter") become the zoned, regulated, and disciplined body acceptable to the cultural formation into which it is born? Douglas contended that nothing is intrinsically dirty or impure; it only becomes so in relation to a given cultural system (121). This observation was taken up by Kristeva: "There is nothing 'loathsome' in itself; the loathsome is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system" (92). Kristeva suggests that the child is taught (usually by the mother) how "correctly" to understand its body and how to restrain and regulate its body according to the codes and demands of its given culture. To do this, it must learn what is clean and unclean, self and not-self. The abject is that which is expelled or rejected in this process. It can never fully be relegated to the other side of the imaginary border that separates it from the subject (Creed 46). "Neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1), it lurks, lures, and threatens—part of the subject, yet expelled by it.

Significantly, in terms of the preoccupations of this essay, the abject is bodily. As infants, we first learn about the clean and the unclean, the self and the other, via the mappings of prohibitions and injunctions imposed upon our bodies. The abject, then, is experienced viscerally—as a wave of repulsion, an urge to vomit, a gag, averted eyes, a grimace of disgust.

Lilian's Story can be read as, among other things, a poetic exploration of objection. Grenville is interested in those whom a society expels or rejects because they threaten its systems of meaning or identity. Lilian, for example, is frequently associated with the imagery of objection. In her fatness, "madness," and brashness, she constantly threatens to overspill her bodily boundaries and is reviled by others. Her dirty fingernails are held

up as an example at school; her cream pie drops to the ground (86); she sweats; her flesh sags and flops in a way that is repellent to polite bourgeois society, with its girls in voile and boys in boaters. "It is hard to be fat and dignified," she observes (54). For a woman of her class and time, she is too much—literally. She is dirty, obese, and "loony." Her body threatens established codes of behaviour and systems of order. In its solidity and growing freedom, it increasingly threatens Father's sense of his own authority and of the natural gender order, and implicitly questions his repressive belief structure. Embodying a world of possibilities outside or beyond the world of "facts," coming increasingly to evade or rebel against paternal control, and standing in metonymically for "body" itself, Lilian threatens Father's phallogocentric, rationalist, and sexually repressive world. According to the logic described by Kristeva, such threats must be expelled. Father attempts to annihilate Lilian and through the very mechanism—the body—that he seeks to repugn; when she not only survives but slips further and further from his control, he has her incarcerated. Lilian may be rejected but Father remains tied to her—perhaps even fascinated by her; he may deposit her on the other side of a border, to paraphrase Barbara Creed (46), but she cannot ever fully be expunged. She remains a defiant testimony to the limits of his system of understanding the world.

If we accept Douglas's contention that the body can stand in metaphorically for any bounded system and the psychoanalytic correlate that it is "an imaginary anatomy" which constitutes the body as a human body capable of speech (Grosz, "Language" 115), then we can read the process of objection as occurring on the level of the social body as well as the individual body. Perhaps, then, we can read certain groups of people as coming to stand in for that which any given collectivity rejects or expels in order to maintain its own sense of coherent identity. In *Lilian's Story*, for example, the poor, the "loonies"—as those whom "sane" society expels in order to maintain its own sense of normalcy—are abject. Neither "us" nor "not-us," they threaten our sense of stable identity, and so we lock them away. In the "loony bin," the inmates pee, dribble, cry, and eat sloppily. They are institu-

tionalized lest they collapse in on themselves and “infect” others in the process. Their “overflowings”—screams, rantings, or physical excesses—are stopped up with gags or straitjackets.

Yet Grenville seems to suggest that despite our fear of it, objection is not as fearsome as repression. Father is a man whose violent passions and untapped depths are only barely kept in check. Apart from Father, Lilian’s (and Grenville’s) most severe criticism is reserved for the emotionless man in a taxi who “gave nothing away” (164). “Serene in his nastiness” (165), the man in the taxi remains unmoved and potentially violent; Lilian wants to force this “congested” man to be “touched by the chaotic hand of emotion” (165)—better the abject chaos of emotion than the cold certainty of reason and the world of “facts.” Not for nothing is Lilian’s first word in the novel “Feelingly” (4)—an appropriately Shakespearian word, of course, which recalls the world of King Lear’s majestic madness: “I see it feelingly” (4.6.151).

Flesh then, even in its abject manifestations, is not something to be reviled. It is no mere Cartesian machine or Christian container for the spirit. Rather it is the element of passionate personhood, capable of transcending itself in ecstatic communion with other people, the natural world or the life of the city. It is the stuff of life, the material out of which stories are made. Grenville has described her frustration at the codes of polite literature itself that prohibit evocations of the body’s materiality. Interestingly, she sees this silence as ultimately complicit with the oppression of women:

When I started writing I felt an incredible rage and frustration, not only with the world, but also with the books that had been written about the world, because they seemed to draw a veil over so much human experience, like the pissing and shitting part of human experience, the plumbing, the squalid physicality of it. Books recognized our spirituality but not the fact that we are also bodies and that those two things are connected, especially for women. Women are constantly being told that we are all goddesses. On the other hand, women are told that their bodies are revolting and a lot of things have to be done to them before they are acceptable. So for a woman, having a physical body, especially the unacceptable things that happen about it, is a really important political and philosophical thing, as well as just an accident of physicality. (Willbanks 101)

"Books should have toilets in them," announces Lilian to an uncomprehending Ursula (42).

The body then, in Grenville's world view, is dynamic and unbounded: "Four years are enough to change every pore of one's skin," we are told on the novel's first page. Its unboundedness, although potentially terrifying, can also be ecstatic—experienced as a moment in which the boundaries of self and other, human and nature, natural and supernatural, break down. Lilian discovers this swimming naked in the bay at night:

Out there in the private night with water making sucking noises at the boat, my body was transformed. I became an envelope of sensation, nothing but skin, as I thought about those men I loved. The boards of the boat were hardly enough to contain so much passion, which seemed about to turn the whole world into a mist of bliss. Finally in my ecstasy. . . . I could not resist lowering myself over the stern while the boat lay quietly on the black water. My feet felt the depths as I hung there and the water became an extension of my skin. My body was terribly white and flickered in the black water like a flame. Something began to throb through me and finally it was hard not to let go of the boat and allow any current to toy with my tremulous white body. (116-17)

But such escapes from order often produce a backlash from those whose power or whose systems of meaning or belief seem most to be threatened by them. Thus Grenville effectively counterpoints Lilian's blossoming realization of the possibilities for corporeal transformations—for orgasm without sex, as it were—with sinister hints that Father's authoritarian sexual repression is becoming unstable. It is grimly fitting then that it should be Lilian's first encounter with the ecstasy of the flesh in a literally sexual sense that Father interrupts and interdicts so terribly; he cannot allow such a liberating corporeal transformation to occur. Lilian must be subjected—though the flesh—to paternal interdiction and the patriarchal order of which it is a metonym.

But if Lilian is never to experience the expansion of self through sexual ecstasy (leaving, or rather expanding, the body through rejoicing in the body), her nomadic life after she leaves the loony bin nonetheless does allow her the possibility of such seductive loosening from the self. Her survival strategy of separation from her body turns into the possibility of a more ecstatic

blending. At Rushcutters Bay, she listens to the sounds of the boats clanking quietly at night:

Like the lives of people, the music of the masts was something complicated and mysterious and composed of the clearest and most simple threads. I listened to one voice telling its story, then another, until I drifted away into the spaces between the stars, and left behind the body of the fat woman. (162)

Her relationship with Frank is never consummated but is as complete a merging as any sexual union: "There were times when we seemed one flesh, separated only by the accident of bodies" (185). The dissolution of boundaries does not frighten Lilian: she has never been frightened by the stars, nor even by the blank spaces between them (202). But it is not always pleasant. When Father dies, the system of rules and prohibitions into which Lilian was born dissolves dizzily:

And now that he was dead I knew that when I stopped laughing I would be overwhelmed by a cold vastness that was beginning to surround me. With Father gone the world lacked edges and went on, grey for ever into the distance. There seemed no reason to do or not do anything. (170)

The boundaries between inner and outer world can collapse in ways that are less mystical, more mundane, but nonetheless joyous, seductive, or bold. A bird accidentally flies in the open window into the house (36); a bee² enters the classroom and sends the prim teacher cowering (55); Aunt Kitty "[loses] control" of her laugh and it goes "careening and shrieking away across the cactuses and startle[s] birds out of the trees" (83); "Yellow moons [rise] into [Lilian's] bedroom and [lure her] out into the night" (116). These crossings testify to the fragility of the boundary that separates human from nature. Self may flow into nature, and vice versa, in crossings (or perhaps Deleuzian becomings) that are sometimes joyous, sometimes debilitating. John, for example, seems "shadowy, as though the sunlight almost penetrated him" (118).

In sum then, the novel is greatly preoccupied with the moments and sites at which interconnection between poles commonly perceived as binaries may occur. Given this preoccupation, it is fitting that Grenville uses the body as a key symbol,

since, according to contemporary attempts to think beyond Cartesianism, it is the body that functions as "a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 20).

Narratologically, the permeability of the boundary between inner and outer worlds is suggested by the way dialogue is represented in the novel. As Roslynn Haynes points out, Grenville blurs the distinction between "inner and outer reality, between thoughts and words" through the idiosyncratic convention of omitting inverted commas for external speech, writing "external" words in italics to distinguish them from thoughts. Haynes suggests that this obliteration of "the formal distinction between verbal and non-verbal thought" helps produce a new language of her own that "interconnects body and language," since "words, in this novel, are invariably associated with facts and patriarchal power" (Salzman; qtd. in Haynes 72).

In a way, Grenville anticipated the popular uptake of Deleuze in the Australian intellectual scene by a decade or so, though her metaphors and conception of Deleuzian style "becomings" are different from his. In her moments of bliss, Lilian's flesh is no longer a Cartesian container, a prison, or a vessel but "an envelope of sensation, nothing but skin" (116) that becomes one with her surroundings. The skin is a metaphor for the thin, indeed porous, layer that separates inner from outer and that is itself a dynamic organ, constantly renewing and renovating itself.

Lilian's Story (like *Joan Makes History*) explores the location of self through a notion of perspective. Grenville's preoccupation with the permeability of boundaries between self and other manifests as both thematic motif and narrative strategy. In her description of others, Lilian often records the way one's position in space alters the appearance of others. Distance and perspective change the relative size and power of others: John looks "like an invention" from Miss Gash's verandah (22); Father looks naked on the beach from Lilian's position on the headland (19); the lecturer looks "puny" from the back of the lecture theatre (79).

The novel also plays with narrative point of view in ways that are suggestive of the blurring of subject and object. Throughout, Lilian sees herself from the inside and the outside, as it were. The first person narration often slips in and out of the third person, sometimes at moments of distress: "Anne did not bother even to glance back at the fat girl who sat awkwardly on the knob of a palm while tears dripped from her nose" (46). At other moments, the shift in perspective is used comically to suggest that Lilian considers herself to be an actor in a modest historical drama, seeing herself in the third person while experiencing herself in the first, as when she describes herself as "the fat woman shouting *Hello* to everyone on the street" (163). Again, her survival strategies are transformed into moments of celebration. Mostly this double perspective belongs narratologically to Lilian; there are moments though when it belongs to the narration and the reader, functioning as a source of dramatic irony and pathos, as in the Lord Kitchener episode, where the reader's "external" point of view is clearly authenticated over Lilian's mistaken belief that the banker is returning her love via tiny, bashful signals (177ff).

Sometimes, Grenville employs a dual perspective to suggest the complete lack of understanding of one individual of another; she portrays the horrible violence done to personhood once someone is framed as the object of a certain discourse, and can be made legible only through that frame. For example, the nurse misreads Lilian's response to her mother's death as "*an attempted self-destruction*" (152), when it is an act of self-understanding and self-preservation. The richest moments of the novel, narratologically speaking, are those where the narration becomes multi-layered, where in tandem with the ironic self-spectatorship of Lilian's first person narration somehow comes the illusion of an ironic omniscient narration. The descriptions of Lilian's growing "madness" function this way, such that we see her through two lenses at once: as a comic commentator on the follies of others, and as a woman falling prey to delusions. Grenville imagines this narratological subtlety as itself a kind of pleasurable merging: "Lilian is right on the edge . . . because the reader is forced into a very close rapport with her and he [sic] has to submerge into her way of seeing the world (Willbanks 103).

The device of dual perspective, however, functions predominantly as a narratological index of one of the novel's key themes: the idea that ordinary lives are history too (a theme Grenville took up later in *Joan Makes History*). The novel suggests that much of our socialization is about teaching us that our lives do not matter: "You think you're Christmas . . . you think you're someone special and you're not," shouts Ursula spitefully (46). This is the lesson that John learns: "*There is nothing that matters*, he told me. *And even that does not matter much*" (81). But Lilian's credo is the opposite: "there was nothing that did not matter" (81).

Lilian hates the history she is taught at university for, in her world, history is not a procession of facts but lived experience (99-100). "History is not the past, but the present made flesh" (192), she tells us near the end of her life. History is about the body, and nature, and the way people live their lives. "*I am history, and so are you*," she shouts from her soap box (192). The narrative strategy whereby Lilian regards her own image as though through the eyes of others is thus thematically appropriate. Towards the end of her life, this strategy becomes less and less about surviving pain by separating out from the self than about a joyful and iconoclastic way of becoming and living history in the corporeal, encompassing way promised by her bulk. Released from the confines of institution, home, and family, "liberated" to roam the streets of Sydney, Lilian becomes subject and object at once—able to be herself and see herself as others do.

Becoming a story to be taken home by all those she encounters, repeated over many years, even handed down to another generation, she transcends time and space and takes her place in history:

Those policemen went home with the story of Lil, to tell their wives. I loved the knowledge that these muscular men would be taking me home, into the warm kitchen where their wives stood mashing potatoes and the baby gaped and gestured. *I saw Lil Singer today*, he might say. His wife would stop her mashing and wait with the saucepan in her hand for her husband to join her small life with my big one by telling his story. *She was causing an obstruction*, my policeman would say, and kick at the lino in his inadequacy, for there are born storytellers, but policemen and their formulas are not among their num-

ber. *She said some stuff at me. . . . What did she say, exactly?* she might ask, but it would be unreasonable to expect him to remember, and the baby might have her own ideas, and a better flair for a story than her father. (189)

In this retelling, part of Lilian is still out there with “her” policeman. The detail and corporeality of her imaginings suggest that even in random, chaotic, and fleeting exchanges between people, human existence can have tangible effects. The human person is not restricted by the material boundaries and limits that constrain her corporeal existence; the person can “flow” in unpredictable, “rhizomatic” ways, rippling out beyond her body and into the unknown spaces of the city and other human lives, transforming herself in the process. For Grenville, storytelling—narrative—is how small lives transcend their limits and join with other small lives or the “big lives” of bold characters (189). One bold historical character who stars in this book is Shakespeare. The literary patriarch is domesticated by Lilian (who calls him “William”), and in her recitations, he is transformed into an instrument of rebellion against patriarchy and convention. She lets him loose in an abject torrent against Father (96), then later she foists him on her fellow Sydneysiders, whether they will or no. Freed from the stultifying institutional context of the university that threatened to contain him, and embodied in the grand personage of Lilian herself (“I am Shakespeare” [147]), William goes mobile. The Shakespearian tome may have been drowned by Father (96), but Lilian can remake the greatest figure in literary history after her own fashion.

That Lilian should see herself as a character in a historical drama is, of course, beautifully apposite, since as a character she herself blurs the boundary between the fictional and the real. She is and is not Bea Miles. Some readers of the book will have heard stories of the real-life Bea or had experience of her, and so every now and then one has the beautifully unsettling experience of fancying that one hears a snatch of the “real” Bea speaking through the novel.

This Bea is a woman who, as Ruth Cracknell’s comments suggest, had the freedom of the city, a freedom that could paradoxically be obtained only by living outside of (or failing to meet) social norms. In the novel, body and city overlap in the

themes and symbols of mobility and freedom. Lilian comes to find a kind of freedom and even power in her rejection of such norms. She absents herself from the normal relations of monetary exchange that obtain in the capitalist city and invents her own kind of economy: "I will not wear out the seat, I told [the tram conductor], and I will breathe only the air I am entitled to, and will provide a free recitation for your pleasure" (186). In the storm-water drain with Jewel and Frank, she finds the happy family that her proper bourgeois family never was. Thus this novel that is so much about patriarchal policing—of acceptable female bodies, of female sexuality, of daughters, wives, and futures—ends nonetheless with the figure of a woman who, through losing everything bourgeois society held dear, finds her freedom. If there is a romanticizing of poverty here, it is one that nonetheless is very moving.

It is also very refreshing to see images of mobility and movement put to feminist ends and championed as possibilities for women. For in Western narrative traditions, mobility has often been masculinized. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, argues that a subtly gendered archetypal structure is fundamental to the patterns of Western narratives: the passage of a hero across a boundary, that is, a primary "conflict of hero and antagonist (obstacle)" (118). She draws on the work of Jurij Lotman, who reduced Vladimir Propp's thirty-one narrative functions to an endlessly repeatable duality: "entry into a closed space, and emergence from it" (119). In this pattern, the closed space (the space of "home") is usually feminized, such that action becomes the province of the male hero. More recently, Meaghan Morris has criticized the unconscious uptake of this metaphorical tradition within cultural studies, whose championing of metaphors of the critic as nomad, detective, flâneur and so on partakes, knowingly or not, of this gendered tradition. In *Lilian's Story*, Lilian soon learns that girls cannot be heroes except in their minds (25), that Joan of Arc gets "hurried over in the history book and [that] Boadicea was just a witch in woad" (29).

Many female readers might therefore rejoice in the freedom, mobility, and heroism accorded to Lilian and in the novel's appropriation of the metaphor of forward, linear movement for

a female protagonist. The novel closes with these triumphant words: "*Drive on, George*, I cried at him. *I am ready for whatever comes next*" (211). This triumph is all the more poignant given the novel's powerful evocation of the patriarchal injunction against female mobility. As Mother so wonderfully puts it: "A lady does not hurtle, Lilian dear" (15). Then there are Father's ghastly command to Mother—"Don't move"—as he tries to impregnate her with a son and heir (4), and the photographer's similar injunction to Lilian as he attempts to produce a photograph of her in which she will resemble the girl she is meant to be—a bourgeois girl in frills (8).

The prohibition on female mobility functions as a key metaphor. As a child, Lilian's boots are always too tight (21); inside the asylum, she thinks of herself as having been shot through the feet (148). Her freedom is metaphorically linked to her refusal of the prohibition on mobility. After the rape, she goes "walk-about" on foot; after her return, she escapes every night from the house. When her worn shoe-leather begins to arouse suspicion, she procures a bicycle, instrument of mobility and thus evasion: "Father did not know that it was now in my power to go where I pleased" (134).³ According to Penny Russell, in her delightful essay on bicycles and the New Woman, public debate about female cyclists centred on the sexual liberation or stimulation that seemed likely to accompany their mobility. "Alarm about the female cyclist centred on her legs" (35), since "the forked body astride a modern machine could be represented as an essentially sexual image" (35). It is precisely this assumed relation between mobility and sexual freedom that Father finds so threatening in Lilian. But she remains undaunted. On her release from the institution, her motto becomes, "It is better to travel hopefully" (158)—abbreviated, when hope seems scarce on the ground, to "It is better to travel" (163). "Mobility is the key," she announces as she steps into other people's taxis (189).

The taxi is a peculiar social space. In the contemporary Australian context at least⁴ taxis are often caught by old people no longer able to drive, by a certain generation of women who were never "allowed" to learn to drive by their husbands, by adolescent girls too young to have a license, or by people too drunk to drive

and fearing being caught by the so-called "booze bus." They are, by convention, deemed a safe space for women, a culturally licensed exception to the rule that women must never get into a car with a man they do not know. Paradoxically, women get into this "sanctified" car with a strange man at night precisely in order that they might be protected from other "strange men" at night. The social contract that says these men and these cars are safe has come about precisely because the city at night *is not* safe for women.⁵ Given the special status of the taxi in relation to the discourses of safety and mobility that form part of the disciplinary techniques, keeping women safe but constricted, it is interesting that Lilian should hijack taxis and make their space work for her.

Feminist analysts from many different disciplines have long argued that women have particular kinds of relations to space in patriarchy. Feminist architects and town-planners, for example, claim that women play little role in urban planning and architectural decisions and that cities are literally "man-made" (Matrix 3). "Modern cities," they argue, "have been planned to segregate different aspects of life" and this "segregation has affected women more than men because our lives have never been so neatly partitioned between the different areas of work, leisure and home in the way that men's have" (4). Women's movement is restricted at night, especially in the city, where women are often implicitly held to be responsible for violence done to them if they leave their homes at night.

Elizabeth Wilson has argued that almost "from the beginning, the presence of women in cities, and particularly in city streets, has been questioned, and the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life have always been directed particularly at women" (14). She argues that in many different cultures, the city has come to symbolize the place where the forbidden—"what is most feared and desired" (6)—becomes possible. Women's presence in the city has often been cast as a problem (5), and the city has been seen as the site for the potential unleashing of women's sexuality, which has led to the control and protection of women, two projects that have often gone hand in hand (16).

The notion of women's space being restricted applies not only to urban design, but also to the very bodies we inhabit. In 1979,

Marianne Lyra-Wex published a startling collection of over two thousand photographs of women, men, and children in public space. They tell the striking tale that women's bodies have been disciplined, in the Foucauldian sense, to take up as little space as possible. Such a finding is supported by feminist phenomenologists, such as Iris Marion Young, whose analysis of women's bodily comportment and motility in space argues that in contemporary urban societies, women's spatiality can be characterized as "enclosed," "privative," inward-directed, and more limited than men's (154-55). She observes that "women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves. To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification" (155). As Young goes on to observe, women also experience "the threat of being seen" in a more extreme form—the threat of "spatial and bodily invasion' in the form of rape (155). As many women can testify, this threat of invasion of intimate bodily space leads to a (self)-imposed prohibition on the free circulation in public space.

Thus the prohibition on women (and other subordinate groups, such as poor, homeless men) taking up space applies both to the city streets and also to the body itself. It is around the issue and metaphor of mobility that my two main interests in *Lilian's Story*—the body and the city—come most clearly together. Following Douglas's precept quoted earlier that "the body is a model which can stand in for any bounded system" (115), we can think of the body and the city as dynamic, open systems, bounded by a provisional, fluid, and semi-permeable membrane, and capable of carrying a wide range of symbolic meanings. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, just as "it is true that everything symbolizes the body, so it is equally true . . . that the body symbolizes everything else" (122).

In the light of this, Lilian's fatness is an act of defiance. The girl who starts life not fitting her own body—her hands are too large for her, "as if [she were] trying on someone else's" (81)—learns to fill her own body, to take up space, and, finally, to foist her way into the public sphere. In a world in which women are taught to take up as little space as possible, Lilian learns to hijack the flows

of the city for her own ends. The prevalence of metaphors of silence, drowning and suffocation has often been commented on by critics and by Grenville herself.⁶ In *Lilian's Story*, Alma, Mother, Lilian, John, and such others who suffer under the rule of Father or the patriarchal law of which he is a symbol, are often rendered speechless; Grenville frequently describes them as "congested." The choice of word resonates within a number of overlapping metaphorical schemata simultaneously: body, traffic, suffocation, and inner crowding. Lilian's triumph over the policemen is thus also a victory for the body. "She was causing an obstruction" (189) laments one of them. She has graduated from blocking doorways to obstructing fellow children (18), to learning to "congest" the masculine public domain and clog up that epitome of modernity—the transport system. Rather than becoming "congested" in her own body, she congests the city-body until her voice is heard. She thus learns to evade the regulatory mechanism of the modern city—both as a woman whose eccentricity (or madness) paradoxically grants her the freedom to move and flow across the city, and also as a self-taught master of transport—hopping on and off buses, ferries, hijacking taxis, and finally being chauffeured around her city for one last tour. Some may say that there is something romantic about a tale in which the rape of a woman leads, albeit eventually and indirectly, to her having freedom of movement in the city by day and by night, in a world where such material possibilities are still very far from real for contemporary urban women. As a symbolic triumph, though, it is very satisfying, for Lilian does symbolically "reclaim the night." In any case, Grenville certainly makes clear the material and personal costs of Lilian's triumph.

In her essay "Bodies-Cities," Elizabeth Grosz writes of the "constitutive and mutually defining relation between bodies and cities" (242). She defines the body as a material structure that is naturally "incomplete," gaining its "unity, cohesiveness, and organization" through the "social triggering" and "long-term 'administration'" and regulation of its potentialities (243). The body becomes "human" by a cultural process in which a sense of self and a set of bodily co-ordinates come largely to coincide (243-44; see also Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*). The illusion of coher-

ence and unity is produced through a "relation of introjections and projections" between the body and its environment. The city, Grosz defines in similar terms: as a "complex and interactive network which links together, often in an unintegrated and de facto way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, and relations, with a number of imaginary and real, projected or actual architectural, geographic, civic and public relations" (244). According to Grosz, the city brings together many types of flows (informational, economic, interpersonal, familial, and so on) to create "a semipermanent but ever-changing built environment or milieu" (244). Cities, like bodies, are thus dynamic systems of flows and exchanges in a material domain.

With both bodies and cities, the experience of coherence is about the coincidence of imaginary and physical space:

The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies. For example, it links the affluent lifestyle of the banker or professional to the squalor of the vagrant, or homeless, or the impoverished without necessarily positing a conscious or intentional will-to-exploit. (243)

Grenville characterizes these flows and exchanges using the metaphor of stories. She imagines the city as a web of narratives that may brush against or intersect with each other in unpredictable ways. The reappearance of Stroud, Ursula, and Rick, for example, while unconvincing in a naturalistic sense, is thus symbolically appropriate. People tell stories and are created in the stories of others, and the city is constituted by these different stories. Lord Kitchener, as he was in Lilian's story, might really be Brian or Lloyd and have a story of his own (182-83).

There is a substantial though not uncontested tradition of this metaphor within urban studies itself. Kevin Lynch thinks of the city as *legible*, like a printed page (qtd. in O'Carroll).⁷ Roland Barthes was familiar with Lynch's work, which may be what inspired him to his own version of the metaphor:

... the city is a piece of writing; the person moving around in the city, that is the user of the city (which we all are) is a sort of reader who, according to his [sic] obligations and movements, takes out fragments of the utterance in order to actualise them in secret. When we move around in a city, we are all in the situation of readers of

Queneau's 100 000 million poems, where you can discover a different poem by changing a single line; without knowing it we are a little bit like this avant-garde reader whenever we are in a city.

("Sémiologie" 13)

More recently, Michel de Certeau conceived of the city streets as a metaphor for a positioned analysis that takes the everyday experiences of people seriously. For de Certeau, as for Grenville, people going about their ordinary business in the city street are unnamed heroes. De Certeau dedicates his *Practice of Everyday Life* to "the ordinary man," a "common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets." The coming to prominence of this "multitude of quantified heroes" is the result of "the advent of the number, [which] comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics." De Certeau appropriates the rhetoric of heroism for "ordinary" people; *Lilian's Story* goes a step further and allows *women* a place in this celebration and "heroicization" of the everyday. Like both Barthes and Grenville, de Certeau bases his study of everyday life on a linguistic analogy: "a multitude of quantified heroes . . . lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one" (n. pag.). He conceives of these "unrecognized producers" as "poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalised rationality" (xviii). He, too, uses this image to celebrate the resistance of ordinary people to the dominant forces that threaten to constrain them: "The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practice" (xvii). *Lilian* can be read as a hero in de Certeau's sense—someone whose very marginalization can paradoxically become a source of power. She manages, that is, to "escape without leaving" (qtd. in Frow 57).

The metaphor of the city-poem is not without its critics. Architect Martin Krampen, for example, argues vehemently against the facile use of "the ill-founded linguistic analogy" (preface and 361). Certainly, it is a Romantic metaphor. But Grenville puts it to beautiful and appropriate use in *Lilian's Story*. For *Lilian*

is both a conduit for great poetry, through her recitations of Shakespeare, and a catalyst through whom others discover their own poetic selves. True to the etymology of the word "poetry" (from the Greek *poiesis*, or "making") she inspires others to invent themselves by telling their stories. The Slavic taxi driver is "inspired . . . into a flight of invention" (190); a woman on the tram invents herself creatively and becomes beautiful in the telling (188); even a "timid" and "hollow" passenger enriches his life "by the small story he would be able to tell" (191). Lilian's presence is the catalyst for webs of stories that will be woven across the city and over generations.⁸ So one of my tributes to this book is that it invigorates critical tropes that have previously seemed to me rather Romantic and politically lean. In terms of my awkwardness about the relation between the feminist writer and the feminist critic, then, I am happy to see academic tropes given meaning, power and passion by fiction, and not the other way around. To say that a book like *Lilian's Story* reinvigorates critical tropes is to be reminded of the potential effects of fiction. For just as Lilian sees her presence as a generator of stories and a catalyst towards self-poesis (Falzon), Grenville's description of the process of writing *Lilian's Story* reminded me of Barthes's conception of the writer as *combineur* (a "combiner") (*Sur la littérature* 23) and of his distinction between readerly (*risible*) and writerly (*scriptible*) texts. For Barthes, the writerly text was one in which readers function as producers rather than consumers—a text whose openness allows for an unpredictable and unlimited plurality of meanings:

In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*; . . . the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (*S/Z* 5-6)

For Barthes, this text was an ideal rather than a form, and indeed it could be as much a strategy of reading as a textual given. While *Lilian's Story* is in no way marked by the kinds of

formal experimentation that one might expect of Barthes's writerly texts, I choose to close with this critical trope, as I see in this novel, and in Kate Grenville's description of the process of writing it, an exemplum of the most dramatic dissolution of boundaries of all—the breaking down of the distinction between reader and writer:

I didn't think it out at all. I never had any idea how it was going to end. It was a really exhilarating book to write. The first two novels I wrote, which were such a disaster, I'd planned really carefully, with chapter headings. I knew exactly what each chapter was going to do, and it just died on the page. I got bored writing it, I think, because I knew what was going to happen. But with *Lilian's Story* I felt like a reader. I didn't know what was going to happen on the next page. I had to keep writing to find out what would emerge. (Ellison 159-60)

Perhaps the greatest tribute I can offer as reader is that I did the same.

NOTES

- 1 Of course, such codings of the body are not restricted to women. Bodies function as markers of many things. Similar arguments can of course be made for sexuality and race, among other things.
- 2 I think irresistibly of "Bee" Miles, on whose character Lilian is based. Incidentally, Bee Miles apparently preferred that spelling to the one that has been adopted for her now ("Bea"). See Anne Summers 23; qtd. in Turcotte, "Telling Those Untold Stories" 292).
- 3 We might recall here the scandal caused by the introduction of the bicycle to Australia in the 1890s, out of which arose the regulatory stereotype of the female cyclist, a woman who shocked bourgeois norms by being "astride," "atop," and, worst of all, mobile.
- 4 I'm grateful here for some discussions in another context with Bruce Clezy—academic and taxi driver—about the space of the taxi.
- 5 Sadly, this protected space has become unsafe for the very men who inhabit it—the taxi drivers. There has been a spate of gruesome assaults and murders of taxi drivers in Australia, which has had itself to be met with a whole range of surveillance techniques.
- 6 See, for example, Turcotte, "Ultimate Oppression"; Turcotte, "Telling those Untold Stories"; Mercer.
- 7 I am grateful to John O'Carroll for reminding me of Lynch's work.
- 8 The truth of this was borne out in the radio interview I heard around the time of the film's release in Sydney, where listeners from across the city rang up with the story of their encounter with Bea Miles, and a web of scarcely connecting threads was formed in the process.

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