Penelope Lively's "Moon Tiger": Re-envisioning a "history of the world"

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PENELOPE LIVELY'S *Moon Tiger*, winner of the 1987 Booker Prize, portrays a world in which neither historical narrative nor individual identity is stable. Its focus on a rich multiplicity that is paired with a disconcerting decentring is not an unfamiliar approach to Lively's work. In *City of the Mind* (1991), "a million yesterdays" (1) impinge on the present as historical narratives from the Renaissance and Victorian England take on an enigmatic underground life as they merge with contemporary narratives in 1980 London. For the central character, Matthew Halland, "everything and everywhere are instantaneous." This disjuncture makes him feel both "trapped and ranging free" (2). In *Judgment Day* (1980), a fourteenth-century Doom painting hanging in the village church haunts the present, which is uncannily plagued by senseless accidents. Likewise, *Moon Tiger* underscores perhaps even more ambitiously a rich polyphonic history, which nonetheless is haunted by an arbitrary and uncertain universe.

Moon Tiger relays rather kaleidoscopically the story of Claudia Hampton, whose writings on Cortez, Napoleon, and other historical personages win her a somewhat notorious reputation for her unconventional historical reporting. With the possible exception of her falling in love with Tom Southern, Claudia, like her writing, is unorthodox. Adventurous, witty, and a bit arrogant, Claudia has innumerable affairs in various ports, a cryptic incestuous liaison with her brother, Gordon, a daughter whom she frequently ignores for her career, and a casual sexual relationship with the father of her child, whom she never marries. She lives unconventionally but fully, playfully disregarding the confines that usually mark women's roles.

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Claudia's story opens with her lying in bed at the nursing home where she is suffering from cancer. Here she imagines writing a subversive "history of the world" (1), which in effect is *Moon Tiger*. The initiating voice of Lively's text, who at one point refers to herself as "I, Claudia" (presumably an echo of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*), she consistently reminds us that history is fiction. Hampton's "history of the world," really her own story with scattered vestiges of historical antiquity most obviously is an interfusion of the subjective and objective, of public and private. Her story is a melding of polyphonic voices, each with its own history to tell. Cruelty, after all, is a matter of point of view. Eating the heart of one's enemy for the Aztecs was a means of ingesting and thereby acquiring the enemy's power, a perfectly reasonable gesture for the Aztec, a rather abhorrent one for the Spaniard. One might add that if historical narrative depends on point of view, myths about women (also a part of history) shift when women acquire the means to tell their version of the story. Or as Mary Hurley Moran suggests, *Moon Tiger*, in emphasizing the personal, provides a "feminist history of the world," one which "challenges established notions about history, time, and the nature of personal identity" (*Frontiers* 90).[1]

Moon Tiger, like many postmodern texts, in querying historiography, decentres the definitive historical story, allowing repressed narratives that are no less definitive to surface.[2] Taking historical narrative as one of its primary subjects, *Moon Tiger* suggests that history, ultimately elusive, is nonobjective and irreparably intertwined with the personal, more contiguous than linear. History lacks, in other words, any specific relationship between configuration and succession. This is the "history of the world" Claudia plans as she contemplates how to write her history from the perspective of primordial soup. This is the book, of course, that she does not write; it is, however, in its disruption of linearity, in its conjoining of public and private, and in its assimilation of multiple voices, the fictional narrative that is *Moon Tiger*. Thus, connecting the historical narrative with the fictional narrative, *Moon Tiger* is a quirky twist on the conventional narrative theory that conjoins, in Paul Ricoeur's estimation, the narrative function and the historical function, for it defies the sequential

and linear plotting that supposedly makes that conjoining possible (294). *Moon Tiger* suggests that reconceiving the historical narrative demands a reconceiving of what constitutes fictional narrative and that this reconstruction, in turn, challenges the representations (particularly of women) that have been the products of these narratives.

Although querying the historical narrative is hardly new to contemporary fiction (Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Gordimer's *July's People*, Swift's *Waterland*) or to Modernist fiction (Conrad's *Nostromo*, Woolf's *Orlando*, and Sartre's *Nausea*, for example), Lively specifically underscores the connections between challenging traditional narrative and the opportunity to rewrite some of the most intractable and, in Lively's view, some of the most outrageous stories about women. Her novel functions as a metafiction, which, by "working both within and against the dominant discourse," reshapes that discourse (Greene 20). Like Hélène Cixous's recasting *The Oresteia* to accentuate the horror of the "forgiven" matricide and like Luce Irigaray's recasting the sacrosanct desire for Oneness in Western metaphysics to accentuate its underlying desire for the self-same, *Moon Tiger* uncovers the buried stories beneath a seemingly objective history. As Linda Anderson notes in her discussion of history in contemporary women's fiction: "The story of wars, nations and dynasties, the tangible public events—so long assumed to *be* history—take on a different meaning, a different configuration when we begin to see through them—" (130). *Moon Tiger* thus not only provides a space for a woman in a discourse from which she has been previously excluded, but also confronts through its use of language and narrative frame the ideological structures that have made such an exclusion possible. The de-centring that emerges throughout, however, is not without its price; the unflinching refusal to opt for any stable meaning lands the text in a "sandstorm" in which everything dissolves—even what is most affirmed.

Conventional historiography relegates women to a space, which in contemporary Irish poet Eavan Boland's words, is "outside history." Unfit to participate in the realm of the public, as

Comte, Hegel, and a host of other Western philosophers would have it, women and their stories have been relegated to triviality, to the subordinate anecdote. These personal stories stand in direct contrast to the more significant public story—the tales of war, political strife, and economic upheaval. This is the first myth that Lively's text interrogates. In perhaps a too obvious move, Claudia frequently (although not always) narrates her personal life in third person and historical events in first. Public events recorded with an experiencing "I" are clearly not devoid of subjectivity and personal bias. Remembering her experiences of recording World War II, Claudia muses:

> I have seen war; in that sense I have been present at wars, I have heard bombs and guns and observed their effects. And yet what I know of war seems most vivid in the head; (66)

The past, that which is "public property—the received past" (29), is also private. As Claudia notes of history on another occasion: "my view of you is my own, your relevance to me is personal" (29). The absurdity of exorcizing the personal from "public property—the received past" becomes evident in an interchange between Claudia and Gordon in which Gordon accepts the possibility of "alternative fates within a personal context," but not the possibility of alternative histories. Chiding him for this paradox, Claudia retorts: "How inconsistent you are," to which Gordon replies: "I consider that people make choices"—as if history is not made by people (39).

The myth that relegates women to a place "outside history" because of women's connection to the personal simply will not stand. On another occasion, Claudia tells the story of how she and her brother Gordon used to scale rocks looking for ammonites. The rocks become mythological rocks and Claudia's life (and all lives) become public myth. Claudia recounts: "So I shall start with the rocks. Appropriately. The rocks from which we spring and to which we're chained, all of us. Like wretched thingummy, what's-his-name, him on his rock . . ." (7). By establishing herself (and everyone) as springing from a Promethean myth, all people vary only slightly from the heroic characters of whom she writes. Public history may appear to be distanced and objective, and hence seemingly superior, but it never escapes the

personal. Memory, which in part is history, is triggered in *Moon Tiger* by the smell of incense, after which the novel is named. More visceral than sight or hearing, the sense of smell cannot be severed from the body and the physical world, and by juxtaposition, neither can memory or history.

Tangentially, Claudia's history refuses also the intractable myth of the ministering mother-woman, the narrative product of a conventional historical narrative that clearly demarcates public and private spheres. Prescriptives for the historical narrative, in other words, produce other stories, such as the one Auguste Comte relays when he argues that woman's moral superiority must necessarily confine her to the domestic realm. The "natural distinctions" that give her a "superiority in strength and feeling" require that she be the guardian of the private sphere so as to insure the moral fabric of the public sphere (374).

In Claudia's rendition, the story of the ministering angel need not be women's destiny; nor is it attractively winged with indigenous moral superiority. Claudia wants no part of the hovering, fluttering mother-woman, which, for example, Kate Chopin's Edna in *The Awakening* could not kill—particularly as it is personified by Sylvia, Claudia's sister-in-law. Sylvia, who devotes herself to children and houses, is the mother-woman turned fat, who trails "in Gordon's wake, like some stumpy dinghy towed by a yacht," the one left behind as her husband engages in love affairs from Singapore to Stanford. A whimpering figure with no intellectual vigor of her own, she produces yawns in Gordon's friends and reveals Gordon's laziness of soul. According to Claudia, "Gordon needs Sylvia like some people need to spend an hour or two every day simply staring out of the window, or twiddling their fingers" (24). Claudia, in contrast, tracks the Egyptian front, writes unconventional tales about Cortez that make her colleagues fume.

Not only does Claudia escape the fluttering, dedicated mother-madonna-angel-in-the-house syndrome, but she escapes it with impunity. The predicted disastrous results do not invariably ensue when that role is refused. Society does not collapse, the apocalypse does not come, the six o'clock news continues, and Claudia's daughter does not become a malformed aberration. In

fact, her daughter is, in Claudia's estimation, disappointingly normal. Claudia tells us that her daughter Lisa wished for a different kind of mother, "a reassuring clothes-shopping sherry-drinking figure like the mothers of her school friends"—a ministering angel, a mother-woman of sorts (51). Claudia finds such demands tiresome and pays far more attention to her work than she does to her daughter, whom she finds a bit dull and predictable. In a rather desperate plea, Lisa clings to a curtain as she watches her mother work. Irritated, Claudia rebukes her daughter, telling her to find something to do. Lisa shouts back: "I can't I can't I can't I don't know where to find it I don't know where to look I want pink fingernails like yours I want to be you not me I want to make you look at me I want you to say Lisa how pretty you are" (53). A small child's plea to her mother to please pay attention to her is hard to ignore. The child's voice prevails here. Claudia seems distant and uncharitable. Yet what is it one wants Claudia to do: flutter, hover, drop her work—become a mother-woman? As for Lisa, she survives quite well. She may not be tracking the latest war, but she becomes, nonetheless, in her own view, a survivor—a "competent mother, an adequate if not exemplary wife" who learns "she married too young too quickly the wrong man," but who has "found ways of making the best of the situation" (60). The choices Claudia makes, in other words, do not produce the ruination of her child, the frequently portrayed fate of children whose mothers have desires and ambitions of their own.

Thus, *Moon Tiger* also challenges traditional plotting of desire that typically denies women access to such pleasures. Access to desire has essentially been a male privilege. As Cixous notes, the "same story [repeats] woman's destiny in love across the centuries with the cruel hoax of its plot," which continually reminds her that there is "no place" for her desire (67). A woman dare not seek an adventure or quest of her own; nor dare she seek her own image—her soul in her partner. She is to be passive, the vacant vessel who mirrors someone else's desires, but never the seeker of her own. To do otherwise, as Jacques Lacan notes, is a perversion:

> But it can happen that women too are soulful in love [*amoureuses*], that is to say, that they soul for the soul. What on earth could this be

> other than this soul for which they soul in their partner, who is none the less *homo* right up to the hilt, from which they cannot escape? This can only bring them to the ultimate point . . . of hysteria, as it is called in Greek, or acting the man, as I call it, thereby becoming, they too, hommosexual or outsidesex. (155-56)

Moon Tiger reclaims the adventure and quest from its male privilege and in Cixousian fashion "steals back" desire for women. Claudia writes books, tracks World War II on the Egyptian front, and has exotic affairs. She acts on her own desires, including her own sexual desires, and yet remains desirable (not "outsidesex"). Her brother, remembering a "bloke" who had a drink with her and her boyfriend in some hotel in Egypt, queries her about the affair. Claudia responds: "There were two or three hundred thousand members of the armed forces stationed in and around Cairo at that point. . . . You can take your pick" (71). Like her brother, she seems to be having affairs in every port. Claudia also "souls for the soul," seeking in her brother her own mirror image. When she and her brother are adolescents, Claudia sees in her brother's maleness "an erotic flicker" of herself, and he, when he looks at her, sees a similar "beckoning reflection." Claudia asserts: "We confronted each other like mirrors, flinging back reflections in endless recession" (137). Women, in Claudia's rendition, need not give up their own desires so to better mirror the man's. The demands and desires here are mutual (even if they are slightly incestuous). She and her brother mirror each other, and neither in their incestuous flicker emerges as particularly perverse. The woman who desires (sex, intellect, material success—in essence, Claudia) is not so bad after all and is clearly having a better time than anyone else in the novel. Unlike many of her literary predecessors, such as Maggie Tulliver of George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Lyndall of Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Sue Bridehead of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, whose longings for intellectual and sexual freedom literally lead to death (Lyndall, Maggie, and Edna) or to a living death (Sue Bridehead), Claudia lives to a raspy old age. She makes the quest available for women.

More subtly, *Moon Tiger* rewrites the Western metaphysical narrative that aligns femininity, the body, and materiality with

darkness, fantasy, and eventual imprisonment.[3] Toward the end of the novel the following scene transpires between Claudia and fellow journalist James Caxton:

> "Women," says Caxton, "are always less philosophical about the ups and downs of life. My wife . . ."
>
> "They also deal them out, of course."
>
> He stares at her. "What?"
>
> "The Fates," says Claudia, "are traditionally represented in Greek mythology as women. Three of them. Spinning."
>
> "As I was saying, my wife . . ."
>
> "The Furies too. Remorseless atavistic maternal punishment. But also the Muses. In fact we have all the best parts. I'm sorry—your wife?" (161-62)

This interchange between Claudia and Caxton retells on several levels a primary metaphysical/mythological narrative that excludes women from possible positions of truth, relegating them instead to realms of fantasy or silence. Women, as Claudia makes clear, cannot be relegated to some contained structure (houses, caves) where the pleasurable illusions with which they become aligned must be foregone for the higher pleasures of philosophy(Irigaray 322).[4] Claudia subtly suggests that the pristine philosophical quest is not so easily separated from the personal, from desire, and from women. Caxton begins his conversation with Claudia by asserting that women are "less philosophical about the ups and downs of life" than men. It is Caxton, however, who keeps returning to the personal: "My wife" and "As I was saying, my wife." Secondly, by interjecting the Fates and Furies into her argument with Caxton, Claudia reclaims the mythological story, reassigning the parts. The Fates, in dealing out the ups and downs, evidently possess considerable authority. One might say they are a bit like God, as are the Furies, who judge and punish. The Muses are inspirations to the truth. Far from being absent or occupying the most egregious parts, these female participants take on god-like attributes.

In this conversation, Claudia seems simply to turn the tables on the masculine metaphysical narrative, reassigning the parts so that women occupy the best parts of the story. Yet closer scrutiny reveals the binary opposition that makes such an inversion possible is nonexistent in this text. In her discussion of the history of

the Russian front during World War II, Claudia critiques not only realism, but a binary opposition that would make fantasy its opposite (a division necessary to empirical history and philosophy). Of this history, Claudia recounts: "twenty degrees below zero temperatures of the winter of 1941; the Russian prisoners herded into open-air pens," the "seven million slaughtered horses, the seventeen million cattle, the twenty million pigs" (67). In Claudia's view, there is something deficient about this objective accounting. It is the deficient "language of war," which is "what history comes down to in the end," not that "other language" of camouflage that she heard so frequently on the front (67). This objective account of the war parallels Tom Southern's story about his life when he tells Claudia that he was born "in the home counties to parents of moderate but sufficient means," that his father was a schoolmaster and his mother was a mother, that his childhood was "marred only by unconfessed fear of large dogs and the patronage of [his] sister," and that he was inept with Latin and the cricket bat. Claudia finds his account boring and complains that he is leaving out "great chunks" of the story. He retorts that he is sticking to the "essentials" (77-78). For Claudia, the chunks left out (the personal and the subjective) are essential. Tom's linear tale, spotted with flat detail (his father was a schoolmaster and his mother was a mother), does not say a whole lot about this Tom lying in bed with Claudia. Something *is* missing. This does not surface until the end of the novel when Tom's sister, after reading one of Claudia's articles, discovers the identity of "C" and forwards Tom's diary to her.

Ostensibly, this opposition suggests that the personal story is more real than the objective one, but Claudia rejects a simple metamorphosis of an empirical recording of public events into an empirical recording of the personal, what Linda Anderson labels as a familiar but too easy and too freighted realism (132). What Claudia offers as an alternative to the lists of destruction on the Russian front is "that other language" which functions as a "smokescreen of fantasy." This zany raillery of the politicians and generals that depicts war manoeuvers as a segment from a Wagnerian opera, men roasted alive from bomb artillery as "brewed up" in a picnic (67), and the bombs that destroy them as Matildas

and Honeys is not the binary opposite of the former realistic story; this is not really what happened either. It is a missing chunk that tells an added story of deflection and denial, of war fused with sex, of women fused with deadly weapons. And both of these renditions are different from Claudia's reflections of the war years later:

> I have lived since in the world of overkill and second strike and negative capability; the scenarios of future wars or probably the final war are preceded by their distracting code-words. Speech regenerates itself like the landscape; words die and others are born, just as buildings melt away and others take their place, as the sand blew over the carcasses of Matildas and the Honeys and the Crusaders. (68)

One interpretation melds into another. The new story provides not opposition, but another layer. Thus, Claudia challenges not only negative narratives about women that make the personal, the subjective, and the sexual subordinate to a more pure masculine principle but the method (the binary opposition) that permits these oppositions to persist.

History conventionally has been a linear story, has manifested a drive for closure and control—it has meant getting the story and the facts straight. In Lacanian terms, it is a privileging of metaphor (pleasure in directness, completion) over metonomy (pleasure in association, process, individual moments). Claudia's method privileges the latter—a state of embeddedness that constantly defers meaning and closure. In the opening scenes, Claudia thinks of her mother, who makes her think of her father, who reminds her of her brother, who makes her think of scaling rocks; this in turn makes her think of myth, of Prometheus, of the rock to which Prometheus is chained, of the rock to which we are all chained. Claudia's mind moves by association, like the incense she burns, which through its scents charges the mind to recall images, associations, and memories.

No one point of view dominates *Moon Tiger.* There are many voices and many layers. Thinking about narrative possibilities, Claudia muses: "Tell it from the point of view of the soup, maybe? Have one of those drifting floating feathery crustaceans narrate. Or an ammonite?" (3) The ammonite, she decides, suits her tale best. An extinct mollusk, which both drifts in the primordial sea

and attaches itself to a rock, the generative of "Amen," the Egyptian god of life and reproduction, and a person of a Semitic tribe, "ammonite" does provide a fitting perspective for Claudia's history: it is fixed, fluid, sacred, human, nonhuman, life-producing, and extinct. And, in fact, all these points of view (fixed, fluid, sacred, human, nonhuman, life-producing, and extinct) do emerge in *Moon Tiger* as narrative voices or as modes of interpretation.

Yet this poststructuralist decentring, which permits Claudia's retelling, lands this novel in a rather odd place. This polyphonic space is, at times, disconcerting. Metaphorically, the text lands in a sandstorm, with the "sharp clarity of vision" gone (85). It lands "untethered, no longer hitched to past or future or to a known universe but adrift in the cosmos" (90). This *is* Claudia's experience of a sandstorm during the war and her feeling of displacement that the war evokes.

It is also metaphorically the position of the reader in this text who is split between a multitude of perspectives and voices and between a multitude of Claudias. There is Claudia the adventurer, Claudia the lover, and Claudia the scaler of rocks, wars, and prodigious historical figures. There is Claudia the refuser of the mother-woman, who sees "children as beings apart" and who does not hear her child's plea. There is Lisa's view of Claudia: the Claudia who "has never seen Lisa detached from Claudia," the flawed storyteller who sometimes gets "simple basic things" wrong (such as the story of her own daughter who is "prettier" and "sharper" than the pasty-looking, snuffed-out candle her mother imagines [60]); there is the Claudia who is always the heroine of Tom Southern's stories; there is the Claudia lying in the nursing home, still mentally keen, but needing the nurse to prop her up.

In the most positive interpretation, these polymorphic identities create the means for escaping fixed identities that have so frequently entrapped women. They offer, in Moran's words, a "swirl of rich experiences that one mentally returns to and reexamines again and again" (*Penelope Lively* 118). This rich polyphony is, nonetheless, both exhilarating and unsettling. In the opening chapter where Claudia is deliberating over point of

view, we move from stories about her mother and father to the myth of Prometheus and finally to Claudia seeing herself as a myth. And she is a bit of a myth. She writes a history of Cortez (because he is unbelievable), as she too becomes unbelievable—off to exotic places, telling exotic stories, having unusual affairs. She says of Cortez: "There cannot have been a human being so brave, charismatic, obstinate and apparently indestructible" (154). One could apply the same adjectives just as easily to Claudia. Her own story becomes a kind of historical romance. Except in her rare moments of apprehension, she seems completely composed, which was also her attraction to Cortez. She lives her life in many ways as a performance, unanchored and untethered. Her life and the historical narratives she relates are marked by constant references to "curtain, curtain."

"Curtain," on one hand, literally designates the common everyday object in her hospital room, the word that Claudia in a moment of panic cannot recall and a word that designates the importance of the everyday object that affords Claudia her privacy. In another sense, the word "curtain" takes on an added significance in its many allusions to the stage, suggesting that all of history and all of life is simply a play. As she tells the story of her life, Claudia notes:

> The cast is assembling; the plot thickens. Mother, Gordon, Sylvia. Jasper. Lisa. Mother will drop out before long, retiring gracefully and with minimum fuss after an illness in 1962. Others, as yet unnamed, will come and go. (28)

Concerned "with structures, with the setting of the stage" that mark her early childhood (28) and with World War II as "some theatrical lion," roaring "off-stage while the actors got on with their business" (89), Claudia, as all who inhabit her novel, becomes a bit of a performer. And, as with any performer, it is at times difficult to ferret out who the woman is behind the mask. As she indicates, there are "many Gordons, many Claudias" (10); the universe collapses and expands at the same time.

The boundaries that do exist are frequently marked by artificial markers ("curtains"). They are what the nurse draws to give the declining Claudia some privacy in a room that really affords no privacy, what her daughter clings to as she pleads for atten-

tion, an item on a list, which Claudia constructs in order to alleviate her anxiety. "Curtain" marks the break between the Claudia lying in the nursing home and the Claudia relaying the story of her young daughter pleading for attention some thirty-five years ago: curtain—end of scene. And it is a word over which Claudia obsesses as she muses on the elusiveness of language: "Thank God, I control the world so long as I can name it. Which is why children must chase language before they do anything else, tame the wilderness by describing it, challenge God by learning His hundred names" (51). Of course, she cannot control the world through language. A "word for a simple object" eludes her. To compensate, she makes "an inventory of the room—a naming of parts: bed, chair, table, picture, vase, cupboard, window, curtain" (41). The list comforts her. She breathes again when the elusive word "curtain" comes back. Yet Claudia's effort to control the world through language is even more tenuous than James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus's attempt to quell a spinning world through his zealous naming and listing—"Stephen Dedalus / Class of Elements / Clongowes Wood College / Sallins / County Kildare / Ireland / Europe / The World / The Universe" (15) in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, seventy-one years earlier. Such list-making is a false comfort that mirrors both the listing of dead pigs and horses as the historical experience of war and also the vacant listing of inanimate objects and random sounds with which the novel ends. A car starting up, an aeroplane passing overhead, and a voice on the six o'clock news—nothing is left except sounds and a disembodied voice.

A similar pattern emerges in *Moon Tiger*'s treatment of aesthetics. Life imitates art, freezes the moment, but then the scene dissolves entirely. The first part of this proposition (life imitating art) initially is deceptively simple. When Claudia and her brother stare out of a window of an Egyptian hotel, the scene they watch becomes for Claudia a Breughel, "one of those busy informative paintings full of detail" that become "a frozen moment of time." They go sight-seeing, and the various places they see also become like a Breughel. As in many Modernist texts, art in these moments, rather than life, purveys the more intense experience. However, life imitating art in *Moon Tiger* is not an Icarus-like

soaring away from life as it so frequently is in many Modernist texts, but an immersion into it. The art imitated in *Moon Tiger* is Breughel's: a scene depicting "people doing particular things, of a dog cocking a leg, a cat sitting in the sun," which surfaces again and again (72).

> I couldn't say at which point we went to Karnak, to the Colossus, to the tombs—they are simultaneous. It is a time that is both instant and frozen, like a village scene in a Breughel painting, like the walls of the tombs on which fly, swim and walk the same geese, ducks, fish, cattle that live in, on and beside the Nile today. (73-74)

Inverting Modernist aesthetics by making life imitate art that depicts the ordinary, this second turn is once again deceptively simple, for there is yet a third more labyrinthine move. Like Claudia's history of the Russian front (which cannot be recovered through empirical recording or through the zany language that masks the atrocities of war), art in *Moon Tiger* also dissipates into endless referentiality. As Claudia and Gordon watch an Egyptian scene, which becomes a Breughel painting, they freeze the moment, which in the next moment dissolves completely. Memphis, Egypt shifts from a paradisaical landscape of houses, temples, and workshops to a landscape of "funerary monuments," which makes Claudia realize the "fragility of places" (114) and the transitoriness of her own impressions. Life becomes art, distanced and frozen into particular moments, ordinary moments (unlike aestheticism of the turn of the century), but then even these moments depicting the ordinary collapse. Superseding even Walter Pater's "vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves," which still, even if momentarily, borders on essence (210), *Moon Tiger* leaves us with starker impressions, "[s]omething—soul, *ka*, memory" vanished (113-14).

Perhaps what is different and somewhat unsettling in *Moon Tiger* is this sense that identity has never been anything else but fractured, some "soul, *ka*, memory" vanished. There is no initial illusion of some kind of anchor that is eventually deflated, no illusion of unified identity (Joyce's Stephen or Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay, for example), luring one into a false unity that later collapses. From the beginning, the anchor simply never exists.

The final scenes of *Moon Tiger* reaffirm this polyphonic dislocation. Several voices emerge in the last two scenes. The first chronicles an event, a particular moment in which Claudia watches the light fade and reappear with the coming and dissipation of a rainstorm. This first voice, similar to the one Claudia frequently uses to describe herself, is anchored and empirical, describing an identifiable Claudia, "filled with elation," gazing at the display of light "as though the spectacle has been laid on for her pleasure" (207). This empirically grounded scene, though, gives ways to the second voice that begins by describing a sinking sun, the glittering tree extinguished, and a darkened room:

> Presently it is quite dim; the window is violet now, showing the black tracery of branches and a line of houses packed with squares of light. And within the room a change has taken place. It is empty. Void. It has the stillness of a place in which there are only inanimate objects: metal, wood, glass, plastic. No life. Something creaks; the involuntary sound of expansion or contraction. Beyond the window a car starts up, an aeroplane passes overhead. The world moves on. And beside the bed the radio gives the time signal and a voice starts to read the six o'clock news. (207-08)

The change that has transpired is presumably Claudia's death: the room is empty; there is a void—"no life." Claudia dies and the "world moves on." One voice embedded in this disembodied description of Claudia's death is Auden's persona in his "Musée des Beaux Arts." "Musée," also embedded, recalls two other texts (Breughel's, *The Fall of Icarus* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*), which Auden uses to defend the world of the everyday against the world of the aesthete. In depicting an Icarus who flies too high and who ends plummeting unnoticed into the ocean, Auden affirms another more ordinary world--dogs going on with their "doggy life," a horse scratching its "innocent behind on the tree." For the ploughman, in Auden's poem, who may have "heard the splash," the fall was not an "important failure," and the "ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." Icarus falling out of the sky simply was not that important to the ploughman who had a field to plough or the shipman who had places to go and tasks to complete. Lively's "the world moves on" carries more than a faint echo of Auden's ship that "sailed calmly on," which, in its use of Breughel, also affirms the ordinary.

Like the history Claudia tells, this final scene is multi-layered. Echoing Auden's "Musée," which affirms the everyday through its allusions to Breughel (to whom Lively frequently alludes), this scene reaffirms what Lively's text has been privileging all along. On the other hand, just as no one pays much mind to Icarus's splash, no one will pay much mind to Claudia's death; the world will simply go calmly on. So even what this text most affirms dissolves, overridden by the disembodied voice that records her absence and the disembodied voice that "starts to read the six o'clock news" (208).

Mary Hurley Moran in her recent book on Lively sees *Moon Tiger*'s conclusion more positively: Claudia's faith in language serves the function of religion, a "miracle of words" that preserves the dead, just as Tom's diary vividly resurrects for Claudia the memory of Tom when she is on her death bed. Moran posits: "And although Claudia herself is extinguished at the end of her novel, she too will continue to exist in the form of words—specifically in the form of *Moon Tiger*, which embodies the consciousness and hence the reality of Claudia Hampton" (125). And indeed, Claudia's memory does resonate. The text ends nevertheless with an unsettling void. A detached voice records nothing of the personal, none of Claudia's personal belongings, which would be imbued with her memory. It records instead that there is a "void," a "stillness of place in which there are only inanimate objects: metal, wood, glass, plastic" (208). The starkness of these final images accentuates not only Claudia's absence, but an indifference to her absence. This listing of inanimate objects parallels Claudia's earlier inventory of her room "bed, chair, table, picture, vase, cupboard, window, curtain," a list Claudia makes in an attempt to recall the word "curtain." Only this time, there is no more Claudia. Like the Breughel-like paradisaical Egyptian scene turned funerary, all dissolves—even what art and language attempt to hold.

This untethering is undeniably countered by Claudia's love for Tom Southern, whom she never stops loving even forty years after his death. When Claudia begins to relay her encounters on the Egyptian front, she announces: "We reach, now, this core" (70). And that core is Tom Southern, whose story occupies, as

Moran notes, the entire middle section of Lively's novel (*Penelope Lively* 118). Also occupying this core, however, is the war and the ramifications of the war—the sand "blowing hard," the "sharp clarity of vision" gone, the horizon invisible, the whole world turning a "lurid pinkish orange" (85). The two visions stand poised: Claudia's love for Tom, which is stabilizing, and the world dissolving in a sandstorm, which is metonymic for Claudia's historical method and for the aesthetics that dissolve into "funerary moments." The disintegrating boundaries, for which the sandstorm is metonymic, are necessary to Lively's reimagined "history of the world." They are necessary to the experimental narrative, which augments the refreshing conceptions about history, philosophy, women, and the plotting of women's desire. Yet Claudia's life, as well as the stories she tells, dissolve like the incense after which this text is named. To Lively's credit, she does not provide an easy solution to this theoretical dilemma that this postmodern vision poses. There is no third solution from which to choose after the binaries collapse, no epiphany to stabilize the previous chaos and uncertainty. Like Halland (of *City of the Mind*), who, in sensing that "everything and everywhere are instantaneous," feels both "trapped and ranging free," one can simply choose in *Moon Tiger* everything and nothing—at the same time. Incense bequeaths rich associative experiences through its smells but it also melds with the air, losing all distinction. It is a paradox that is both liberating and terrifying.

NOTES

1 With the exception of Mary Hurley Moran's work, Lively has received little critical attention.

2 Although many postmodern texts are preoccupied with the processes of history and textuality, it does not follow (as has often been posited) that such markings set off the postmodern text from its predecessors; although these textual features may be exacerbated in the postmodern text, the roots of these experimentations clearly exist in Modernism—Conrad, Joyce, Woolf.

3 Plato's womb-like cave, Descartes's materiality, Hegel's skepticism, Nietzsche's destructive female will (which like nature must be conquered) are only a few examples of the exclusion of women from the light and the truth (which invariably is characterized as masculine).

4 In her critique of Western metaphysics, Irigaray notes that the masculine must speciously disengage itself "from his human double, his female understudy, launching himself into the sky in a philosophical flight, raising his head toward what alone has a real existence. Ideas" (322). In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," in

Book 7 of *The Republic*, the cave in which the prisoners are chained is dark and earthy—womb-like. It is a place of illusion and trickery to which, once escaped, one must not return. The philosopher, associated with the sun, the father, and the pleasures of higher truth, supersedes the pleasures of the cave. By juxtaposition in Plato (and in Western metaphysics in general) that which is associated with the feminine becomes a place of nontruth.

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