

*Jamming the Machinery*

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# *Jamming the Machinery*

Contemporary Australian  
Women's Writing

Alison Bartlett



Association for the Study of Australian Literature

First published 1998 by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature

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Bartlett, Alison, 1961 –.

Jamming the Machinery: contemporary Australian women's writing

Includes index.

ISBN: 0 9587121 2 3

1. Women in literature. 2. Women authors, Australian – 20th century. 3. Australian literature – Women authors – History and criticism. 4. Australian literature – 20th century – History and criticism. I. Association for the Study of Australian Literature. II. Title. (Series: ASAL literary studies).

A820.992870904

Typesetting: Margaret McNally, School of English, University College,  
Australian Defence Force Academy

Printed by the Document Production Centre, ADFA

Cover Design: Flying Fox, Canberra, based on an illustration by Alison Bartlett

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# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ania Walwicz, Margaret Harris (Coombs), Fiona Place, Inez Baranay, Susan Hawthorne, Sue Woolfe and Davida Allen for their generosity in agreeing to be interviewed and then continuing to correspond with me intermittently for what has now been a number of years: their contribution to this project was invaluable.

The research for this book was begun in Townsville at James Cook University, and I want to thank the English Department for their support and especially Dr Gina Mercer for her inspiration and guidance and for taking me to Feminist Collective. Professor Robert Dixon has also played a major supporting role at both James Cook and at the University of Southern Queensland, where I have been able to complete this book. Colleagues at both institutions have provided an intellectual network which is the mainstay of academic research, and I am especially grateful to Dr Gabrielle Watling and Kevin Brennan for their vibrant discussions and friendship. The Association for the Study of Australian Literature performs a vital role in promoting Australian literary networks and I particularly thank the publishing committee for encouraging this project through to publication. A lot of people have made the writing of this book richer for their presence in my life; I especially want to thank Gabby for taking me to the forest and Isobel for coming into my life during the final edit.

Versions of some chapters have appeared in *LiNQ*, *Coppertales*, *ASAL Conference Proceedings 1996*, and *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* edited by Amanda Nettelbeck and Heather Kerr.





# Introduction

In this book I am interested in the ways in which feminist theory and practice intersect, specifically in the relation between contemporary women's writing and feminist theories about women's writing. Do the subjects of women's creative writing coincide with the concerns of feminist theorists? Can the theories be applied to contemporary novels? Do they work? Do the novels include theoretical issues – purposefully? And how might the practices of women writers reflect back on or interrogate the work of theorists? I have chosen the work of seven contemporary Australian women writers to examine these issues, through their relation to French feminist theories of *écriture féminine*. These theories of women's writing have been enthusiastically taken up by many Australian theorists and critics – as well as other writers – but I suggest that there are some national, linguistic and cultural differences that only appear when the theories are applied locally, as I do here with Australian writing. As Hélène Cixous predicts, 'writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned)'.<sup>1</sup>

My understanding of *écriture féminine* comes largely through the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and, to some extent, Julia Kristeva. While undefinable, it is a style of writing marked primarily by its disruption to conventional reading, writing and representational practices as produced through, and supported by, patriarchal values. Luce Irigaray represents such a disruptive strategy not as 'elaborating a new theory of which women would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself'.<sup>2</sup> This metaphor might invoke a mechanical image of jamming a spanner in a machine (give a girl a spanner . . .) but the machinations of patriarchy that Irigaray refers to are, of course, more invisible and insidious, entrenched as they are in our cultural imaginations. As a counter-strategy, *écriture féminine*, it is argued, is theoretically sourced in the bodies of women. Here, the body represents

one aspect of what it ‘means’ to be a woman, but of course our bodies are infinitely variable as are our socio-historical relations and the way that we live through and make meaning of our particular bodies. Texts, however, are produced through the lived practices of being socially positioned as (among other things) women, so those effects will be inscribed in what is written. ‘Writing the body’ therefore plays a significant part in actively inventing new ways for women to speak and write about ourselves as women, rather than through the narrative machinery of patriarchy.

The seven women writers whose texts I have selected to study have all published between 1988 and 1992 and, like myself, they all live in Australia. Our location in and as part of ‘Australia’ has an impact on our practice of reading and writing both fiction and theory. Considering the incorporation of ‘imported’ feminisms, Susan Sheridan writes that Australian feminism ‘has certain indigenous features, notable among them being its capacity to graft those others on to its own growth and at times to produce new species’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Sheridan sees this as a ‘*rewriting* of their discourses in different circumstances’. Susan Hawthorne also regards our position in Australia as an asset in this grafting process in being historically ‘other’ to the traditions of dominating northern hemisphere cultures, which don’t necessarily translate onto an Australian cultural landscape.<sup>4</sup> The women writers here are part of that grafting process insofar as their writing is produced through the cultural conditions of living in Australia and contributes to the body of literature engaged in working through and interrogating feminist theories of women’s writing.

The cultural conditions of living in Australia, however, are not homogeneous and I want to flag at this point that there is an important body of cultural work missing from discussion here, and that is work by Aboriginal women. That I have found very little to connect their increasing oeuvre of writing with French feminist theories is perhaps not so surprising, given the very different cultural formations and material conditions in which, as indigenous people, they live and write in Australia. As Patti Lather argues, ‘our different positionalities affect our reading’<sup>5</sup> and, I would suggest, our writing practices in various ways.

Considering my own position as a writer has also had a profound effect on the way I have chosen to write this text, especially in relation

to the French theories I examine and the Australian writing I read between these covers. Rather than assume a single, linear, consistent and authoritative voice as author, I want my narrative to resound with the many women's voices on which I have drawn to produce this text. As a piece of contemporary Australian women's writing, I want it to reflect the 'different economy' of *écriture féminine* which, Irigaray argues, 'upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse'.<sup>6</sup> The seven chapters which read the seven writers' texts are therefore interspersed by four pieces of more experimental writing, writing that represents my desire to write in a different language, and the pleasures I find in that writing. These sections are also crucial to the performance of *écriture féminine* as those theories can be practically applied to my reading and writing.

A major contribution to the process of this text has been the interviews I conducted with each writer; edited versions of these therefore form an important part of this book. Because I regard contemporary women writers as critical thinkers, whose texts practise and interrogate feminist theory, I felt it important to interview the writers concerned to record their theoretical perspectives. By including their knowledges I am able to position their thinking alongside the academic signatures of published reviewers, critics, theorists and other commentators, including myself. I use excerpts from the interviews as points of intersection with my narratives on their work, and they were also given the opportunity to comment on what I have written. The writers' comments are not conventionally introduced or referenced but are indicated by a different font, to differentiate them visually from my own text and to situate them as interventions rather than as a part of my argument. The 'Polylogue' begins the book by using fragments of these interviews, arranged into common themes that the writers all discuss. They largely fall into topics like how 'feminism' affects them and their writing, their attitudes to 'theory' and also their views on the conditions of writing as a woman in Australia at the start of the 1990s. I had trouble fitting the quite passionate responses to these subjects into the more academic chapters, even though in some ways they represent the central concerns of my project. Representing them as a kind of a play, however, allowed me to highlight their common and particular responses and also to

introduce the writers as individual characters being staged in this book.

The work of Ania Walwicz begins the analyses 'proper', introducing some of the fundamental ideas on language and subject formation with reference to the theories of Julia Kristeva. I argue that Walwicz's non-English speaking background intensifies her speaking position, and that her novel, *red roses*, especially problematises some of Kristeva's ideas on the maternal and the semiotic. This densely theorised chapter is followed by a ficto-critical piece which theorises in an alternative mode by attempting to 'flesh out' the ways in which *écriture féminine* might be practised. In this way, 'Reading Bodies', imagines the interwoven relations between theory and practice, and reader and writer.

The next section examines four novels which are concerned with representations of specific women's bodies in their contribution to theories of writing the body. In Chapter Five, Margaret Coombs's text, *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing*, narrates the dilemmas of a woman with 'post-natal depression'. In doing so, I argue, Coombs raises important theoretical issues about how women's bodies are positioned by and produced through medical discourses, including psychiatry. This analysis is then continued through Fiona Place's novel, *Cardboard*, the narrator of which writes her experience of anorexia nervosa into a recovery story, partly due to psychiatry. My dilemma in this discussion is how to account for the romance plot that appears to enable such a story. The importance of new storylines is a vital part of the ensuing discussion of Inez Baranay's *Between Careers*, a novel which takes up 'romance' in a quite different way. Using a narrator who works as a prostitute, Baranay problematises the linear and climactic storyline of the romance genre and its parallels to the heterosexual relations expected of women. The patriarchal structure of storylines is further challenged by Susan Hawthorne's *The Falling Woman*, a text which explores alternative perspectives on epilepsy through its lesbian narrator(s). Located specifically in an Australian desert, Hawthorne's text is also shown to question Irigaray's possible biases through a discussion of constituting desire. While each novel is traced through its representation of a woman's body and how meanings are made of that body, it is through the particularities of the bodies they write that theoretical implications emerge.

The ways in which desire is constituted becomes an increasingly important site for interrogation and, sometimes, dismantling at this

stage. Slightly uncomfortable at my tenuous position in discussing lesbian aesthetics, I move on in the next section to ruminate about definitions of desire and how they might be reconceived. 'Writing Desire' is also about the implications of redefining desires. The next two novels also pivot on notions of desire: about women whose desire is to be a visual artist, and how this desire is complicated by the politics of representation and the conditions of production for women. Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman* charts how a woman's body forecloses on the options available in the traditional art world. Woolfe's artist-narrator is intent on living up to, and then discarding, the desires of her father before she can tell her own story. Davida Allen, on the other hand, centres her novel on the desires of the artist Vicki. *Close to the Bone: The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*, represents a woman as wife, lover, mother of four, teacher, daughter and artist, and how these identities inform each other. The fairly conventional heterosexual desires of this narrative impel some discussion of 'feminist heterosexuality', a topic many feminists find distinctly uncomfortable in theory, if not in practice.

The final chapters bring some self-reflexivity to the limits of practising *écriture féminine*. Written in the form of a speech, 'Performing Bodies' plays on the discursive act of performing feminist theory, especially one that involves the apparent paradox of theorising bodies. The conclusion is then tentative about concluding; it problematises endings and looks forward to many more beginnings. Then begin the interviews with each of the seven writers. These are edited versions but they nevertheless maintain a sense of the dynamics and tone of each conversation. While all the writers were dubious about their spontaneous and transient thoughts being enshrined in print, I regard these primary sources as valuable, documenting the writers as often quite formidable theorists, rather than as *idiotes savantes* as Walwicz and Coombs feel they are still perceived.

Finally, I hope this body of work gives as much reading pleasure as I have taken in writing it and that it will, as Elizabeth Grosz argues for feminist theory, 'produce new kinds of questions and different sorts of answer[s]',<sup>7</sup> new reading pleasures and writing desires.



# One

## *Polylogue: Writers Theorising, a Performance*



## **The Characters**

ANIA Walwicz: small but hugely animated with her cat, Mr Boopee, beside her, and a cup of herbal tea.

SUE Woolfe: apprehensive and excited, with a glass of riesling which gradually relaxes and enthuses her.

MARGARET Coombs: timid and very nervous but passionately intense. A cup of tea in front of her.

SUSAN Hawthorne: lean and nervous and speedy and intense. A short black coffee.

INEZ Baranay: apprehensive and slightly suspicious but willing to see what develops. A pot of strong coffee.

FIONA Place: lively, bouncy, boppy, younger than the others. Glass of orange juice.

DAVIDA Allen: a typewriter in front of her rather than paper and pens.

ALISON Bartlett: very self conscious and nervous, but also feels that she should be mediating and encouraging. A glass of blood-red wine for her.

Cixous, Irigaray, *et al* ... there in theory.

## **The Scene: Post Dinner Party.**

*Centre Stage, a large round table seating ANIA, SUE, MARGARET, SUSAN, FIONA, INEZ, DAVIDA and ALISON. It is set with paper and pens in the place of plates and cutlery, so that everyone can see each other and dialogue can spring across the table. Most have drinks in front of them.*

*The stage should be simple but not stark. The back wall could have photographs or slide images of women writers, or images of women's art (Judy Chicago? Judy Watson? Davida Allen? local women artists?) to signify the differing and shared heritages of those in this performance.*



All the characters in this play are fictional but may resemble real people. What those people have said about the experiences of writing as women draws strongly on personal, lived experience as well as using feminist theoretical ideas and has been taken out of context for the (usual academic) purposes of this enactment.

## ACT ONE

*Lights up, centre stage.*

- ANIA:                Hmm. I always worry about saying anything about my work because later on, you know, I think, ‘Oh what did I say?’ Or I disagree with myself very strongly. But that’s the best way to think of things, that one can change one’s mind.
- ALISON:            Well what about we start with your reading practices. Have you read any good books lately? What sort of books do writers read? [*Pause*]
- MARGARET:        Celine’s *Journey to the End of the Night*.
- ANIA:                Was reading Dumas lately, *The Black Tulip*.
- SUSAN:              Janette Turner Hospital’s *Isobars* collection.
- FIONA:              Jeanette Winterson. I read *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. But I also like reading stuff like the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian Financial Review*, business magazines, sport magazines.
- SUE:                  My all time favourite writer is Marguerite Duras and *The Lover*. I’m reading her *Summer Rains* at the moment.
- ALISON:              What about you, Davida?
- DAVIDA:             *The Mint Lawn* by Gillian Mears. It was given to me by the author, whose sister is an artist and likes my work. Like answering your questions, Alison, I feel obliged to read this novel.

ALISON: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you, Davida. I thought our reading habits might give each other some indication of where we're coming from at the moment, and give us all a chance to start talking. I've just been reading a book of Robyn Davidson's travel essays which were really interesting, especially the ones about Alice Springs, as I grew up there. Oh, and Jackie French's *Backyard Self-Sufficiency* – it makes me want to go out and create jungles of gardens. What about you, Inez? What kind of books are you into?

INEZ: Um, I don't know what, see this is one of the things – how do I describe the sort of books? I read the kind of books I like to read and that covers a whole range of things. I tend to read a lot of fiction, I probably like it most, and biographies. Now the thing I read recently was Colette's *The Vagabond*. It's wonderful. It re-awoke my adolescent passion for Colette so I've been reading a whole bunch of her books again lately which has been wonderful. But a lot of the time I'm restricted by what falls into my lap. I can't afford to buy books lately.

ALISON: Mmm, cost is a limiting factor in access to books, isn't it? Obviously I use the university library as a resource, but I'm curious about how you might come across feminist theories in your reading – how does theory circulate outside of those institutional walls?

FIONA: I did a creative writing MA. I went to U.T.S. and I did my Lacan, I did my Cixous, I did my Irigaray, all that sort of stuff.

ALISON: So were you conscious of those theories when you were writing your novel Fiona?

FIONA: I hadn't been informed consciously by any theories, by anything. I mean I didn't even know about post-structuralism, didn't even know who Derrida was. I wouldn't have known any of that when I wrote the

novel. Obviously, later on, I can see how a lot of the stuff that I'm saying in that is very, very post-structural. There's a whole lot of images and connections, but they came later. I mean, it was a very gut reaction, natural, instinct stuff. So yeah, I've taken all that theory. A lot of it I've found really interesting but now, it gives me a sense that I want to go off and write.

INEZ: I don't have any truck with universities. I went to university at a time when the English school was extremely conservative, a time when there was a clash between the old conservatives who were like really – patriarchal is the word we'd use now – and the people who were responding to all those exciting ideas who were around at the time, in the sixties. I was much more interested in the sex, drugs and rock'n'roll of that era. But I didn't see that reflected anywhere in the way the classes were conducted or in what we were reading. Not only what we were reading but how it was talked about. I had to get over it. It was like, you know, you had to grow up and leave home.

ALISON: So you haven't come across any feminist theories in regard to writing?

INEZ: Well I probably have but they're put in disguise in novels I suppose, or in life itself, or something. A lot of these things are just names to me and they've been on my Must-Read-This-One-Day list, but haven't fallen into my lap. So, not really. I mean, where do you? You have to go to university don't you, to come across that thing?

FIONA: For me, I would hope that I'm dealing with a lot of the ideas that the theorists are interested in, but for me the only way that I can deal with them is in fiction, and I hope that most people can read it in my fiction. I'm not sure that a lot of people do.

MARGARET: Well, I think it's extremely hard to say precisely how theory influences your writing, you know. I sort of guess, I think that if all this stuff has been fed into you that it's likely to change the way you write and affect the way you write.

FIONA: I mean, yeah, obviously you can't help but be informed by it. I mean the paradox was *Cardboard* was informed by it anyway. So yeah, obviously I've found a lot of those ideas quite useful and interesting, but I think I'll also move on from them. But yeah they'll always be there.

MARGARET: I'm certainly interested in trying to convey identity as fluid and the complexity, you know the idea that as soon as I articulate 'I', I am no longer that me – I mean, identity is a process, not a fixed essence. And that, what Foucault said about it, I mean I know he can be a sexist, hopeless, old creature, but, you know, I'm really interested in what he says about the relationship of power and knowledge.

ANIA: I am aware of the theoretical background too, but I'm not sort of coming to it from some sort of inquiry or research. Once I come across books like this I absorb them but I am not getting the idea of the way to write from those books. There is a difference. I don't have to have direct acknowledgment of sources, too, which an academic does.

FIONA: I find it extremely difficult to deal with them in academic language. I just find that so hard. And yet, I understand them in academic language and I go 'yeah, yeah, yeah.' But then my only way of talking about them is through fiction.

INEZ: Then I did go to university kind of through you, Alison. I read some of the theory that you sent me, and it was a delight and astonishment: language stretched to

express familiar thoughts. In those essays, as in what follows, there was much 'stuff I recognise'.

MARGARET: I've been very interested in Liz Grosz's work, Terry Threadgold, Hélène Cixous and I've certainly been sort of exposed to part of Irigaray's work but I'm much, much less familiar with Julia Kristeva's work, as far as, you know, like maybe I've had it in mediated form from other people but Cixous and Irigaray are the ones that, I suppose, I've admired.

SUE: Yes, I have a friend who was always passing on articles which I would skim and dip into. And from them I cobbled together some theory.

SUSAN: What disturbs me about some of the French feminist theorists is that sometimes they're said to be the first to come up with that idea, when in fact a number of American radical feminists had come up with very similar ideas about five or ten years earlier. So what I was drawing on in my writing was much more my experience of the women's movement in the 1970s and the sorts of theories which were floating in the air but which were not written down at that time. And also reading from the States in particular about women's literature. And it was only then, after that, that I came to the French stuff. And they seemed to be saying very similar things.

DAVIDA: I am not aware of Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray. Funny really, I have Peta, my 19 year old daughter, who is doing all this stuff at the A.N.U.! Of course she won't ever mention her dumb mother in any of her essays on Feminism! But she knows all these names you know. I feel old and stupid. But there's too much I can do that you and Peta can't and so for my own sanity I just can't allow myself to get upset about what I don't know!

- SUE: What happens when I read theory is that just a phrase creates such a whirlpool of images that I want to just go away and think and dwell on that and I don't want any more. There's so much in that writing that's so full of poignant phrases. A friend gave me an article, and it started 'Mother with your milk I have sucked ice'. Do you know that one? Wow. And that kept me writing for the last four months, that phrase. I just found it so, so rich. So full of meaning.
- SUSAN: I remember in the late 70s there was a lot of discussion of the idea of 'Is there a female aesthetic?' And this was before the French feminist stuff was available in English translation, and I don't read French. And I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead and other friends, other women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a woman's novel could be different.
- ALISON: So if, as Susan says, theory follows life practices, do you think it adds anything to your writing practice?
- SUE: I'm informed by the ideas that really hit home and they change my life, and by changing my life and my attitudes they certainly affect my writing. But in no sense am I doing an illustrated Irigaray. But, for example, Elizabeth Grosz, talking about the mother as a lost territory – that we look back through the mother as a lost territory, and that's all – that phrase struck home.
- ANIA: I like the psychoanalytic approach to literary work, and the feminist, well, how my work would be seen as babble, and the female speech. But the relationship between me and theory is much more indirect than your relationship between me and theory Alison. But I still absorb it but it comes out in a different way. And it doesn't have to be a direct relationship. It's curious how authors are seen as always naive, as though they didn't know about basic theoretical things. Why is that?

MARGARET: I do feel there is a problem from the point of view of the writer like me, that there tend to be a handful of writers sort of very self-consciously interested in theory and who are mostly working within the academy and so sort of don't actually need to make a separate reputation outside of it. They've sort of got a ready-made power base. And on the other hand the vast majority of Australian writers seem to me to be extremely hostile to theory and, you know, well, sort of irritatingly naive and some of them are technically brilliant and so it's terribly frustrating to me when these people can write beautifully and not be aware of what their work is doing, what their work is, that it is sexist or you know supportive of values and power systems that are really odious.

ALISON: Yes, I can see what you mean.

MARGARET: And yet, it's quite difficult because on the other hand I feel a great deal of kinship with that group of people whenever I'm confronting the heavy-duty academic who doesn't understand how hard it is to acquire those technical skills and survive in a literary market place where the prevailing ideas are very romantic.

ANIA: That's the old idea of looking at the author as a sort of *idiote savante*, you know, they have this marvellous talent but they're sort of idiots, or mad.

SUSAN: I went to the States for six months as an 'Adjunct' in the Women's Studies Department at San Diego. A lot of writers actually read in academic areas as well and there are numbers of academics who work in writing fields. So I don't think the divisions are anywhere near as stark as they're often made out to be and, I guess, I work in a range of different fields. I write academic papers from time to time and I write reviews of books and I think that that's an important part of the work that I do because it's important to feed that critical

work back into the literary community and into the feminist community. It's like those Venn diagrams that you have at school, where you have a sort of circle and there are various parts of the literary world that are not overlapping with one another.

MARGARET: I feel that I sort of don't get enough support from the academic critics and that I've severely alienated the mainstream people, partly by trying to be a mediator between those two worlds and bringing those ideas to these people out here.

DAVIDA: I only hope to God the simplicity of my work is not analysed into complexity beyond its reason to be born.

MARGARET: I really enjoy reading theory and there's a part of me that would happily be a philosopher and, of course, you know, this is another thing; I mean I know I could be a philosopher, a feminist theorist. I know it. And especially in the last three years or so I've put an enormous amount of effort into reading and learning this sort of stuff and I sometimes go to academic things where I know a lot more of that sort of stuff than a lot of people who have nice comfortable jobs, as tutors, if not lecturers, do. It does sometimes tempt me away from writing, partly because I guess I can see that theorists get taken so much more seriously.

SUSAN: I think that writers of fiction and poetry and the like have also contributed a lot to the development of critical theory because it's the writers who actually do it before the critics realise it's been done.

MARGARET: I've sort of self-educated myself to a point where, you know, I can do that stuff and feel I know what I'm doing, but I can't get it taken seriously because I haven't got the right credentials or I'm not in the right institution.



- ANIA: I feel that I can have more of a voice now because the author's voice is invited back again, because of creative writing becoming a subject at universities. That's the difference. At Melbourne University I gave a lecture recently. Suddenly I appeared like a living textbook!
- MARGARET: Someone I admire in the academic world is Terry Threadgold – that lecture I gave at Sydney University was at her invitation. She's prepared to, you know, expose her students to actual practising writers and try to set up some kind of dialogue. She takes risks, those sorts of risks and that's really important encouragement to a writer like me.
- SUE: Mmm. Well I read bits of critique in the academy with horror. No terror is the word. Terror. Because I don't fit in. I often read articles by critics who suggest that we should be writing about such and such, for example about women who are victorious, and we shouldn't be thinking about the struggle. And I think yes, this is right. But when I'm alone with myself and my writing what emerges – what *has* to emerge – is what I feel most deeply about. That probably comes from a pretty painful source. But that's what I *must* write. I am speechless when I think about what I should do. I agree there are things that desperately need to be done, particularly in women's writing. The fact is, I can only do what I can do. And, that's the reason for my terror.
- ALISON: Yes, I must admit to feeling a certain amount of terror as well! But while I'm consciously operating within the academic framework, you feel excluded from it, Margaret? Do you think writers see the academy as hostile?
- MARGARET: Yes, it does tend to be suspicion, fear and hostility. I mean I thought, especially in 'Protect me from what I want', I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have

a rigid, linear argument, sort of stripped of all metaphors and so on and so forth. And, and I sort of think that that's good. But what happens is that unless you can somehow *announce yourself* to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be *from somewhere* and all that, it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a 'proper academic essay'.

ANIA: Yes, and the creative genius comes out and they don't know what they're doing and someone has to elucidate it. That was the old framework, the theoretical framework to begin with, when I was at university it was like that.

SUE: I feel criticism is quite arbitrary.

INEZ: It is my impression, though, that certain writers, and they tend to be female, are more willing to expose/display/admit their own position from which they review and respond to the book in question. I am sorry when a female critic 'playfully' calls for the destruction of books that go on excessively about menstruation and not only because I think she means me.

SUE: Yes, yes. One of the things that propelled me through *Painted Woman* and still propels me is this incredible loneliness that we're not known as females, that we're not known in any way, that there are no stories about us.

INEZ: I love to see women's truths in writing, and menstruation fascinates me as I was brought up to deal with it competently and then considerately to ignore it, but I believe our lunar/lunatic cycles must be expressed in order to feminise the world, which is something I also kind of believe in at present. Speak the unspeakable, find words for what is not said. I love it when I see something that does that.

SUE: Like, when you think, what's it like to be a mother? I'll pop to the library and get a few books about mothers.

I don't mean, how to mother, I mean the imaginative experience of mothering. There aren't stories about this. And it's easy to think, My god, I'm all alone. I'm the only person in the world who's a ramshackle mother who can't stop being an artist and everybody else doesn't need stories like this, that's why there are no stories. Or sexuality. I think, how do I *feel* sexuality when all the stories seem to look at sex from the man's point of view? How do I feel sexual when I haven't got a whole web of stories inside me about how other people who are women feel about sex?

DAVIDA: I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy because it's as much a part of life as anything else (probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche). It was easy to write about it, as easy as the imagery of the poohy nappies.

SUE: I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there are a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, 'Well, the game is really not for me'. And that compels me to write, that feeling that I want to tell.

ALISON: Well, I'm really glad that you agreed to join in and tell some of your stories here, Sue.

SUE: I think it's lovely you should bother. No, I mean that.

MARGARET: Yes, writers really need that kind of work, that kind of support and that kind of interest and approach and I think, you know, it's a good thing you're doing. I like what you said about your project in your letter.

INEZ: Because of the way you wrote about it was so interesting I didn't feel as threatened or whatever as I would be if some of the reviewers had wanted to see me – but

they wouldn't you see. I just thought 'Oh, what a lark! And doesn't this sound interesting, her approach. Look, it might be fun to hear about.' And now that I've seen it in practice, I know it works! How do you do that? That's not how they wrote essays when I was at university, thank heavens.

ALISON: Well I think it's important to listen to women like yourselves as skilled professionals. So often it's the theorist and critic who are given greater legitimacy than fiction writers, but in demonstrating how writing – like all of yours – works through theoretical ideas and feminist issues, I'm trying to argue that writers of fiction put those theories into practice: put them to the test, if you like.

SUE: I keep trying to read about post-structuralism, I feel it is a duty, like visiting relatives. I find it – the language – very difficult but I struggle with that.

ALISON: That language issue is often alienating, isn't it?

FIONA: I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed within phallocentric discourse. But no, I didn't have that sense, like, as a woman not being able to find her own words. No, I didn't. Not in the particular way where the words were difficult. But that doesn't mean to say that I think language is easy for women.

SUE: I fight with words all the time. I mean, a simple phrase can take two pots of tea to think through. But I feel obliged to find it. As if it needs inventing for the first time. I feel a tremendous sense of compulsion to write about a woman's life as meticulously and as truthfully as I can. So I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic trivia and metaphysical truths, because that's, to me,

how women's minds work. We are talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with a lettuce the next.

INEZ: In knowing quite clearly that form and content are one, that a woman who knows her body as a woman writes from that knowledge, and similar things not articulated, I am helped by my study of yoga: it is a language that makes sense of such things for me, not only the writings of yoga but its practice. It makes me practise what I work for in my writing: that attention, that constant refining, that precision. And intelligence that is diffuse in the body. A yoga instruction might be to bring intelligence to the big toe. And you find you can. And your intelligence is then expanded.

ALISON: It's like making new discoveries, isn't it? And it's amazing how our bodies relate in so many ways to our writing, too.

SUE: I think, in a way, it's wonderful to be a woman writing at this particular moment of this century because we're exotic to ourselves. And any little exploration we can make feels, well feels to the writer, exciting.

SUSAN: I think that women at the moment are experimenting more with form and with content, and style and with genre – the whole thing. I think it's also happening amongst other groups, like, black writers, indigenous writers etcetera, people coming from cultures which are not currently in dominance. I think that part of the reason that's happening is because we haven't had a voice, and the old forms don't necessarily suit us. When you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read and you've

got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice.

ALISON: I'm glad you've brought that up, Susan. I find contemporary Australian writing by women really exciting too, but I often wonder if that's because it's produced through cultural conditions which are familiar to me, and that's the reason I like it. What do you think?

SUSAN: I find it difficult to find the same kind of experimentation with ideas and form and style as we get here in Australia and to some extent also in New Zealand. And I think that's part of that whole thing of being part of the dominant culture or not, and that the problem of the American women's movement is that, like it or not, they are part of a dominant culture and they forget, they don't know what the other side sees. And the ones who are writing and doing different things in the States are not from the white population. They're usually Black or Chicano or Native American. Amongst those groups there is some exciting work happening. So I think that Australian writing still has a long way to go in getting adequately recognised for the quality of the work that's coming out.

ALISON: That awareness of cultural positioning is increasingly important, isn't it? Can I ask if you have any political agenda when you write?

SUSAN: One of the things which interests me is a sort of mixing of genres, and the epilepsy theme. That and I guess the point of a lesbian perspective on things as well.

SUE: We all are our experience because of the stories told to us. I imagine that my little daughter goes around with gradually more and more complex stories in her head about who she is. So my political agenda is to try to tell stories that make us know who we are.

INEZ: Yes, we all want to tell what we don't hear told.

ANIA: Obviously I was brought up as a female, or was seen as a female, was told that I was female, although I was brought up in a very unusual way; I wasn't really told I was a female because, I was told in a way by my father, I was called by a boy's name. Very odd. So my sense of myself was always sort of a transvestite sense of myself. My view of gender has always been a form of parade of gender.

MARGARET: Well one of the things I sort of thought that I'd like to make a point of, is saying what a huge difference it makes to me that I am a mother of two children. And, I think being a mother, at least in our culture, you know, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't. And that's sort of made a big difference to me as a writer. For instance I've spent the past twenty years, or the years before I was actually trying to write full-time, say ten years, I was spending that time being a mother rather than, say, doing a PhD or being a lecturer at a university and so it's very much harder if that lump of your life was spent being a mother, which of course in our culture is to be sort of a nobody. And from that life you don't bring a whole network of friends who are useful in your career as a writer and so forth. So, you know, I think you'll find that there are still very few women writers who are mothers.

DAVIDA: I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants! Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written when my fourth child was at school. I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!

SUE: Yes. I feel deeply that there are no real mothering stories. There are a lot of stories about good and bad mothers and negligent mothers and nurturing mothers but

there are no stories about how mothers live in themselves, and how they feel about their lives. That sort of lack I suddenly realised when I became a mother and I want to write about that because when I looked about for mothering stories I felt there were none.

MARGARET: I mean it's part of how the body affects writing because, you know, motherhood is the ultimate isn't it, the consequence of having a female body as it were. I get very impatient with feminists who are unaware of the complexities of class, money and motherhood.

SUSAN: I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the 70s and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women.

MARGARET: I got involved in Redress Press, which was a fairly small feminist publishing group back in the early eighties, and because I'd been an isolated mother, it gave me a sense of – an awareness of – my own competence, you know, opportunities to discover from experience that I could do things, all sorts of things.

SUSAN: And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work.

FIONA: When I was younger I was one of these people who just simply said, I couldn't understand feminism. I don't understand: I've got jobs, I've done this, I've done that, I've wanted to do things – why do people whinge about being women? I just couldn't understand at all. And then once I got politicised, I realised.

ANIA: My writing stems from the eighties which was the beginning of a collection of women's work and it was feminist awareness and readings that were set up by women, so inevitably my work was produced within the context of feminism right from the beginning. And



I think that shaped it – absolutely, even if it shaped it indirectly in that the work was looked at as women's work, because before the eighties that wasn't even done. And I actually started to write then. So in a way I'm a product of feminist criticism indirectly.

DAVIDA: Subversive? Feminist? I tend to shy away from these words as firstly I do not understand their current meaning, and also, I simply had a story to tell.

INEZ: Feminist of course, though I will say 'depending what you mean by the word' as alas it is used to mean e.g. humourless man-hating separatist (which I am at times!). What a problematic troublesome word – but let's use it, I say, don't let it be taken away. It's like 'God' isn't it? 'Do you believe in God' as I think it was Carl Sagan was asked on the radio the other day, and replied something like, 'definition? Not the white bearded patriarch in the sky, but if as Einstein said ...'

DAVIDA: I am perhaps a true feminist in the specific sense of the word: to believe the woman is as good as any man, to be truly liberated in the household and work place and not be inferior.

FIONA: I guess I'm not an absolute and utter disciple, but I'm definitely fascinated by what people have to say about women writers and how they write about space and how they write about gender and all of those sorts of things. I find all those ideas very interesting and I would use them, but I'm not going to expound one particular theory. I'd rather question them, challenge them, or see where they fall down. I would hope that my book deals with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does interesting things with them. That's what I would hope to do most. That you can

then use it as a further understanding of what the French feminists are on about. Because I think they themselves have many contradictions and many areas that they don't explain or many things that they can't talk about.

MARGARET: The hardest thing about the isolation of the job is that you're just not surrounded daily by people who think what you're doing is a worthwhile way to be spending your time.

SUE: I like talking about the process. Part of it is that writing feels like a sort of madness. And it's comforting to talk, particularly to other women writers, to see if they share the madness because then there's a sense that if many of you are mad then it has its own form of normality. Writing to me is actually like talking. White paper is wonderful. It's a great friend, blank paper. Life seems to me to be composed of people saying something with a whole depth of silence going on in between. I'm fascinated by people's chatter, and the depths of their thinking between the chatter.

*[Lights fade to darkness, lingering on the images on the back wall. Voices fade but continue to 'chatter'.]*

### Acknowledgments

Quotations have been liberally taken from the following sources:

Fiona Place interview, January 1993, and following correspondence.

Sue Woolfe interview, January 1993, and following correspondence.

Margaret Coombs interview, January 1993, and following correspondence.

Ania Walwicz interview, September 1992.

Susan Hawthorne interview, September 1992, and following correspondence.

Inez Baranay interview, April 1993, and following correspondence.

Davida Allen interview by correspondence, December 1992.

## Two

*Translations: Maternal Debt in the  
Language of Ania Walwicz's red roses*

## French Feminist Theories of Language

Language has been a critical site in discussions of the politics of women's writing but it was not until the works of French feminist theorists were translated in the early 1980s that a different set of debates – informed by psychoanalytic theory – was made available to English speakers. Marks and de Courtivron's anthology, *New French Feminisms*, constructs for us a collection of those debates which includes Xavière Gauthier's (1974) rally for women to speak as women, to make audible what is left in the holes of discourse:

As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the (1977) manifesto of the editorial collective of *Questions féministes* opposes the desire to privilege a women's language, especially one that might locate itself 'outside' of masculine discourse. The collective also defends the use of theoretical analysis against charges of its masculinist elitism and inaccessible jargon:

We are only playing the oppressor's game if we deprive ourselves of knowledge and conceptual tools because he has used them before us ... there is no good reason to reject as 'masculine and oppressive' a certain form of conceptual discourse and thus give men the exclusive control over discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Marks and de Courtivron also include samples of work by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, theorists whose work has arguably become representative of 'French feminist theory' for English speakers and on whose work I largely draw in my discussions of *écriture féminine* as practised in Australia by contemporary women writers.

While Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray might be yoked together under the banner of French feminist theory, their ideas on *écriture féminine* are as polyvalent as the debates brought together by Marks and de Courtivron in *New French Feminisms*. Kristeva regards women as always marginalised from signifying practice, so that 'language seems to be seen from a foreign land'.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Kristeva argues that, as a product of their position

in the symbolic order, women always have a negative function: either artificially (and unsuccessfully) to mimic the poetic language mastered by Mallarmé, Artaud and Joyce, or to retreat into silence.<sup>4</sup>

For Cixous, all writing is 'marked' by the male or female body through which it is produced, but language is constructed through 'a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy' which privileges masculine values. The erasure of the value of women's writing is all the more reprehensible for Cixous, as 'writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures'.<sup>5</sup>

Cixous's outrage is matched in passion by Irigaray's vision of *écriture féminine*. Her analysis of the masculine investment in language calls for

an examination of the *operation of the 'grammar'* of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences*.<sup>6</sup>

Irigaray's promotion of female specificity brings into operation the discursive formation of women's bodies, and in particular our sexual bodies, as sites of creativity. In her attempt to break down the power relations inherent in language and its alienation from (women's) corporeality, Irigaray mobilises the figure of women's two (labial) lips, which are contiguous, to advocate multiplicity and ambiguity, to discredit the binary oppositions fundamental to patriarchal thought, and to stress the tactile element she sees as so important in keeping 'woman in touch with herself'. This plurality and fluidity comes to represent qualities of women's writing (through our relation to and construction by language), whereby "She" is indefinitely other in herself:

This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ... not to mention her language, in which 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning ... For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself ... What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*.<sup>7</sup>

Irigaray calls not only for women to speak (and write), but for them to

be heard, not so much for a new language, as for a subversion of the existing language so that it becomes overloaded, marked by excess, which unleashes the heterogeneity of meanings, the ambiguities and the assumptions which lie silenced.

### **Acts of Reading**

As writing which foregrounds its use of language, the work of Ania Walwicz is particularly relevant to discussions of language – not only in its writing but also in its reading. Her ‘style’ echoes many of Irigaray’s points in suggesting women’s relation to language. Refusing the ‘operations of grammar’ and syntactic codes which hold our language together, Walwicz forces her reader to actively participate in the act of constructing meaning from language.

It’s demanding of the reader. They have to engage themselves with the text. They have to participate in the formation of the text. (Ania Walwicz)

This act of constructing meaning is foregrounded by constantly disrupting and de-familiarising language. The processes of reading and writing become writ large, in effect making visible the relations between signifier and signified and their cultural mediation. This contrasts with conventional practices of reading and writing which privilege content, often assuming that language is a straightforward medium of communication.

I do involve them in this particular experience in which they themselves have to engage with the text actively and most reading is seen as passive sort of entertainment, escapism. Here I’m doing the opposite: confrontation. (Ania Walwicz)

This can be quite an unsettling experience for readers. Commentators often find it difficult even positioning Walwicz’s work within accustomed categories; conforming neither to prose nor poetry in the usual meaning of the terms, it is often described as prose/poetry or prose clusters. Reviewers of her work often include in their responses anger, impatience, frustration and exasperation at the difficulties and demands placed on them as readers. Ivor Indyk advises that *boat* ‘is not for the

faint-hearted. It is often difficult and exasperating'. Rosemary Sorensen records her 'frustration' and occasional 'anger' and 'impatience', and Barbara Giles finds that the works' 'unvarying similarity of style, their tension, compression, is threatening to the reader'. Betraying his helpless frustration, Imre Saluszinsky is reduced to parodic ridicule in order to 'review' for a national newspaper the presence of Walwicz's work in an edition of *Southerly*.<sup>8</sup>

It's not everyone's cup of tea, this form of writing or this form of reading. (Ania Walwicz)

I would like to read her radical use of form and language as part of a political and theoretical agenda, but it is something she attributes to the influence of the European *avant garde* tradition rather than any ideological basis. She nominates as her main influences German Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, citing Joyce, Kafka, Strindberg, Stein, Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Breton and Dickens.<sup>9</sup> She also draws on automatic writing, a technique associated with those early twentieth-century art movements, and which corresponded with the popularising of psychology and Freud's theories in their relation to accessing the unconscious.

### **Multicultural Politics**

As a non Anglo-Celtic woman writer her literary play with fluency is significant in theoretical and political contexts, but Walwicz repeatedly resists this positioning:

the *avant garde* area, to me that seems a lot more flattering and what I really want to do because I've never consciously set out to be multicultural. No, no. That was something that was said about me, so it's a form of gossip. But I did set out to be an *avant garde* author. (Ania Walwicz)

Her deconstruction of language as a strategy of radical resistance is also largely de-politicised when Walwicz states that her aim is more akin to the modernist project of revealing actual states of emotion:

I am reworking language and taking it apart, slicing the top layer off it, peeling it away and revealing the subconscious and unconscious levels of language ... It appears that I am

producing this dismembered language, but in fact I am producing language which is closer to the actual process of feeling and thinking.<sup>10</sup>

Her 'dis-membered' (or castrated?) language might still have more relation to her position as a woman (and a woman with a non-English speaking background) rather than, or as well as, her identification with an *avant garde* tradition. Despite resisting a cultural position in terms of ethnicity, gender, class or anything else, Walwicz has nevertheless experienced the effects of such positioning in relation to her writing and her presence as a writer:

Because my form of writing is so fragmented there can be a sort of belief that I actually speak in this way or function in this way. I would be unable to function, but interesting isn't it? (Ania Walwicz)

Despite resistance, it is as difficult to escape having cultural positions imposed on us as it is to recognise how their influences have informed our knowledge of ourselves. Sneja Gunew argues that 'Both women and migrants internalise the process whereby the culture constructs them, and it requires a great deal of self-conscious analysis before they are able to step (and only ever in part) outside these constructs'.<sup>11</sup> In response to such cultural attitudes, Gunew felt impelled to change the terms of her critical area from Migrant writing to non Anglo-Celtic writing, 'since within Australia, Migrant connotes an inability to speak English'.<sup>12</sup> In 'no speak', Walwicz parodies this perception of migrants by playing on the idea of 'broken English'.<sup>13</sup> In this piece, breaking the structures of the English language does not reduce the ability of the speaker to be heard and understood by readers. The repetition of the words 'i no speak english sorry' constantly erupts between a series of questions for directions – 'where is john street' – and the practice of naming as it might be learnt at school, learning to speak *this* language rather than *the* language.

People actually believed that I wrote like I do because of insufficient grasp of the English language! (Ania Walwicz)



Walwicz's engagement with this issue is registered in her writing which is concerned with naming. *boat* contains a large number of pieces concerned with learning to name in English. The poem, 'boats', begins with the importance of pronunciation, of the sound of the enunciation to make meaning clear: 'say oat be oat be say boat she said exactly do correctly ... i say boat like bolt learn how to say oat be'. Learning how to say the word invokes the memory of a father boat-builder (as the Law of the Father builds words like boats), of a boat journey 'to futurelands from badlands' filled with the terror of not being able to swim, having to be rescued, of an office cleaning job where there are pictures of boats on the walls. The internalisation of the word and its properties, 'i'm a boat and i float' is further destabilised by the ensuing pieces, which take the word boat along both logical and absurd paths of association, scattering the central word/image into diverse dimensions. The speaker's own boat-building enterprise here appropriates the signifier 'boat' and fills it to the brim with her own meanings. Overturning the act of naming, she takes the name and ascribes to it a whole spectrum of associated emotions, colours and experiences.

At the end of the series of boat writing is a piece entitled 'boat show', which charts the painting of ten boats. The final boat is gold: 'my gold boat supports me it carry my show for forth it's on cover of now i sail'. It is literally 'on cover': there is a reproduction of a painting by Walwicz of a gold boat on the cover of this 'boat show'. Ironically in Australia's patriotic sporting colours, green and gold, this painting might be described as naive in style, mimicking the innocence of a child in its outline of a boat/boathat. The straight-ish lines overlap untidily in places, are sometimes patchy and gone over in other spots; there appear to be negligent dribble-spots on the canvas, and the boat outline collides with the end of the fabric at the top of the mast.

I do aim for a directness that child's art does ... What I hope is that my images directly relate and that there is a kind of close communication between the image, the viewer and a response. But of course I'm not a child and I am aware of art history.<sup>14</sup>

The studied minimalist and naive quality of Walwicz's visual representations is comparable to her experimental prose in which 'broken' English

breaks up the assumptions involved in the practice of making meaning of words.

As texts which are constantly commented upon for their rhythms, their flow beyond the words, for their use of disjunctive grammar, lack of syntax and frequent organisation around drives, for the constant eruption of sensory images, smells, sounds and colours, their predisposition to performance, the refusal to recognise a constant, unified 'I' and the fragmentation of identity and gender, Walwicz's work would seem to suggest Kristeva's notion of the semiotic. In working through the acquisition of language and the formation of subjectivity, Kristeva offers the notion of the semiotic as potentially subversive to symbolic language.

### According to Kristeva

According to Kristeva, the speaking subject is a product of the dialectical relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, two processes, sites, movements or energies which approximately correspond with the pre-oedipal and the oedipal, or the unconscious and the conscious. In Kristeva's thinking,

Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he [sic] produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.<sup>15</sup>

The semiotic predates the distinction between subject and object, and therefore subjectivity and signification, and operates according to drives, rhythms and a primal sensuality which incorporates the wonderfully untranslatable sense of *jouissance*. Forces of desire are characteristic of the primary relation between the mother and the child: it is these forces 'that connect and orient the body to the mother'. Kristeva terms this site the *chora*:

Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm ... the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythms), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.<sup>16</sup>

Being 'analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm', Kristeva's notion of the semiotic has parallels with Walwicz's poetry, yet Kristeva refuses the

*chora* articulation: the *chora* can be spoken of but never spoken, as it is filtered through the operations of symbolic discourse:

Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form.<sup>17</sup>

This modality constitutes the potential through which subjectivity is formed during the mirror stage, or the *thetic*: 'The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second includes part of the first and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified'.<sup>18</sup> The differentiation between child and mother, and the difference between lived reality and the image in the mirror, or representation, provide the rudimentary materials with which to use systems of signification. Regulating characteristics of this linguistic system include the hierarchising of terms, the overlaying of a normative linguistic system which uses standardised grammar, logic, syntax, and use of the first person subjective 'I' to claim authority and possession of discourse, as well as the provision of a subjective and social identity and a phallic sexual economy.<sup>19</sup>

### **Semiotic Poetry?**

If such regulating practices appear anomalous in regard to Walwicz's poetry, the characteristics of Kristeva's semiotic *chora* seem all too familiar. In 'Delicatessen', for example, the speaker shifts between being subject and object, mother and child, totally disregarding any differentiation. The speaker is initially personified as the delicatessen and everything in it, but at the same time is able to satisfy a desire to eat everything in it:

I'm the elegant. Delicatessen ... I swim in the windowpane. And I nearly fall over that I'm so full of all delicious. ... I fat sausage. Sit in the cheese. I'm the shiny sweets ... I get big on me. I get full of myself. I eat me gently and slowly. (*Writing*, 87-88)

The lack of discrimination between the eater and the eaten recalls the connections between mother and child in the womb. But then the speaker is 'two years old. I'm all flavour gelati. I don't talk to anybody'. Interlaced with pleasure and desire, sleeping and eating, is a continual striving

for oral satisfaction. This could recall the pleasure principle around which pre-lingual babies are said to be organised:

I baby that never got enough to eat. I make it up. My little momma cheated me I eat and I eat ... In my mouth to get the world inside me. I that used to be an empty egg.

But again, the subject can never be pinned down as it becomes alternatively baby and mother:

I eat and eat. I made this little house in me to live. I make me so big. I'm pregnant with me ... I used to be starved. Now I feed my baby ... I grow enormous. With me. This me. Now in me. I'm only little baby. I feed myself.

If Walwicz's writing is constructed in a manner that 'lends topology' to the *chora*, as Kristeva allows, it also writes through the transition to the symbolic. Kristeva's thetic stage is characterised by a sense of separation (and simultaneous constitution) of the self and other, and much of Walwicz's imagery is reminiscent of the 'body in pieces' metaphor associated with the mirror stage. 'Coming To' traces the coming into being of the separate parts of the body:

To come to. Be. Alive. Really. I. That's how it started. One morning. I was walking. My left arm. In a green jumper. Started to feel itself. Be. My hand. Swinging by me. Coming to. (*Writing*, 73)

This simultaneous individualising of body parts into a collective body is mirrored in '2 Girls' by a subjectivity which is torn to pieces over what is good and bad:

I was 1. In bits and pieces. In parts. At times longer or shorter. I hid in my corner. While girl 2 took over ... Girl 1 was a bad girl. Girl 2 was good ... I made her up. She took me over. (*Writing*, 99)

The piece immediately preceding, 'pauses', enacts this fragmentation on the page with large spaces between clusters of words, while it describes time stopping:

jump i pause i break i don't connect i just  
wait and i wait i wait i wait there is  
(*Writing*, 98)

Similar to the 'body in pieces', these words are almost pre-linguistic in their disjointed, unconnected relation to each other, and writing here parallels the process of subject formation as described by Kristeva.

It is difficult to reconcile Kristeva's theory and Walwicz's practice through their shared interest in the operations of the unconscious. Kristeva stresses the interactive relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic which renders the speaking subject always in process/on trial. Yet she also posits the overriding laws of the symbolic which would repress anything prior to itself: 'Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother'.<sup>20</sup> Traces of the libidinal economy of the semiotic can only *threaten* to disrupt and transgress the installed borders of symbolic language because that would dissolve the provision of identity, which would result in psychosis. Semiotic 'excess' is therefore relegated to 'return' only in the form of dreams and fantasms within the operations of the unconscious, or to overflow into areas which Kristeva delegates as specific moments in madness (psychosis), holiness and poetry. She heralds as successful semioticians a select few of the male *avant garde* literary elite.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps Walwicz's allegiance to the male *avant garde* tradition which Kristeva values so highly is not unimportant in connecting these two women's theory and practice. This association, however, would have to be in terms of what Kristeva regards as women's negative role, in artificially mimicking the poetic language of the masters, which consequently acts to deny women any sort of agency as speaking subjects. As Elizabeth Grosz comments, this dead-end might account for Kristeva's reluctance to mention Gertrude Stein's work.<sup>22</sup> Stein, whose writing techniques have obvious parallels to Walwicz's style, would also trouble Kristeva's theory.

### Abject Poetry

Another area in which Walwicz's writing contests symbolic regulation is in disregarding discrete bodily borders. 'Throw', for example, depicts a trajectory of movement out of/from the body:

I one. That throw. Myself. Out of my mouth ... I throw up my pink self  
... Somebody made a hole. I get my inside. Out. And I throw.

(*Writing*, 74)

It is both the self and vomit – the ingested non-self which is in-corporated but then rejected – which is being thrown. This disruption of the inner and outer borders of the body can be associated with Kristeva's notion of abjection. This term names the remnants of the body's physical functions as they operate in the semiotic as undifferentiated matter, but which the symbolic order rejects as dirty, unacceptable, monstrous: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules'.<sup>23</sup> As remnants and reminders of our bodily functioning they are unable to be assimilated within the immateriality of the symbolic, except via carnivalesque humour. Kristeva describes its recognition in terms of physical reactions:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck.<sup>24</sup>

She uses the example of the skin on the surface of hot milk, which sets off a bodily reaction of gagging and nausea so that 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*'.<sup>25</sup> In Walwicz's 'skinny', a fat girl marked as monstrous literally induces the expelling of self through a bulimic response: 'ate on all fours from dog dish can't stand straight guts till burst then back to tingle life ... ate too much now sick'.<sup>26</sup>

Walwicz's exploration of abject topics inevitably deconstructs the symbolic paranoia invested in their construction as abject. 'Big Red' celebrates the coming of menstrual blood:

Each month. Blood comes. My blood. Comes to me. Out of me ... It's unbelievable. To have so much blood. And I am so glad. Each month. That there is nothing growing in me. That I'm free of it.<sup>27</sup>

By discussing other scenes of blood – chickens being killed, a policeman killed on some steps dripping blood, a cut finger – she locates menstrual bleeding in a continuum of dangerous bloody events in life or death, but also marks its difference: 'that it doesn't scare me anymore. That I live with it and in it. That I'm at one with the bleeding. That I bleed'.

In Kristeva's framework there are two types of polluting objects: excremental and menstrual. In its difference from excrement, menstrual blood signals sexual difference. Characteristically, these concepts border on further subjugating women's bodies, as Barbara Creed points out,

The problem with Kristeva's theory, particularly for feminists, is that she never makes clear her position on the oppression of women. Her theory moves uneasily between explanation of, and justification for, the formation of human societies based on the subordination of women.<sup>28</sup>

By deciding that 'it doesn't scare me anymore', Walwicz's speaker in 'Big Red' collapses the (male-derived) horror of menstruation and reinvests the event with joy and health:

That I like to bleed ... That it makes me soft. That it makes me tender  
... That it makes me juicy. And red. All over. That it makes me glisten.  
And full rounded. That it makes me better. That it makes me a rose.

Undermining the monstrosity and silence imposed on women's blood – 'Devil with a red dress ... That you are not supposed to talk about' – Walwicz replaces them with a bower of abundant richness: red bird, scraps of red plastic, red raincoat, red roses, rubies, red glass beads, red claret.

In another poem, 'vampire' (*boat*, 94), the associations between blood, vampires and Europe mean that a non Anglo-Celtic couple are monstrously other. Their 'foreign' blood is represented by their eyes according to the dominant gaze – 'you got them bad eyes you got he looks like one of em vampires from films'. As with menstruation in 'Big Red', Walwicz makes the inherent fear of otherness sound ridiculous, this time through the absurd voice and speech patterns of the accuser:

hope I'm not interrupting youse listen i'll buy you a drink you going  
i'm going meself soon just one drink for the road have a drink with me  
i shout my shout now he don't look australian to me

Invested in this otherness is a subtly implied femininity, in marked contrast to the masculinism of the beer-drinking Australian speaker.

## Crossing Borders

The web of associations between otherness, femininity and migration is more explicit in *boat*, which uses images, representations and feelings associated with boats as metaphors for carrying the body/self from one place/language into another; it functions in a manner similar to the way the mirror acts in the thetic stage as a point of separation, of making separate meaning of oneself. These writings could thus be said to pivot on this threshold of entry into the new world for the immigrant, as the thetic is the threshold of entry into the symbolic order for the child, and as birth is yet another threshold of entry from the womb to the world. According to Kristeva's theories, these representations must inevitably be spoken from the latter, destined position. And yet, it is not simply memory of the semiotic/old land erupting through the cracks and fissures of language in Walwicz's writing. To begin with, the old land is still there and its language(s) still alive here, in the new land from which the subject speaks.

One of the assumptions Kristeva's theories make is that the subject-in-process acquires, or is inserted into, one *particular* language and signifying system following the thetic stage. For the migrant writer, or for anybody living in a country whose people do not speak their native tongue, identity and subjectivity must undergo some transformation or reconstitution as they enter an-other symbolic order of language. This does not easily fit into established theories of subjectivity formation. If the passage of migration might be likened to the thetic stage in terms of subjectivity, Sneja Gunew links this shift to an imagined violence:

if you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first.<sup>29</sup>

She takes the example of the de-legitimisation of proper names in Anglophone countries like Australia to be indicative of the breakdown of the migrant's former symbolic order (for example, the anglicising of Guiseppe to Joe). This process of re-learning another language and of renegotiating subjectivity as an ongoing process is particularly pertinent to Walwicz's writing. The journeys on the numerous boats in her



work are often violent ones which include a fear of drowning or of having to be rescued. Violent images of (symbolic?) fathers imagine them as veterinarian, butcher and dissector, while Walwicz often constructs her speakers as babies or children negotiating the mores of culture. Gunew identifies this fashioning of adult migrants into children as a trope of Walwicz's, reflecting and parodying the dominant culture as it imagines the linguistic ability of migrants.<sup>30</sup> The 'infantile' speakers are given space to speak in Walwicz's work, however, and often turn the tables so that the addressee becomes 'other' to the non Anglo-Celtic speaker, as in one of her best known pieces, 'Australia'.<sup>31</sup>

### Translations

This practice of inverting the dominant-marginal speaking positions is echoed by Gunew in her paper, 'Who's on whose margins?'. Here, Gunew stresses the difference between locating a writer as a non Anglo-Celtic and identifying a non Anglo-Celtic position from which the writer has chosen to write. The choice 'of choosing to interrogate – a will to alienation'<sup>32</sup> is evident in many of Walwicz's writings. For example, 'translate' (*boat*, 83) celebrates the non-English speaker as a privileged position: the knowledge of (at least) two tongues is an advantage, inaccessible to the host culture and subverting the domination of one language/culture over another. As the speaker learns English, the Polish words are 'typed in my head hidden in drawers' as they are typed on the page, hiding their meanings to me as an English-speaking reader. A house-painter introduces the idea of renovating the prison house of language: 'going to paint my house renovate looking for right word page ... renovate these words'. But it is the old house that is to be renovated, the one where she was a baby, because once again the speaker feels as if she is in that pre-social position in relation to her old world: 'foundling orphan doorstep basket koszyk niemowle baby can't speak i once did now forget'. The speaker sets about re-learning her mother tongue, that feels like a 'lost language lost tongue pickled' in which she can speak back: 'i will speak polish on a tram and discuss people be nasty wroga hostile giggle girls discuss teacher'. Access to another language here means power to speak behind the teacher's back and the ability to translate flaunts that power.

In Kristeva's terms, the semiotic and, by derivation, the mother tongue of a former community, are feminised sites owing to their debt to the maternal, a time prior to the laws of the Father which underwrite representation. Pamela Banting, on the other hand, argues that women's writing operates 'within a theory of signification based not upon representation but, alternatively, upon translation'.<sup>33</sup> With materially different bodies, Banting suggests that,

Her body's *différance* interrupts the logocentric mechanism of simultaneously hearing and understanding oneself speak. It prevents her from automatically reducing materiality to ideality and thereby effacing the sensible bodies of signifiers – both language and limbs.<sup>34</sup>

Acknowledging that bodies are largely socially and discursively constructed, Banting follows Cixous on women's public speaking being an act of embodying their words, that,

She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking.<sup>35</sup>

Banting further suggests that women's ability to 'doubly inscribe her story: in flesh and in speech' indicates that women are not fully conversant with or limited by signifying practice; that they bring with them an-other kind of corporeally based speech which is in excess of symbolic representation. For Cixous and Banting the body of the female hysteric is a raw example of how women use their bodies literally in the translation process: 'The hysterical body does not represent its symptoms; it translates intersemiotically between language and flesh'.<sup>36</sup>

I would be epitomising this kind of female hysteria, a repressed voice which arises and erupts in an abnormal way too. I'm quite happy to be considered like that within my work, yes. Sort of psychotic element is used there too, in my performance, I'm sure. That frightens people you know, like someone

speaking in the street uncontrollably or putting on a funny voice too – uncomfortable. But I like to make people uneasy with me too, in performance. (Ania Walwicz)

It is the act of translating *in public* that renders this functioning all the more apparent. Translation, though, always loses something in the process while simultaneously creating something new. Banting quotes Nicole Ward Jouve on connecting women and translation:

For many bilingual women ... translation is an activity by means of which the 'natural' bond 'meaning-language' can be transgressed. It is a state of continued suspension – a living process, ever beginning anew ... The process, therefore, is eminently 'feminine'. When you translate, the absolute status of nouns, the 'Name-of-the-Father', is shaken. Exchanges between words are no longer 'full', that is, guaranteed by the law of the Father, the law of significance. Identities cease to be stable. You escape from definition, from the law which rules and partitions women, which prevents femininity from coming into being.<sup>37</sup>

Cixous is always conscious of speaking double, of withholding a (m)other tongue. She associates her mother's German tongue with the maternal – 'my German mother in my mouth, in my larynx, rhythms me'.<sup>38</sup> German thus comes to represent the repressed language of the pre-symbolic relation between mother and child which was overridden by the language of her father – French, the dominant language used in post-colonial Algeria. The foreignness of her (m)other tongue is feminised and sourced in her specificity as a woman:

In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know, I don't need to enter it, it surges from me, it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious. The language that women speak when no one is there to correct them.<sup>39</sup>

The fluidity and multiplicity represented by this pre-symbolic language is not limited to Cixous's 'actual' mother's tongue of German but is represented by its dormancy. Like Kristeva, Cixous suggests that recognition of this language is potentially subversive to symbolic language structures but, unlike Kristeva, Cixous wants to activate that potential

threat and allow it expression:

Prevent 'my language' from taking itself for my own, worry it and enchant it. Necessity, in the bosom of my language, for games and migrations of words ... In the language I speak, the mother tongue resonates, tongue of my mother, less language than music, less syntax than song of words.<sup>40</sup>

Cixous's notion of the 'migration of words' and Banting's theory of translation are useful for reading Walwicz's work as connecting writing and identity. The poem 'New World', for example, is the last in her first book, *Writing*. Here the (end?) process of writing is the creative act which gives birth to the speaking subject. It begins: 'I'm newborn. I'm new. Brand new. New. Me ... I'm going to start a new life ... I'm shaky leg young horse. The afterbirth hangs from my back' (125). Naming accompanies this arrival and Walwicz's subject is typically split, both male and female: 'Mister New is my name ... Joy is my name'. This birth is intimately linked to the anticipation and hopes of the immigrant's passage to the new world: 'I'm going to start a new life. Go to a new state. Make a clean. Break. With my past. To start afresh. Be new'. While enacting the clean break syntactically, this looks forward to the making of a new self in a new land. As such, it addresses the experience of translating oneself into an-other symbolic order, in re-presenting a self in language. In anticipating this act, the piece might be written from that space where translation is imminent, where, in order to be recognised as a speaking subject, a new language-symbolic-text will be necessary. Text is important here, not only as a script for cultural behaviour (or resistance to it), but also as a means of creating a self. The birth of the speaking subject in this piece is enabled by an act of writing: 'I'm first mark on my page'. This is an autonomous act; it is the speaker who is actively creating herself: 'Yesterday I was heavy with me. And today I give birth. I give me birth. I give birth to myself.'

### Writing Maternity

The writing of the self as an act of creativity in *écriture féminine* inevitably draws metaphors of maternity, as Walwicz does in 'New World'. For Kristeva, the symbolic is predicated on its debt to the maternal (in its association with her concepts of the semiotic, the *chora* and the abject),

which it must deny and repress. For Kristeva, maternity is overwhelmingly passive:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism.<sup>41</sup>

'I'm not there', so maternity cannot be an act of a speaking subject. As a re-creation of the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter, birth resituates women-mothers as 'other' to the symbolic and reinforces their relation to the unspeakable maternal:

By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother ... a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond.<sup>42</sup>

Kristeva's theoretical constraints on women's activity are ironically stifling in this birthing context. Even in 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva's exercise in allowing the repressed maternal to speak (of her pain and joy in childbirth), her 'personal' text is set in a column, butted against another erect column of 'academic' theoretical writing; it is structured, regulated, carefully designed not to overflow or take up too much room.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, Cixous's sense of a maternal debt is drawn on as a source of creativity which she practises in her writing: 'There is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink'.<sup>44</sup> Cixous redefines the literal and culturally binding definition of the term 'mother', rendering them relative rather than familial:

I write 'mother.' What is the connection between mother and woman, daughter? I write 'woman.' What is the difference? This is what my body teaches me: first of all, be wary of names; they are nothing but social tools, rigid concepts, little cages of meaning assigned ... But, my friend, take the time to unname yourself for a moment. Haven't you been the father of your sister? Haven't you, as a wife, been the husband of your spouse, and perhaps the brother of your brother, or hasn't your

brother been your big sister? ... Unhappy the 'woman' who has let herself be shut up in the role of a single degree of kinship!<sup>45</sup>

For Cixous, the relation between woman and 'mother' is metaphorical; both creative and disruptive, this 'mother' in all women will 'not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes' and 'urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style'.<sup>46</sup>

### **Mother-text: *red roses***

Walwicz's novel, *red roses*, seems to epitomise the position which Kristeva would deny could be spoken, but which Cixous regards as the very source of women's writing. In writing into being not only the speaking subject but also her mother, *red roses* becomes a mother (as) text. Walwicz's literary birthing of her mother is full with the power of writing to create, and with the power of creation associated with the maternal.

The death of my mother prompted the book. I actually started writing it nine months after her death. It's very curious. Like having a baby. (Ania Walwicz)

*red roses* begins with the speaker's mother singing to her 'in her dark mum say i'm swim in her adark cavern a station'.<sup>47</sup> From this fluid and darkened state the speaker is then born: 'here i come out a tunnel a dark tunnel i was being born into my cry in light room in earth' (2). This ultimate site of semiotic life is where Walwicz begins a sustained two hundred and fourteen pages of broken language without syntax or punctuation until 'she is gone' (214). In some ways, quoting a line to support my statement that the speaker is born gives both too much meaning to that line and too little. The speaker is born over and over again in a variety of ways – stillborn, by forceps, pushing – as meaning floods from the barely distinguishable phrases. Walwicz introduces her fictionalised self through her mother – 'little ania i'll tell you my secret' (11) – and continues to make appearances throughout the narrative, mother and baby alternatively take up the speaking position weaving one after another. Similarly, Walwicz's polymorphous mother/child speaker draws into its world a variety of other texts which become enmeshed in their life-text.

*red roses* is all about suggesting a relationship with the mother, becoming all images, becoming all things, projected onto all images, and all the images become imbued with her. So other images can be perceived as forming an attachment to the mother. It is like a collage.<sup>48</sup>

Cixous regards women's stories or histories as continually intersecting and overlapping in this way: 'Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women'.<sup>49</sup>

How do we read? Maybe all kinds of reading are a form of absorption. One is forever like a sponge. Well I think everything that I have read has entered into me and I can recollect it in some way. (Ania Walwicz)

Beginning with the songs her mother sings (her) in the womb, the novel weaves into its fabric scripts for film, television, theatre, cartoon bubbles, formal letters, formulaic romances, Jewish history, Art, rose mythology, nursery rhymes, advertising hard-sell, recipes, fashion-speak, French, song lyrics, heroic narratives, fairytales and literary theory. The speaker happily inserts herself into all of these narratives and the proliferating texts also start to envelop her mother in new stories, changing the patterns and inventing new possibilities: 'i didn't have a mother i am making one up here to full a fill to fill a gap a void i am making up i am making mum talk' (32).

Making room for the maternal to speak means weaving new maternal stories: 'i am making up a mother a biography out of what's said' (79). Erupting through this mesh of texts and speaking positions comes a desire to create not only the speaker's mother but all mothers:

i want to write about everybody's mother everything is becoming my mother everyone is becoming my mother all texts speak about her she is in them she is talking to me through them (21)

Compare this to Cixous's desire to write:

Write? I was dying of desire for it, of love, dying to give writing what it had given to me. What ambition! What impossible happiness. To nourish my own mother. Give her, in turn, my milk? Wild imprudence.<sup>50</sup>

For Cixous, writing is nourishment and a source of creativity which she can happily mix with metaphors of birthing: 'A child! Paper! Intoxications! I'm brimming over! My breasts are overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I'm hungry, too. The milky taste of ink!'<sup>51</sup> Cixous's figurative mingling of milk and ink in her writing is part of her vision which enacts what Kristeva theorises for poetic language.

In *red roses*, the act of creating the mother(s) is inherently linked to the form of the writing as both continuous and fragmented, constantly shifting and overflowing with ambiguity: 'a text is breaking away it is doing a text is multiplying i am carrying a text is making mum me i am cutting' (28). The narrator is a chameleon constantly changing shape which amplifies her ability to subvert, fragment and distort. She is at times inventor, chef 'of wordy salads' 'cooking my text', reader, critic, signwriter, joker and magician. Always shifting in form and viewpoint, a maker of fictions, the narrator is an inextricable part of the style and multiplicity of this semiotext.

In a manner similar to Cixous's description of a woman talking in public, the body of this text is also performative, 'a speech about my work making a text how to do a long story how to keep it up' (80). It also suggests how to read it, as if the reader might be entering into a new linguistic landscape: 'she is coming out my syntax the pluperfect i don't understand every word but i get the tone i can read and the general tone the outline' (167). The self-conscious use of theoretical concepts also makes overt the constructed links between the speaking self and her mother: 'i am doing literary theory a symbiotic relationship with the mother's body the self merges with other objects a polymorphous work all statements are performative' (119).

The symbiotic relationship mentioned here connects Walwicz's work with research Irigaray has found on placental relations that challenges the representation of the foetus and mother (by psychoanalysis, for example) as in a state of fusion. Irigaray and biologist Hélène Rouch, whom she interviews, speak of the placenta as a mediating tissue between mother and foetus which, although formed by the foetus, works not only to regulate supply to the embryo but also to ensure the mother is not depleted in the process and takes on the production of certain hormones for the mother.<sup>52</sup> The implications for revising maternal relations as symbiotic, rather than fused, means a radical re-evaluation of



psychoanalytic theory in terms of the speaking subject and a consequent renegotiation of the psychoanalytic desire/fear of the maternal as engulfing. If the foetus is always in symbiotic relation to the mother then entry to the symbolic is not so much a severance from the other but an acquisition of an-other language. This metaphor would allow for the effects of migration on subjectivity to be more easily accommodated.

Such symbiotic relations might be said to characterise Walwicz's writing, where the reader is often addressed. Drawn into the narrative world, we are rendered part of the process:

you never reveal her completely or yourself why do should i you have to make her up i'm just giving suggestions i don't want to say completely and fully i'm just hinting at a story then you just read me carefully the reader participates the reader reads the reader makes me (116).

This interpolation of the reader into the text disturbs the scission between self and other, reader and text. By attributing to the reader partial responsibility for constructing the text, Walwicz makes transparent the fragility of authorial authority.

- Ania: Well I wanted the book to be the mirror too, so that the reader could project their own mother onto it. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?
- Alison: Aah, it's ambivalent.
- Ania: I feel the relationship with the mother always has ambivalence, but it's a good one?
- Alison: Well, I guess we get on, but, you know, there's things that need working out still.
- Ania: But it's strange, the person [I know] who liked the book has a good relationship, the one who found it harrowing doesn't. So I am suggesting areas of experience in the reader which are not fully conscious for them. (Ania Walwicz and Alison Bartlett)

Walwicz treats literary theory similarly, introducing its terms – 'crafted the notion of intertextuality i am making a collage montage' (19) – and undermining its authority: 'literary theory invents all ideas you can apply to this a way of seeing the text the reception i'll get but does it apply

at all and did i plan it like that' (117).

I am certainly interested in challenging the norm, the authority of the literary world, or the authority of language, or of what one expects of a book.<sup>53</sup>

The credibility of any generic convention is, in fact, undermined. The fairytale her mother tells her that goes terribly wrong when the dog eats the king, the cat eats the pageboy and the mouse eats the princess is revealed to be a gastronomic feast: the king is a sacher torte, the pageboy a gingerbread man and the princess made of marzipan.

While I can argue for the subversive theoretical innovations of Walwicz's texts, they continue to present me with contradictions as they require such dedicated concentration to read through to the playful semiotic *jouissance*. And yet they are playful; how much seriousness can I ascribe to a text when 'elvis comes and says i'm your brother now someone shouting say my brother professor elephant does this to you i will clear your head if you rest a bit oh charlie chaplin help me' (34)?

It is a dilemma of literary studies, because theory invites complexity and an intelligent reading, whereas literary works are supposed to invite, well, a sort of form of eating candy – all very nice, cosy. But I want to be treacherous for the reader.<sup>54</sup>

Maybe that treachery is part of its theoretical attraction from a critical position in the symbolic order. In some ways subjecting Walwicz's texts to theoretical analysis is also contradictory, as it inevitably seems to involve a sense of containment in or by those theoretical strictures which, I argue, her texts resist. Such resistance is certainly a part of what attracts me to reading it through the frame of *écriture féminine*, which, Irigaray suggests,

is not [an issue] of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.<sup>55</sup>

I've never been happy about anything that's ever been written about me if I were to be totally honest because I would like to write it myself. (Ania Walwicz)

# Three

## *Reading Bodies*



No one method, form of writing, speaking position, mode of argument can act as representative, model or ideal for feminist theory. Instead of attempting to establish a new theoretical norm, feminist theory seeks a new *discursive space*, a space where women can write, read and think *as women*. This space will encourage a proliferation of voices, instead of an hierarchical structuring of them, a plurality of perspectives and interests instead of the monopoly of the one — new kinds of questions and different kinds of answer[s].<sup>1</sup>

Let's try out some narrative voices.

*Voice!* That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return. Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music. Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses. And that is how she writes, as one throws a voice – forward, into the void.<sup>2</sup>

Your body and mine rest on each other's, making and filling curves, creating humps and gorges to sink into and nestle against. Lines traverse and shadows shade: weathered leg against soft belly flesh, inner sole over kneecap, armpit covering shoulder, fingers in hair – whose hair? – roughsmooth, softcoarse, paletanned hairysmooth publicprivate musclewrinklebonenailcells intermingled separate the same different all at once simultaneously.

We are reading together. Then I am writing about us reading together, weaving together books and bodies, fleshing out paragraphs, entwining words and skin: touching.

Osmosis: the crossing of boundaries which turn out to be permeable.

While I read I feel the sensations from your fingers running over a section of my leg, up and down, up and down and over again, rhythmic, comforting, electric. I feel the touch. I respond as my body is touched, by another, by you.

While I read Irigaray:

Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid herself to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, a caress. Theory that caresses my life the way you do, writing that touches me. That's how I want to write.

That is why writing is good, letting the tongue try itself out – as one attempts a caress, taking the time a phrase or a thought needs to make oneself loved, to make oneself reverberate.<sup>4</sup>

There is a shift. Body parts move at the turn of a page while eyes seek the continuing line of type, never ending text. Even while the hand is concluding the turn the eyes are well into the next line.

Your book rests on my body; my book blocks out part of your body in my vision. Reading bodies.

Stroke.

Competing discourses of touch operating: your stroking on my thigh, on my inner arm, and the intellectual strokes of Irigaray and Cixous. I can flip my awareness between the two, but the movement between body and mind is no movement at all. Contiguous. Not divisible. Reverberating. What's the difference? Where's the joining?

The mind is not a non-material, disembodied object, nor is the human body an exclusively material object. Minds are always *embodied*; bodies are animated by minds.<sup>5</sup>

Experience and knowledge meet between the pages; they are interleaved. Irigaray says we (women) have an 'appetite for touch', as represented by our lips, by

that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched.<sup>6</sup>

There is a change of position. An arm comes down across my text to interrupt the flow of words. A clean sweep. I am suddenly made aware of the materiality of the book, the corporeality of your body, its concreteness, that can break through the abstract words. The moment it takes your arm to pass my page is curiously prolonged,

... challenging the split between public and private which keeps our lives out of our knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

I glance at what you are reading. It is a book I have just read, by Inez Baranay. You are reading a chapter describing the narrator's menstrual

cramps. I loved that chapter: the articulation of an experience common to me and the offering of knowledge on that experience. In this instance, Baranay recommends a yoga position, *supta-badakonasana*. I have recently started doing yoga again. It makes me aware of my body in ways which often surprise me – the ways I can and can't bend, twist, move and direct parts of me. I especially like the postures where I can cradle parts of my body, where I can be 'two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other'. I like the touching. But I also like the intellectualising of the practice.

Yoga-menstruating-fiction-theory-touching-reading.

They connect.

Like Jane Gallop,

...at times I think through autobiography: that is to say, the chain of associations that I am pursuing in my reading passes through things that happened to me.<sup>8</sup>

I find it difficult harnessing all of these interrelated life happenings into the writing of this text. They matter. They connect with the theories and the fiction – I want them incorporated into the formation of my writing. Like Cixous does:

Her discourse, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectivized,' universalized; she involves her story in history.<sup>9</sup>

But of course I can revise my life in story, and I must choose my words carefully. The revision of words is a part of Irigaray's project, to exchange representations (of women), to revise exchanges:

Systems of exchange, such as linguistic exchange, for example, shall be revised ...<sup>10</sup>

This is hardly an exchange, unless you speak back to me, unless I can touch you somehow. But I want it to speak of change, exchanging discourses, balancing them? Confronting them? Layering? Colliding? All of the above? Although there is not, strictly speaking, an exchange between you and me, I want there to be an exchange of voices within

this (con)text. Like those old telephone exchanges with leads that go everywhere – doubling up, intersecting, crossing lines, connecting speakers. There are a multitude of voices buzzing around in my head: the theorists, the writers I interviewed, the fictional characters, the reviewers, my colleagues I talk to and me inbetween. I need to make space for everyone, to make sure everybody can be heard. But there is no available score for orchestrating these voices.

I am looking for just the right voice to use. But maybe I need several. Recently, I have begun to sing a cappella. This might be helpful – a layering of voices in different keys. Cixous talks about song as a kind of vitality:

In feminine speech, as in writing, there never stops reverberating something that, having once passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us, still has the power to affect us – song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive.<sup>11</sup>

And listen to these words by song-woman Frankie Armstrong, who teaches the powerful connections between voice, body and life:

There is little that touches, stirs, excites or moves me like the human voice raised in melody. Especially the voice bare, unaccompanied ... my stomach turns, my spine chills, my eyes water. My feet dance, my mouth smiles or laughs spontaneously: some part of me literally moves.<sup>12</sup>

It's as if she enacts Cixous's edict: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard'.<sup>13</sup>

I went to a women's voice workshop run by Frankie Armstrong; I left with aching legs but an amazing sense of power and energy about my voice. Whatever voices I choose to use and whatever songs I sing here, they will be (theoretically) sourced in my body:

*Writing and voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries.<sup>14</sup>

Voice is inherently connected with bodies – with breath and wind pipes at the very least but in addition to physiology, it is linked to gender, class, race, age, to life experiences and emotions, psychology, politics, to situations and to knowledge. Its strength, however, lies in the power of finding it, at least in the way Armstrong and Cixous write about it:

find the voice from the deepest part of ourselves, the voice that must have been used throughout millennia for calling up and on the spirits and goddesses, the voice that howled at funerals, shrieked at births, chanted at rituals and initiations. The sound, the singing, can be strong and gentle, strong and savage, strong and joyous, strong and despairing. It can be of exquisite beauty and subtlety. But strong.<sup>15</sup>

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing.<sup>16</sup>

I love putting the writing of those two women side by side: practitioner and theorist, singer and philosopher both through writing.

On paper it is difficult to produce a lot of the nuances and variations of voice, though. Is this merely a gesture on my part? A textual representation? A metaphor, which some could insist is 'merely' textual with no material referent, in the way that Irigaray's lips have been (lip)read by some? But here I am voicing my worries when I've only just begun.

Where was I?

My body was resting in another's,  
books were resting on bodies.

That intersection is pivotal, for me. When a book is actually in contact with a body, when they touch, the constructed borders between text and body coalesce. Especially when I'm reading in bed. Especially if it's a book I have borrowed from someone. If it's not my property it feels like the boundaries of propriety are both marked and stretched when a



text touches my naked body: elastic surfaces bending toward each other to touch and read. It feels deliciously subversive: an unacknowledged intimacy by default. Because while these pages rest on my skin today, last night (or next week) they might well have lain (or might well lie) on someone else's body yesterday (or tomorrow). So through the pages we make contact.

Just subtly.

Softly

gently

like the

stroke

of a page turn/arm shift.

Where are these pages resting? Are they making contact with your body?  
Are you holding a corner between your fingers,  
gently feeling the texture,  
settling into the angle,  
stroking,  
ready to turn it over?  
Is it touching you? Somewhere?

But the body I am leaning on, the body who touches me and against whom I rest my page, has now become a part of my text. As I become more engrossed in the writing it is incorporated between the pages. You are now part of the fiction/theory. We have crossed borders which now appear to be only flimsily constructed, entered a new discursive space which is filled with bodies, with listening and speaking, with a proliferation of voices strong and soft, gentle and savage, silent and seductive. Voices which all call for attention, moving, whispering, urging, celebrating, stimulating, chorusing together and then dividing apart, in solo and then in part-harmonies – in unison and sometimes in anger – weaving over and under each other, complementing and then contrasting. There is plenty of space. Eighty thousand words are available here. Enough room to tell all kinds of stories, to encourage new kinds of questions and different kinds of answers.



## Four

*The Ailing Body: Women, Medical  
Discourse and Power in Margaret  
Coombs's The Best Man for This  
Sort of Thing*

Margaret Coombs's novel engages with the concepts of *écriture féminine* through her particular practice of writing-the-body. *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* scrutinises the operations of power which produce the body and subjectivity of Helen Ayling, née Diamond. Helen's self-reflexive narrative voice recounts her version of personal events that are significant in shaping her identity. In her recounting, Helen also articulates the gulfs between 'how she *wanted* to be, how she *pretended* to be and how she *was*'<sup>1</sup> and the forces acting to complicate those tensions. The circular interaction between the imperatives to resist and to conform, to think of ourselves as individuals in a culture that silences resistance to institutionalised knowledges, is related through a series of events in Coombs's first book, *Regards to the Czar*. One of those significant events – the birth of Helen's second daughter – is followed up in greater detail in *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*. Between these two texts, Helen's surname has transmuted from the brilliant 'Diamond', representing one of the hardest known substances, resilient enough to etch most surfaces, to the decaying 'Ayling'. This signifies the increasingly deadening effects of patriarchal knowledges and practices on her.

### Medical Inscriptions

Reference to the way power is exercised on and inscribed on to bodies, and the ways in which it contributes to the continual formation of subjectivity, is usually credited to Foucault's theories of power and discourse.

I know he can be a sexist, hopeless old creature, but I'm really interested in what Foucault said about the power of knowledge. (Margaret Coombs)

Meaghan Morris directs us to the advantages of Foucault's 'displacement of the problematics of science and ideology, in favour of an analysis of the fundamental *implications* of power-knowledge and their historical transformations'.<sup>2</sup> Terry Threadgold laments, however, that these implications are not always used in response to lived practices: 'the notion of discourse as technology for the making of subjects is ubiquitous, but just what it might mean, in terms of those 'real practices' ... is rarely explored'.<sup>3</sup> Margaret Coombs's writing does explore the implications of such practices. Both of Coombs's novels can be read as working on the

micro-level of discourses of power traversing a single body, a body which has been constructed by those discourses somewhere between her resisting and conforming to them.

Like Foucault, Coombs is interested in the operations of Western medical science and how, as a knowledge based on the naming, construction and valuing of this thing called 'anatomy', it discursively forecloses on making available any alternative mapping of Helen's body. As a girl-child in *Regards to the Czar*, Helen is trained to comply with the disciplines imposed on her by the authoritative 'czars' in her life.<sup>4</sup> A doctor's daughter with the 'best' medical regimes available to her, Helen is made especially aware of the indignities of her body, its propensity for irregular and deficient performance and her commensurate inconsiderateness to important people in institutions like hospitals. This training puts her in good stead for 'electing' an early induction for the birth of her second daughter to comply with her doctor's social arrangements for the Easter weekend. Responsive to the pressures to be a docile body, Helen is eager to accommodate her doctor's desires. When the birth is arranged for April Fool's Day, however, she feels affronted and foolish but powerless to protest. 'Induced and Abandoned: the Story of an April Fool', in *Regards to the Czar*, becomes the point of departure for *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing*.

The first page establishes this novel's concern with discourse when the words of the young male obstetrician establish the power relations at stake. 'Well, you're obviously a very strong person' (3), a line patronisingly directed to the patient Helen, becomes a form of coercion: if she is strong she will deal with the post-natal depression she is experiencing. While Helen's condition has been named by the profession – 'Puerperal depression, we call it' (3) – the fraternity does not understand Helen's experience beyond its being 'terribly unfortunate' (3). Eroding the connections between Helen's depression and her cultural positioning within the institution, Helen's condition is attributed to her rebellious body and subjectivity. Helen wants to contradict the doctor's aetiology but that option does not appear to be available to her. Her status as ailing patient, powerless over her misbehaving body, carries with it an obligation to accept and respond to the authority of her doctor. She protests to us: 'I was pretty sure that what was wrong with me was not "bio-chemical" not in the way the doctor meant – but I was also sure that I

didn't have the guts to say so' (3). Deciding not to question him specifically and Western medicine generally, Helen adds support to its cultural currency. If she is its victim, she is encouraged to be so willingly with no other real choices. The cultural weight medicine carries is so indoctrinated, so interiorised, that it has already been active in forming her consciousness which registered in the first place that she should go to the doctor, or even that her body is ailing.

That her 'condition' is recognised, and therefore legitimated as real experience, is enough for Helen to continue her 'performance' in the way it is expected: 'I nodded "sensibly" to show how "mature" I was – mature enough to take an "objective" view of my own case and willingly accept "expert" advice' (3). All the doctor can prescribe however is tranquillisers which will take months to dull the depression and which will also affect the nine day old baby who, he claims, might also be depressed. Adding to her depression, Helen thinks, 'this was the saddest thing I ever heard' (6). In Coombs's essay, 'Protect Me From What I Want', she discusses the authority of doctors in direct relation to post-natal depression:

Of course they don't ever make women feel post-natally depressed. Hormones do. It says so here: *Hormone tie with postnatal depression*. (SMH, 23/2/88.) That was a surprise to me, actually. Because it proclaimed very guardedly indeed that *for the first time* researchers (at the University of Newcastle) thought *perhaps* they *might* have *some* evidence to *suggest* there *could be* a *possible* link between postnatal depression and hormonal imbalances. You mean all those years white-coated doctorly authorities talked as if they were sure there was, they were bluffing!! Cor, what a hide these 'scientists' have!<sup>5</sup>

Through offering an attentive reading, Coombs exposes the precarious foundations on which the authority of much medical discourse rests.

### Forms of Feminist Resistance

In constructing a not uncommon scene of a depressed mother visiting a male obstetrician, Coombs outlines the operations of individuals using institutionalised forms of disciplinary power through the discursive formations of Western medicine. What marks Coombs's writing as significant is that Helen's resisting voice is made audible for us alongside

the part of her that wants to be good and liked for doing what is 'proper'. Despite the strength and amplification of the deep voices of authority ringing in her ears, Helen's other knowledge of herself is clear and high enough to keep questioning those regimes of propriety. Coombs interrogates the inter-personal power relations operating between doctor and patient in words which any woman might utter if the nagging doubts and expectations in her mind were made articulate, or if the linguistic tools and knowledge to hear and make sense of those contradictions were made available to her.

While useful, Foucault's theories and phrases are only one framework through which Coombs's work can be read. In a feminist context her novels are grounded in an analysis of the patriarchal relations between women and medicine, between women's lived experiences and an institution philosophically steeped in the mind-body split of Cartesian dualism. This 'economy of the same' takes male bodies as the norm, so that women's bodies are remaindered as pathologised through their differences. As Moira Gatens argues, this type of feminist analysis also suggests that Foucault's work largely ignores sexual difference to concentrate 'on the history of the construction of male bodies'.<sup>6</sup> Rosi Braidotti reinforces this analysis, and contrasts it to Irigaray's theories of difference:

Foucault elaborates a new ethics that remains within the confines of sexual sameness, whereas Irigaray is arguing for sexual otherness as a strategy allowing for the assertion of feminine subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

When Threadgold calls for the exploration of the 'real practices' in which power constitutes subjectivities, she could just as well be articulating Irigaray's similar concern about 'men's discourse':

the world is designated as inanimate abstractions integral to the subject's world. Reality appears as an always already cultural reality, linked to the individual and collective history of the masculine subject. It's always a matter of a secondary nature, cut off from its corporeal roots, its cosmic environment, its relation to life.<sup>8</sup>

Coombs carries out a similar critique of phallocentrism in a different medium to Irigaray, Threadgold and other feminist theorists.

Coombs's novel particularly challenges the notion of the 'always already cultural reality' Irigaray identifies in 'men's discourse' by including other cultural narratives vying for attention in Helen's life-writing. As well as reproducing a newspaper article and quoting from *Ventriloquism for Beginners* and *The Book of Magic*,

sources/authors I quite consciously and explicitly cite are William Blake, John Bunyan, Jean Rhys, Dr Benjamin Spock, *The Stern and Day Handbook of Magic*, William Shakespeare, Carl Jung, Emily Dickinson, Henry Fielding, Edward Lear, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Dorothy Richardson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jane Austen, John Keats, *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, Marcel Proust, *Home Management*, Franz Kafka, Anna Kavan, Joyce Carol Oates, Felix Deutsch, Janet Frame, Erik H. Erikson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alice Miller, Dorothy Green, Milan Kundera, George Eliot, John Lennon, Terry Threadgold, D.H. Lawrence, Kurt Vonnegut, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Hester Eisenstein, Roland Barthes, Jane Gallop, Eric Hoffer, Evelyn Scott, James Joyce, Maria Ramas, W.H. Auden, Cora Sandel, *The King and I*, Charlotte Bronte, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam*, a medical public relations calendar I've lost the details of, Julian of Norwich, my father, my mother, my brothers, and – again and again – *myself* – or, to put it more accurately, various selves of mine.<sup>9</sup>

These excerpts are arranged like the boxed snippets in magazines which contain the juicy bits condensed for our immediate consumption. In *Regards to the Czar* they are contained in black boxes which emphasise their difference from the text.

People have said to me that the way I put quotes in *Regards to the Czar*, they couldn't see the point and certainly didn't like them being in black borders, framed. I really enjoy letting backing quotes comment on each other without spelling it out. (Margaret Coombs)

In *The Best Man*, however, they are without borders, leaking directly into Helen's narrative. This intertextuality highlights how life-practices are filtered through the pressures of innumerable competing discourses, which include various feminisms.

Coombs sees strong affinities between her work and Terry Threadgold's theorising of ficto-criticism. Threadgold describes such a



‘hybrid of literature and criticism’ in terms of mime:

Mime produces exact copies and re-motivates them as signifiers in a new system. The new representation substitutes examples for arguments. It approaches the object of study in terms of the examples it uses. The effect is one of collage/montage, a process of repetition, citation, where each citation interrupts the linearity of the discourse, forcing at least a double reading. The writing mounts the citation in another frame ... It is a performing, a making, a doing.<sup>10</sup>

The effect of Coombs’s superimposition of texts functions to position Helen as a subject-in-process constantly processing a range of inscriptive cultural texts (for example, how to be a dutiful daughter, a good mother, a trouble-free patient, an intelligent and likeable person). As an (inter)subjective text, Helen’s narrative does not compete as yet another ‘truth’ but re-situates those various knowledges in relation to her lived bodily experiences as a white middle-class educated female of Jewish heritage. Refusing the validity of access to a single truth through presenting a range of competing ‘truths’ challenges the fundamental binarisms of Western philosophy (like right and wrong). Like Coombs, Gatens imagines the ‘attempt to “write” the repressed side of these dualisms’ as

not, necessarily, to be working for the reversal of the traditional values associated with each but rather to unbalance or disarrange the discourses in which these dualisms operate. It is to create new conditions for the articulation of difference.<sup>11</sup>

The interventionist structure of Coombs’s novel corresponds to what Cixous imagines as women’s multiple libidinal economy:

A woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.<sup>12</sup>

To Cixous, smashing those censors means also to ‘break out of the circles; don’t remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around, then cut through!’<sup>13</sup>

## Like Magic

One of the most interesting texts Coombs uses in juxtaposition with the performances of Dr Argyle, as representative of the medical/ psychiatric profession, is the discourse of magic. Just as Helen is being made to wait for the arrival of the ‘best man for this sort of thing’, for example, Marvin Kaye is quoted from *The Stein and Day Handbook of Magic* outlining the deception of authority invested in the magician’s knowledge:

*The classic figure of the magician is the authoritative sorcerer with apparently unlimited powers. If a performer can portray this role convincingly, the audience’s confidence will overcome its suspicions. For if the audience is sure the magician is too skilled to be caught, it may not even try.* (27)

Authority here is quite openly spoken of as illusion, and the knowledge which enables this magic trick is a sleight of hand. The doctor’s diagnosis has that same ring of magical authority when uttered in medical mumbojumbo: ‘Probably endogenous, this depression,’ he pronounces. *Abracadabra*’ (39). Later Helen recognises Dr Argyle’s gesture of palming a peppermint as sleight of hand. The connections between authority and illusion, and the discourses of magic and medicine, are also established through the terms of Helen’s seduction. Suffering under the illusion that her doctor knows best, Helen is slow to recognise the extent of Dr Argyle’s guile as his fingers slowly extend into uninvited territory, traversing the lips and folds of her body. Adding to her humiliation, Helen is dismayed that her body registers his touch as erotic.

In Coombs’s first novel, *Regards to the Czar*, there is a precedent for Helen’s acceptance of such behaviour and her transference of blame to herself. In the story, ‘Nothing Happened’, a thirteen-year-old Helen endures the ramblings of an old taxi driver while he holds her hand ‘on the bulge between his legs’ (96). Helen takes responsibility for his actions which afterwards don’t seem like anything she can describe to her girlfriend: ‘How can I explain to Anne what I don’t myself understand? *There is nothing to say. Nothing happened*’ (104). She feels guilty of her passive participation, thinking, ‘my mother will murder me if she ever finds out about this old man’ (93). In *The Best Man*, the older Helen reacts similarly to Argyle’s hands: ‘Every scrap of sexual guilt in me tells me it’s *my fault* I feel invaded and aroused by what he is doing’ (40). Again, Helen refers to her mother as policing social behavioural rules

which she feels she is responsible for transgressing: '*My mother would be furious with me for submitting to this! It would be me, not him, that my mother would wish to punish!*' (38-39)

Helen often positions herself as her father's or her mother's daughter. This familial identity is reinforced by the novel's division into 'The Daughter's Seduction' and the daughter's abandonment. The reference to Jane Gallop's book,<sup>14</sup> which addresses the issue of feminists being intellectually seduced by the fathers of psychoanalysis, adds another frame to Coombs's interrogation of the daughter discourse. Helen's continual relegation to daughter denies her additional identity as a mother and has the effect of trivialising her needs through infantilisation. The taxi driver in 'Nothing Happened' tries to make the young Helen accept the position of his daughter as if this makes his intimate advances more acceptable, or less questionable. Dr Argyle also forces Helen into the role of surrogate daughter (38). This is taken to great lengths by Argyle and his wife, Emily, who fosters Helen's dependency on them both. The family drama being continually played out in Helen's life situates her as daughter and as powerless alongside the numerous fatherly 'czars' and 'best men' who exercise their power over her, and the mothers who maintain their authority through censure.

## Maternity

In both novels, the relations between Helen's construction as a woman, a mother and a patient are grafted together irrevocably, positioning her body as pathologised, in need of medical attention, and also in need of regulation, discipline and advice.

It really does fascinate me, what a difference a body makes. And, well maternity ties into all that, you know? It's sort of, the difference that being a mother makes, is a product of all that. (Margaret Coombs)

Maternity in particular has become a site of enormous regulation and surveillance. Irigaray makes an interesting link between women's silencing and childbirth:

How can the natural suffering a woman experiences during childbirth be separated from the artificial suffering society imposes upon her? I

think most women still experience childbirth alone, that no one allows them to talk about it as *subjects*, but rather they are always valorized as *mothers*, and thus as having suffered. They are identified as such and pass on this identity they bear as a *talion*: to be a woman, you must suffer.<sup>15</sup>

Dorothy Broom argues that women's health has increasingly been associated with their reproductive health, and by the 1930s the management of pregnancy and birthing had been transferred from women's business to careers for middle-class men:

Increasingly, pregnancy became medically and socially defined as a disease, childbirth as a potential medical or surgical emergency, and both as processes that women and their babies could not be expected to survive without medical (eventually specialist) intervention.<sup>16</sup>

The material and symbolic power doctors exert over women means that the concept of a 'healthy woman' can be seen as a contradiction in terms, when every aspect of a female cycle is seen as problematic and pathological; the presence or absence of menstruation, pregnancy or menopause can be considered worthy of medical intervention, while the apparent visual lack of these cycles in men provides a model of health to which women's active bodies are negatively compared.

### Theorising the Body

In an effort to address the specificity of lived bodily experiences in a female body, feminists have been actively engaged in the broad debate of theorising the body, a debate in which novels like Coombs's participate. Like the theories and practice of *écriture féminine* which source themselves in writing-the-body in new ways, current theorising of the body is engaged in finding ways of speaking about the body without performing the Cartesian split; that is, in exploring the intersections and consequences of bodies being both physiologically given and socially shaped through culture and language.

The significance of the discursive or imaginary body in contemporary debates is in part due to its very malleability through discourse. In our theorising we can read an anorexic body as a product of cultural pressure exerted by the media's models. Meanwhile, other people's bodies

inexplicably eat themselves away with cancerous cells which fail to respond to even the most destructive radiation or chemicals. The concept of the body as a discursive site is inviting in that it provides us with a way to read meanings onto 'the body'. This sense of control over the symbolic body, however, is very difficult to translate onto our own lived experiences and corporeal specificities. When I was researching this chapter my body was found to be growing polyps on my cervix. I found it very difficult to read this activity in terms of the theory I was pursuing. The medical book that had named them provided no plot and offered little in the way of alternative readings or even multiple endings. Like post-natal depression, nobody knows a lot about polyps so the only apparent way to deal with this aberration, to restore my cervix to how it is supposed to look, is to get rid of the excess growth: to cut, burn or freeze the tissue inside of me, along with the obligatory dilation and curettage while in the area. I could find no feminist readings of this story, no discursive analyses nor even an 'alternative' therapy. It seemed that my ability to read 'the body' did not extend to my own body and its actions. Like Margaret Coombs's character, I got swept along on the expert advice of medical authorities to be operated on so that my cervix could be normalised. Since then, I've found that proliferating tissue growth can be a healing mechanism to envelop unwanted tissue. Despite my critical resistance, I wonder if I will feel any different next time I'm told medical intervention is required.

While neither anorexic nor cancerous bodies nor even post-natally depressed mothers or polyped cervixes seem to respond directly to our readings of them, our construction as such bodies is irrevocably linked to our positioning within certain discourses.

Being a mother, at least in our culture, you know, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't, and I think being a mother of two rather than one, or seven. (Margaret Coombs)

But neither are we passive inhabitants of our bodies. Philipa Rothfield stresses the interaction between our theoretical and ideological knowledges and the material substances of bodies:

Bodies are not sponges, computers, blank sheets of paper, or empty vessels. They are living flesh, with blood, bones, organs and energies.

Even if bodies are inscribed, and forms of bodily pleasure produced, there is the (material) stuff which *interacts* with these processes.<sup>17</sup>

The point to be made in our theorising, she stresses, however, is 'that we can never *know* that materiality independently of its discursive determination'.<sup>18</sup> Cixous makes a similar point about the element of unrepresentability of our bodies, out of which comes the imagination of our writing:

body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style.<sup>19</sup>

The notion of writing as a practice, as a political intervention to produce new knowledges, here parallels Rothfield's construction of lived bodily practices (which might include *écriture féminine*) as active interventions. Countering the sense of bodies (as they are often represented) as passive, inert surfaces onto which inscriptions are etched and social practices played out, both Cixous and Rothfield regard bodies as active sites and even as resources for producing new kinds of knowledge. Consequently, both writing and bodies recover a sense of integrity and action in the interaction between bodily materiality and subjectivity. One of the things I like about Rothfield's writing is that by establishing 'anatomy' as a social construct she is able to speak quite comfortably about energies, acupuncture, Chinese medicine and shiatsu, which simply represent 'a different mapping of the body, elaborated in terms of energies, elements and meridians'.<sup>20</sup> Healing techniques regarded as 'other' or 'alternative' to Western medicine thus become viable equivalents which use different knowledge bases, rather than being relegated to the margins of Western scientific authority.

### Critical Readers

The theoretical implications of such writerly interventions are not so easily read in practice. Coombs includes not only a profusion of cultural texts vying for attention, but also disrupts the conventional expectations of a novel by including forms like telephone calls, a newspaper article, postcards, a short story, literary fragments, an interview with herself and letters to Argyle, to Jemima the baby, to Dorothy Green, to Nobody

and to a Piece of Paper. What's more, the narrator's own sense of abandonment is mimicked in her narrative by abandoning her readers to make their own sense of such a diverse pastiche of texts. In doing so she refuses the illusion that any text is passively available for us to read outside of its context:

well, as far as it's possible given that I've chosen them, I've edited them, I've given them titles, I've had the power to juxtapose this with that, to give or withhold dates of writing, things like that. You'll be as free as anybody ever is to think what you like! (191-192)

Coombs seems concerned to position her readers as critics, or at least to offer us a critical text to read, but the position she carves out for us is not always taken up willingly.

I have the experience of readers who read everything I've written and then still, I feel, don't 'get it'. I mean, that's sort of complicated too, but there was one woman who is a psychiatrist who read all my work and thought it was wonderful and then said she thought it was a pity that *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing* didn't have a more optimistic ending. Well I felt that spoilt the whole thing, do you know what I mean? So I do feel discouraged at those moments. (Margaret Coombs)

In many ways, the reception of Coombs's work seems to replay the contradictions she writes about in her novels. Writing against the grain of conventional values, Coombs is frustrated by readers who read against her grain to re-establish those values.

A lot of people tried to read and indeed a lot succeeded in reading *Regards to the Czar* as a very conventional, identify-with-the-heroine narrative, which I put quite a lot of effort into trying to prevent them doing. (Margaret Coombs)

The reviewers also had problems with the form the novel takes. Rose Lucas finds *Regards to the Czar* 'awkwardly constructed', as does Carmel Bird. Lucas and Helen Daniels also accuse Coombs of being 'too autobiographical'.<sup>21</sup>

This whole business of conflating women with their characters in fiction is a real problem. Especially for somebody like me whose work reads as, and to a large degree is, extremely autobiographical, as people usually use the word.

(Margaret Coombs)

The content and characterisation were repellent to some reviewers. Marion Halligan comments that ‘Too many stories in *Regards to the Czar* ... are catalogues of victimisation’.<sup>22</sup> Reminiscent of Helen’s mother’s voice, Halligan remarks, ‘“It’s not fair” ... is her favourite remark. Of course it isn’t. But however justified a whinge is, it’s not attractive’. Halligan’s desire for an ‘attractive’ central character is matched in tone by Carmel Bird who regards ‘irritating heroines [as] dangerous creatures to have in your fiction, especially when they are not funny, and Helen is not often funny’.<sup>23</sup> Judith White also laments the lack of humour as well as literary merit in Helen’s ‘spoilt girl’s whining’.<sup>24</sup> Adding to this list of faults implicitly associated with gender, Leon Trainor laments the lack of a strong story line, good, tight description and clear characterisation.<sup>25</sup> ‘Good’, ‘strong’ and ‘tight’ clearly sounds like Trainor wants Coombs’s writing to resemble a particular kind of male body. As Anne Cranny-Francis writes,

When criticism is so imbued with patriarchal assumptions that textual production is itself described in metaphors drawn from the male body and from masculine desire and sexuality as constructed by patriarchy, then its function as an engendering practice is obvious.<sup>26</sup>

As writing operates in discursive relation to networks of power and politics, so does reviewing as a writing practice. The reviews I have singled out so far are those that read Coombs’s novels through particular conventions which are concerned to re-establish the patriarchal codes the novels refuse: conventions about what fiction is ‘about’, how it should be structured, and codes of behaviour for female characters – and female authors – particularly when it comes to voicing protests against those codes. Like much patriarchal criticism, these conventions parade as universal criteria, as what Trainor calls ‘traditional literary virtues’, positioning their readers and the texts they review as patriarchal subjects.

Other reviewers had less trouble diluting the novel’s politics. Phillip



Siggins praises *The Best Man* as confronting, witty and racy in a sympathetic discussion without any reference to its feminist or even gender politics.<sup>27</sup> Kate Grenville neutralises any feminist politics in *Regards to the Czar* by stressing that 'these stories don't blame *men* for all this. In every story there's a female figure who is the real enforcer'.<sup>28</sup> Voicing her frustration that some people just 'don't get it', Coombs attributes these 'misreadings' of her work to a lack of critical knowledge,

The sooner, you know, everybody gets the education to problematise representation and read in a more sophisticated way, the easier it will be for writers to write. (Margaret Coombs)

and to her status as 'mere' writer, rather than writing theorist.

In 'Protect Me From What I Want' I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have a rigid, linear argument, stripped of all metaphors and so on ... But what happens is that unless you can somehow announce yourself to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be from somewhere and all that, it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a 'proper academic essay'. (Margaret Coombs)

Coombs addresses this trivialisation of fiction in another essay, 'The Myth of the Woman Writer as *Idiote Savante*', which, as she suggests in the title, is applied particularly to women. The essay was written largely in response to the reception of her first book and also reiterates its voice of discontent. She concludes,

To behave otherwise – to persistently keep quiet, stay 'modestly' in the background and let the fiction 'speak for itself' – to play along with myths like the myth of the woman writer as *idiote savante* – makes it only too easy for potentially subversive work to be assigned meanings that only help prop up exactly those hierarchies autonomy-oriented feminists like me are so anxious to undermine!<sup>29</sup>

Coombs was not alone in arguing that some readings reinforced the silencing which colludes with and reinscribes the systematic practices the novels challenge. In response to reviews of *Regards to the Czar*, Beth Spencer offered her analysis of the discursive power relations operating

in both the novel and its reception. She defends Coombs's work as,

a rare articulation of the victim's silence [which] reminds us of something so obvious but so obscured in our culture: that violence is never entirely random, abusers choose their victims; abuse and power are thus linked to certain kinds of bodies from childhood onwards; and abuse is not caused by silence, it generates it.<sup>30</sup>

Applying this to Coombs's critics, Spencer compares some of them to Helen's 'big brother' Mike who was distressed by the publication of her 'literary efforts' which he attributed to faults in her immature personality, exhorting her to grow up and be a more dutiful daughter.

Rosemary Sorensen and Jenna Mead suggest that writing that is experimental, subversive or interventionist urges a necessarily different reviewing practice: 'Like any other form of discourse, book reviews depend on a network of power and language ... "Feminist" writing disrupts the gendered economy of author and critic ... of patronage and patriarchy (author/father/progenitor and critic/son/inheritor)'.<sup>31</sup> Their reviewing, like my writing here, tries to be responsive and dialogic by incorporating a series of texts through which to read and review. The assumptions coded into much of Coombs's reception reinforce the inadequacy of certain representational structures to accommodate such work, in the same way that Kristeva's theories are problematic in conjunction with Walwicz's work. Irigaray argues that this is a characteristic of *écriture féminine* in that it will always have difficulty being categorised and regulated by conventional literary structures: 'Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand'.<sup>32</sup> Writing such as Coombs's opens up new possibilities of writing, and reading, through its contribution to the practice of *écriture féminine* and debates of theorising the body.

## Five

*A Fairytale Body?*

*Writing a Way Out of Anorexia in  
Fiona Place's Cardboard: The Strength  
Thereof and Other Related Matters*

There is a physical basis to modern patriarchal, phallocratic power, and it is not in armies and prisons and punishments – instruments of torture and restraint – but in bodies, and the pleasures and knowledges they enable.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking about the body of Margaret Coombs's Helen Ayling as a site on which patriarchal discourses converge to inscribe their power, Beth Spencer's analysis above could easily be applied to Lucy, the anorexic narrator of Fiona Place's novel *Cardboard: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters*. In tackling one of contemporary Western society's most fatal bodily inscriptions, Place focuses on the effects of language in writing the body. In the form of a novel that slips between poetry, prose and critique, Place challenges the medical and cultural discourses which name and produce anorexia nervosa. In doing so, she closely associates recovery with the rewriting of those dominant narratives, as Lucy's body is given form through the narrative shaping of her life. This writing practice puts into effect Cixous's words:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure.<sup>2</sup>

While *Cardboard* sometimes draws on the narrative structures of fairy-tale to facilitate the transformation of its heroine, the success of this story is in its writing.

### Where's That Girl?

Surprisingly, perhaps, Lucy's body takes up very little space in this text, despite its being the centre of attention. As narrator, Lucy matter-of-factly reports the punishment regimes and disciplines she metes out on herself: 'I always had things up my sleeve. Food to chuck. Or an arm to burn'.<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons I steered clear of the body in *Cardboard* was because I was sick to death of everyone assuming that anorexia had something to do with your body. I mean, I know that it does. But I think I just wanted to flesh it out in a much more psychic way, with ideas and feeling. But I felt that the body was a trap in that situation. (Fiona Place)

Lucy's feelings and her sense of embodiment are reduced to her reading of the scales every day and that mechanical measurement of her weight is the topic of pages of negotiation and surveillance. This detached method of narrating mimics the way patients as 'cases' are treated in hospitals as bodies to be observed and diagnosed. It contrasts with the way Coombs writes about Helen Ayling, who is acutely aware of every point of epistemic violence played out on her body and her subjectivity. In her review, Kate Veitch responds to this distancing technique by suggesting that, 'there is very little description of the physical self, the actual body, in *Cardboard*; perhaps the self-hatred is still too strong'.<sup>4</sup> Self-hatred is an assumption associated with the image of anorexia rather than the novel.

One woman asked me, 'Do you hate your body that much?', and I was really shocked. I mean, it wouldn't ever occur to me, because it's never been an issue for me. (Fiona Place)

The unproblematic conflation of author and narrator is characteristic of many of the reviews. The back cover, however, does promote the book as 'an unforgettable autobiographical account of a young woman's engulfment by anorexia nervosa and her eventual hard-won recovery'. It is also endorsed by a senior lecturer in psychiatry, suggesting this work of fiction has professional parallels.

Lucy's disembodiment in the book is not so surprising, though, given that her condition is named and produced through a scientific discourse. As Matra Robertson argues, 'it is against "reason" in Western society to starve oneself, and the self-starver finds herself rendered "reasonable" in society as "the anorexic patient"'.<sup>5</sup> Like Coombs's Helen, Lucy is also diagnosed as having '*endogenous* depression' (48) and is prescribed antidepressant and tranquillising drugs to render her more 'reasonable'. The universalising and depersonalised framework that constructs medical knowledge, however, is shown to erase personal differences. Lucy's personal experience at times does not match the classical model of anorexia. For example, she sometimes 'surprised them with the fact that in all this time I'd never stopped menstruating' (164). Lucy is quick to account for this anomaly, however, to place her case back in their terms and model of disease: 'I'd never had any hang-ups about periods. I'd also have to get them quickly off that topic in case they decided I wasn't truly anorexic' (165).

Like neurasthenia in the nineteenth century, Robertson claims that anorexia was created as a category so that the medical profession could make sense of seemingly non-sensical behaviour, rather than for the benefit of the person concerned. Anorexia, neurasthenia and hysteria all have a history of treatment which is often confining and which enforces passivity on to women, pathologising their bodies and delegitimising their knowledges and their expression. Feminist analyses often consider women's hystericised bodies as physically manifesting the contorted, confusing and controlled circumstances patriarchy offers female subjectivities. The hysteric, 'whose body is transformed into a theater',<sup>6</sup> becomes the site of spectacle, a display of excess similar to that of the anorexic. Elaine Showalter argues that at one stage 'hysterical' became 'almost interchangeable with "feminine" in literature, where it stood for all extremes of emotionality'.<sup>7</sup> While Place's text claims inclusivity of males and older women, it is significant that none enter into the context of this novel, and that the vast majority of anorexics are still young women (ninety five percent is usually cited).

Obviously with *Cardboard*, it was extremely important to write as a woman. (Fiona Place)

### An Anorexic Language

Matra Robertson argues that 'the possibility of a woman's experiencing anorexia nervosa is as much a result of her place within language and patriarchy as it is an indication of her "pathology"'.<sup>8</sup> The terminology in which anorexia is discussed is therefore significant. In her analysis of the romanticisation of tuberculosis and the horror associated with cancer in literature, Susan Sontag argues that before the medical aetiology of an illness becomes known the condition becomes embedded in language as a cultural metaphor accumulating a barrage of not necessarily related meanings.<sup>9</sup> The language and metaphors used in discussing anorexia are sated with associative meanings. The symptoms of anorexia are often described in terms of excess: *severe* weight loss, *overly preoccupied* with food, *relentless* exercising, delusions of being *too* fat, bingeing, compulsive, secretive, obsessive. Treatment, therefore, is intent on forcing this spectacle of excess to more 'normal' proportions, on restoring the status quo which requires (symbolic) order rather than disorder in our

eating habits. The pioneering work of Hilda Bruch leads Bryan Turner to suggest that 'becoming sick is like becoming a member of a social (and therefore linguistic) community', and that an important facet of interpreting anorexia lies in 'the language by which "victims" describe their complaints'.<sup>10</sup> This language is learned from doctors, as Lucy tells us: 'I used their language. I wanted them to like me' (164). And it is also maintained by media representations. Drawing on work by Marilyn Lawrence, Robertson argues that these two avenues actually produce conditions like anorexia by publicising lists of symptoms for people to adopt. Place's novel engages directly with such discursive formations through its form as well as content.

One significant feature and departure from other forums of discussion about anorexia is Place's use of three distinct narrative voices: these displace the authority of any single viewpoint but all reinforce Place's argument. Firstly, there is the anorexic Lucy who tells her story in first person present prose. Her narrative is supplemented by a voice/text made physically separate by its poetic form in free verse. Written in the third person, it comments and critiques, supports and justifies Lucy's narrative as if in hindsight, and from a confident position within the discourse over which Lucy seeks control. This has the effect of a dialogue between two worlds, indicated by prose and verse. Discussing the benefits of 'self starving women' writing about themselves, Robertson finds that 'by switching from the third person to the first person, women can experience the ways in which the subject is located within the various discourses about anorexia'.<sup>11</sup> Place's report as writer-in-residence at the psychiatry unit, Prince Henry Hospital, reinforces this sense of displacement and objectification experienced by patients:

they talk *about* themselves rather than *as* themselves. Their dominant life narrative seems to be that of their problem rather than how they experience life. And their contact with the logo-scientific mode of thought used extensively in psychiatry seems only to intensify these feelings of objectification.<sup>12</sup>

This linguistic practice is critiqued in the novel by a third narrative voice in blocks of bold type-face. Adopting a documentary-like manner, this voice employs the same techniques medical discourse uses to register its authority. As if to highlight this mimicking of authority, the poetic

voice still freely interrupts and supplements the 'bold' narrative. Far from colluding with the disembodied 'objectivity' of medical science, however, this bold narrator recommends a more subjective and personal reconceptualising of patients and their treatment.

The first of these segments establishes Place's thesis: that anorexia nervosa **'is first and foremost a language problem'** (97). The language of medicine, the text argues, is **'imbued with middle class ideology'** (97) and, as Margaret Coombs's stories also assert, exerts part of its control over patients through an often baffling and inaccessible jargon in which only their physicians have 'expertise' (97). Part of the alienating effects of clinical discourse is its refusal to **'acknowledge the sub-texts'** (162). Place suggests that one of the disadvantages anorexics experience is their inability to identify and decode the metaphoric meanings and nuances of language:

The person with anorexia nervosa has, for various reasons, often failed to pick up the sub-texts of language that her/his peers use to decode the double meanings and messages given to them by parents, teachers and the media. (137)

Lucy is acutely aware of media representations that signal how her life is meant to be lived, despite her difficulties with decoding subtexts. Moreover, she recognises them as romanticised constructions which she actively resists:

the ideal woman with her loving Volvo owning family, Alfa Romeoed boyfriend, close girlfriends and *Cosmopolitan Magazine* type problems ... I knew no one had such a magazine neat life. (17)

She also uses this awareness of cultural codes to manoeuvre herself into being recognised and categorised as anorexic by medical personnel: 'I tried to convince him that I was like all other anorexics. That I was extremely concerned with my appearance' (34). Her adoption of the 'beauty myth' discourse guarantees her a position within their system: 'I was sure she'd think I was OK if I told her I wanted to be attractive to men. Not that I could ever imagine losing weight to please a male' (16).

In contrast to this lucid account of her manipulation of clinical expectations, Lucy's explanation and understanding of her disease



elsewhere is based on 'sound intellectual reasoning. On *e*' (16):

she got to  
the stage  
where she was  
scared of  
the letter *e*

...

I'd hide the newspaper just to escape the employment section, I'd even block my ears when the newspaper boy blew his whistle. I used to go for days without eating, just to forget I existed and as for ego, I concentrated on being ethereal. Emptiness was my biggest *e*. I seemed to find it everywhere. (16)

Her long-term psychiatrist is Dr E, who becomes part of the problem associated with 'e's. Dr E has institutional authority in his presence and in his knowledge of theory: he 'was always there' and 'he knew / knew about / theory' (142). His theories, however, become the tools of inscription and description of and for Lucy: '**In making the necessary clinical notes the psychiatrist shapes the experience into his clinical terms**' (163). Lucy's feelings then become circumscribed by that discourse: 'I could hardly remember how I used to describe things before I met psychiatry' (164). One feeling that does remain 'outside' of (clinical) language, is Lucy's panic attacks, which she can only name 'it'.

### Looking and Touching

Part of the 'problem' is that Dr E's presence completely subsumes Lucy's, and he refuses to acknowledge her as an embodied patient. 'Looking' becomes an intense focus for Lucy's narrative of Dr E: she can only remember him in terms of his navy jacket and pink chairs. His refusal to register the personal transfers Lucy's dysfunctional family drama around him, as a new site of resistance and dependence:

The baby fear/set up rejection. And abandonment.  
Only Dr E knew about that. That's why he was always there. Always.  
But without arms.

the lack of arms  
meant mother

couldn't hug  
the baby

let it know  
mother knew

the baby had to  
cold experience  
theory

And all my rational textbooked reasoning as to why he couldn't have  
arms for me couldn't convince me that touching should be forbidden.  
(142-43)

Lucy's conflation of psychiatrist and mother pivots on her desire to be  
hugged as an indication of acceptance and love. In direct contrast to  
Coombs's Dr Argyle, Dr E's disinterested objectivity towards Lucy's body  
is experienced as alienating. Accounted for in terms of control, it is 'the  
control of mother' (143). The control exerted by Lucy's mother is later  
explained in descriptions of her health regimes. These were,

related to money and not to me personally. It wasn't that she was into  
being trendy or wanted me to look nice. Teeth cost money. Skin cancer  
would cost us money later on.

she took  
machine rigid  
care of the outer (260)

Her mother's regimes are in direct response to her economic powerlessness. She is dependent on her husband who is mean with money. Lucy's father was 'into rituals, obsessed by the war and into rules' (331). His rules are about touching – about not touching the television controls, the stereo, the heater. Lucy's impulse to burn her arms with cigarette butts mutilates the limbs primarily extended for and to touch. In a perverse way this act connects her to the lack of arms extended to her by Dr E and her parents, who become enmeshed in the same drama:

I'm repeating the old script, the one with my parents, but this time I've  
written Egmond into it, he's the one who now acts in the role of the  
loved one. I've set up parental rejection once more. (176)

Irigaray suggests that touch is particularly familiar to women, 'whose genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact'. This is something positive and self-fulfilling, in that 'woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid herself to do so'.<sup>13</sup> Lucy, on the other hand, craves touch from others. In this novel, however, the connection between touch and sexuality is developed in conjunction with its link to food.

## **Appetites**

Food and sexuality are linked in many cultures through the mechanisms of desire. Robertson notes that the mouth and the breast are regarded as erogenous zones in Western society, and sexuality can be discussed in terms interchangeable with eating: 'Women can be described as 'spicy', 'a dish', 'good enough to eat', and men as 'meat', 'a hunk'.<sup>14</sup> Sweet foods are especially used as terms of familiarity (honey, sweetheart, sugar, peach) and Rosalind Coward argues that these linguistic links are applied actively as well as descriptively:

language suggests that the desire for sexual relations is like the desire for food. We have sexual *appetites*, we *hunger* for love, we *eat* out our hearts, *feast* our eyes and have *devouring* passions. And like any meal, we can overdo it and expect a bout of lovesickness.<sup>15</sup>

The mouth is the threshold of eating, speaking and sexual pleasure but Deborah Thompson maintains that it is a gendered site. Arguing that the relation between women and food is part of an economy of commodity exchange, Thompson notes in her study of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' that 'while esthetic [sic], erotic and economic consumption may converge for men at the site of women's bodies, they converge for women in 'Goblin Market' at the site of food'.<sup>16</sup>

In our media age, the use of women's bodies to sell goods through advertising emphasises the inscription of women's bodies as consumable commodities. Irigaray argues: 'woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity'.<sup>17</sup> Women are trained to participate in this regime for the perfect, desirable body through the highly profitable and culturally powerful diet industry which encourages food use in relation to body image rather than appetite. It therefore follows that *all* women will have a complex

relationship to food which is both emotional and symbolic. Sally Cline argues that 'women have access to food in a way that they do not have access to power', and that our attitudes to food are inextricably linked to the sexual dynamics of our culture.<sup>18</sup> In *Cardboard*, Lucy's restriction of food involves the control of desire, but not necessarily desire for food. The recovery of her body involves the production of her female sexuality.

## Desires

If sexual desire is part of the plot for this anorexic's recovery story, then Tim functions to make Lucy acknowledge and accept her sexuality and material specificity as a woman. There is a shift in the operations of desire when Tim enters the scene, from Lucy's committed relationship to her scales as a vehicle for attaining 'purity', to her investment in Tim as someone she is allowed to visit, to look at, to reach out to and hug – to find desirable. One of her major 'breakthroughs' is when she has 'finally done something about the desire. To hug' (292). Tim breaks the rules Lucy's former experience of psychiatry had established between patient and doctor because he voices his feelings. He becomes a new focus for the acceptance Lucy sought from her father/mother/Dr E, but he transforms it from a parental focus to an adult sexuality. Lucy's displacement from her sexual body is retrieved in fragments: 'the woman began / to own parts of / herself' (258). This is a new and empowering feeling for Lucy as she gets in touch with her matured female body:

The world had changed.

I was ecstatic.

Some vital part had found its way back to me.

My arms joined my body as though they really belonged to me, almost as though I belonged to me. (186)

The text suggests, therefore, that sexuality is an important factor in this anorexic's relation to language, despite Lucy's assertions that her weight-loss is not driven by a desire to be attractive to a male. While the narrative is concerned to unravel the subtexts of language, and in particular the sexual agenda, Tim's facilitation of this is ambivalent given the critique of psychiatry in the novel.

Dr E and Tim contrast the difference between an object-relations theorist (Dr E) and a self-psychology theorist (Tim) and the attributions each associates to certain effects (emotions). There are also issues of generational differences. (Fiona Place)

Relations between Lucy and Tim become the driving force of the narrative, in the same way that romances operate, to the extent that Lucy Sussex can comment that, 'instead of a knight in white armour, who will rescue the heroine from Castle Psyche, we have here a dominant male in a lab coat'.<sup>19</sup>

I know there are a few feminists that got really angry at me that I had a male protagonist, like the doctor should have been a woman. And I say to them, 'Well look, life is more complex than that'. It's not as simple as wanting it to be completely and utterly some feminist statement. (Fiona Place)

The romance narrative is extremely seductive in the process of reading: I wonder if it can be compared to Mary Ann Doane's study of 'women's films' of the 1940-50's? She notes that the figure of the doctor in those plots functions 'as reader or interpreter, as the site of a knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity'.<sup>20</sup> She posits this as a transference of 'the erotic gaze' to 'the clinical eye'. In the films she samples, there is a structural pattern whereby the hysterical, psychotic or dis-eased woman undergoes a visual transformation; this is registered through her body, which provides the somatic fabric for the inscriptions which signal her psychological state. More specifically, her cultural alienation is marked as a deterioration of her beauty or sexual attractiveness. Doane remarks that in these films, 'the woman's "cure" consists precisely in a beautification of body/face. The doctor's work is the transformation of the woman into a specular object'.<sup>21</sup>

Although Place's novel does not exactly reproduce this established narrative pattern, there are some obvious correspondences. The male doctors in the novel are readers and interpreters of Lucy's body and they also offer her a discourse which positions her so that they can read her. Dr E, although able to read the sign of Lucy, fails to rehabilitate her as he cannot 'see' her as spec(tac)ular: their eyes never meet. Tim, on the other hand, immediately sees and confronts her sexuality, suggesting

that he will 'discover' a woman in her (179). The conflation of Tim's 'clinical eye' and 'erotic gaze' are in fact the reason for his 'success' with Lucy.

As in *Pygmalion* and the story of the ugly duckling, Tim's transformation of Lucy entails making her look the part. When Tim begins encouraging Lucy to go out with Jackie, detailed descriptions of her clothes appear. Prior to her last session with Tim, dress becomes excruciatingly important to her, in a curious step toward that *Cosmopolitan* lifestyle previously critiqued. It takes planning and preparation to dress 'appropriately' for him, as she consults her friend, Jackie: 'we moved onto the matter of clothes. And decided on black. Madonna style, with the fake pearls and the wide leather belt' (358). Madonna provides an ambiguous model of dress. As an icon of popular culture, in the late 1980s she represented a distinctly provocative sexuality, autonomous and in control, like the screen vamps she modelled. However, as David Tetzlaff comments,

for all of Madonna's independence, for all of her power, she still offers her image as an object of the gaze – looking hot, tantalizingly cosmetized and costumed, ready and waiting for whatever use her audience may wish to make of her.<sup>22</sup>

Lucy's cure-beautification-sexualisation seems complete now that she is no longer a dag, her outward appearance conforming to the codes of popular culture.

Couldn't Lucy be doing any of these things for herself? Couldn't she want to do the Madonna look for herself as well as Tim? Isn't she empowering herself? Maybe she wants to be a sexual object!! (Fiona Place)

## Fairytales

As well as casting Tim as the site of (sexual and psychiatric) knowledge which comes to shape Lucy's subjectivity, as in the women's films Doane examines, the narrative could easily be read as having a fairytale ring to it as Lucy is 'saved' by the handsome Tim. The end of the novel is jubilantly optimistic even though it avoids the 'happily ever after'

resolution, and leaves us in suspense as to whether Lucy and Tim get together when they are no longer patient and doctor.

Are you sure Lucy is saved by the handsome Tim? Couldn't Lucy have saved herself? Couldn't she have worked at making the experience with Tim what she wanted and made it work for her? Is she so helpless it has to be read he did this for her? Such a reading only perpetuates her role as helpless woman. (Fiona Place)

Another reading might construct Lucy as the agent of her own socialisation, but then what function would Tim serve other than someone who finally takes notice of her? Tim's institutional authority cannot be ignored even in his personal relationships. I'm not certain this reading would be so enabling for Lucy, anyway. Falling in love isn't a solution except in romance and fairytale plots, which I argue this narrative hints at but doesn't go all the way. So how does such a plot function for this story?

Like all stories, fairytales convey powerful, and powerfully gendered, messages. Their connection to discussions of anorexia seems particularly relevant. The application of the fairytale grid to the life of the Princess of Wales accommodated her much publicised anorexia so easily that it almost seems a mandatory part of the tale now. Women's magazines continued to zoom in on her body shape and exercise patterns even after the 'fairytale marriage' took quite a different plot. One analysis of anorexia in a women's health bulletin is written in the form of an allegory about Beauty and the Beast, as 'to the sufferer of anorexia or bulimia nervosa, food becomes a metaphor for what is monstrous about herself'.<sup>23</sup> The stories Lucy tells Dr Rainer from her notebook are also in the form of allegory; despite her apparent difficulty with subtexts, the story of the ant and the giants (103) is transparently about herself. Cixous also writes a variation on the theme of the 'Beauty and the Beast' fairytale:

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

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable: all mystery

emanates from them. It is men who like to play dolls. As we have known since Pygmalion. Their old dream: to be god the mother. The best mother, the second mother, the one who gives the second birth.<sup>24</sup>

Rewriting the old tales of beautiful princesses waiting for their beast/prince has been part of women putting themselves into the text – ‘as into the world and into history – by her own movement’.<sup>25</sup> At one stage Lucy recognises the power of stories when she feels ‘bewildered’ by ‘the jungle of myths’ (304) and directly links them to the same source as psychiatry: ‘pen in hand I wondered what part psychiatry had played in their continuing deep hold on me. Had it subtly exuded the belief in everlasting love, in commitment and permanency?’ (304)

### Tales of Writing

One of the most significantly enabling actions in *Cardboard* is Lucy’s copious writings in her notebooks which she pens obsessively in times of crisis and which ultimately lead to the writing of *Cardboard*. She begins her notebook in hospital to ‘plot trace’ (84) her thoughts.

I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed in phallogocentric discourse ... it’s men that set up the way we talk about the world. So I think women’s writing can do interesting things in at least showing women how they’ve been positioned, where they are in language, and how they might at least try to redefine their sense of self. (Fiona Place)

This is Cixous’s reasoning in calling for women to write themselves, to write their bodies as an act of healing and reclaiming those bodies and their pleasures:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.<sup>26</sup>

I would hope that it does deal with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and it maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does interesting things with them. (Fiona Place)



Lucy is astonished and uncomfortable with some of the poems she writes. There are the 'blatantly romantic' Max poems (whose name is later used interchangeably with Tim's) and the 'prostitute poems ... the spit jinxed tart thing with Joe cool puffing on his smoke' (249). Lucy is aware of her deep cultural connections to modes of representation when she writes, 'that wasn't how things really were/are ... I was merely representing the myths' (356). The poems and her notebook entries are not given much emphasis in the narrative. They seem to be one of the 'Other Related Matters' of the title, while the cardboard on which Lucy's next appointment with Tim is written is given greater strength and value. The apparent relegation of her writings as one of her obsessive behaviours submerges their final value in writing her a way out of the story of her 'condition'.

As a story of one anorexic's recovery, *Cardboard* contrasts the usual coverage of anorexia nervosa in its suggestion of ways out of rather than ways into the condition.

I have to say that it is only one person's experience of anorexia, that people experience it in different ways. But one of my main reasons was for people to understand that process of recovery ... that process of putting it all together and that people can come out of that whole experience. (Fiona Place)

The importance of this writing is borne out in Place's life. She received the first grant of its kind from the Australia Council to serve as writer-in-residency at the psychiatry unit at Prince Henry Hospital. Her report in *Australian Feminist Studies* acknowledges the impact of feminist thought on such interventions into clinical discourse. The writing and reading courses she ran encouraged patients to write with a voice of their own, a project which is optimistically summed up in her last paragraph:

People, through the use of narrative and poetry can re-write their lives, can reconstruct their subjectivity and thus re-map their past and create new possibilities for their future.<sup>27</sup>

The writing and publication of *Cardboard* have also made an impact on readers who recognise their experience in parts of the story.

I get a lot of people who will ring me up and say, My daughter's got anorexia, can you help me? So, I think it has had a meaningful reception within that community. (Fiona Place)

Most hopeful is the novel's intervention into some practices of psychiatry.

I had one psychiatrist ring me up out of the blue and she said, 'You know, my patient and I, she reads a chapter out of the book each week and then comes and talks about it, and she can only talk about it to talk about her own personal experience.' Now, I would never have intended *Cardboard* to be used in that fashion, but, if that helps. (Fiona Place)

Taking one particular anorexic body as its central concern, then, this text is filled with words; with the operations of language which name and produce such bodies, and with other voices and stories which might reshape and reclaim those bodies; with subtexts, competing discourses, and readings inscribed onto the body of a self-starving woman,

And also I suppose it was a book of hope, you know?: that things can change. (Fiona Place)

## Six

*No End to Romance? Sexual Economies  
in Inez Baranay's Between Careers*

Like *Cardboard*, Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* uses the romance plot for its narrative drive. Baranay, however, more explicitly holds the device and its ideological foundations up for scrutiny. Where Lucy's romance is left speculatively open-ended, Baranay writes off Vita's romance and then dares to write on (and have Vita write) beyond those (hetero)sexual relationships, in an effort to imagine alternative plots for lifestories. Divided into two parts and a coda, the novel begins as far from romance as possible by charting Vita's career as a call-girl.

### Prostitution

Vita works under the pseudonym of Violet in a job which is often slipped between the covers of 'legitimate' careers, or, as Vita describes it, is 'between careers'.<sup>1</sup> In a desire to divide her life neatly between night and day, work and home, Vita constructs a separate identity as Violet, but Violet never quite takes the borders between the real and fantasy seriously: 'Violet was only an invention but she had her own existence' (3). Vita/Violet's split identity resembles what Irigaray argues is the effect of women's position in patriarchy as an exchangeable commodity:

*A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies': her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.*<sup>2</sup>

Vita's conscious act of splitting her identity into Vita and Violet is part of her contract with the patriarchal economy in which she operates. It is a rupture which she is compelled to signify visually: when a call comes for Violet, Vita transforms her body according to the fashion code required to indicate her commodification:

'will I put on something else? Maybe the top needs to look a bit more tarty ...' She took out her high heels and splashed scent over herself. She was already wearing gorgeous underclothes: a personal indulgence learned from Violet and taken up full time. Catherine watched the transformation. (62)

Unlike Place's Lucy, Vita is aware of the inscriptions urged on to her as a sexualised woman, and as a sex worker she exaggeratedly mimics patriarchal expectations and fantasies. In this light, prostitution can be

seen as a transfer of male fantasies onto real women's bodies. But while their fantasies are realised, Vita is left juggling the contradictions involved in being someone else's living fantasy.

She is ambivalent about having to make her own body into an object, not only to be looked at but also to be bought and (ab)used. She is aware of her 'collaboration with the enemy':

the most reprehensible part of Violet's collaboration was the perpetuation of the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl. She never nags; she is never dreary; she never has bad moods; she never demands; she never, seriously, thinks. (14)

While recognizing her complicity with those patriarchal myths, however, she enjoys the 'indulgences' this license carries. Her high heels are an especially fetishized symbol of her trade which she flaunts, luxuriating in their symbolism:

Once she steps into them the transformation is complete. The high heels elongate her calves, creating a lovely long curve. They are simply, wickedly beautiful. They symbolise both vulnerability and domination. They make her feel both helpless and powerful. It seems so wrong that they look so lovely and are so crippling, so damaging. (17)

Baranay's account of prostitution from a woman's point of view is filled with these competing motives. The power which Vita and her boss, Pamela, gain in receiving money for her body is weighed up against the lack of that transactory and economic power in conventional heterosexual relationships. There is also an awareness of the illusions involved in any gain which requires providing sexual services for men at their whim. Feminist concerns are neatly woven into conversations with women friends: 'Sometimes Vita got the approving verdict: "Make them pay!" Other times she was challenged with the proposition that selling women's bodies is oppressing and degrading' (54). The questions her friends ask of Vita are given slick answers, which often sound as though she is justifying her actions to herself. The omniscient narrator remarks, 'Vita went on thinking she knew all the answers' (55), which effectively leaves the ethical questions open, unanswered.

The idea that sexuality is a commercial and commodifiable product under patriarchy is constantly highlighted by the text. This paradigm is

not restricted to sex-workers, however, but is applied to all women operating within a culture which, Irigaray argues, 'is based upon the exchange of women':

The same way many women 'feel like a whore' with a man.  
(Inez Baranay)

The chapter called 'Taste and Distaste' documents the trade of women included in business trips, and directly links this commerce to the 'advice' invested in women's magazines:

'How do you actually do it?' Vita's friends would ask, the sex part of it, they meant ... Well, you just *do* it; you imitate; you pretend ... Magazine articles on how to please your husband when you have a headache (and he doesn't) will tell you the same thing. (15-16)

This analysis of heterosexual relations has been available since at least 1888 when Mona Caird described marriage and prostitution as 'twin systems': 'Prostitution is as inseparable from our present marriage customs as the shadow from the substance. They are the two sides of the same shield'.<sup>3</sup> Christine Overall has reiterated that claim in more contemporary political terms:

Like rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and incest, prostitution is inherently gendered, a component and manifestation of the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Sheila Jeffreys has analysed and campaigned against heterosexuality, which she sees as a political institution designed to uphold a social system based on male supremacy, whereby,

each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps, or even sheds at the bottom of the garden. In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying 'their' man as part of the enemy. Any woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger.<sup>5</sup>

In line with that perception of the patriarchal model of sexuality, the differences between exchanging sex for money or through love are dissolved in Baranay's text. The sex workers despise women who 'gave it away' (54), and Vita recognizes her own 'desires' in operation while on the job. Sheila Jeffreys points out that,

Men experience orgasms whilst killing women. Girls and women can have orgasms during rape and sexual abuse and then spend years in guilt and shame for 'enjoying' what happened to them. In fact the body is capable of physiological responses quite unconnected with an emotional state of 'pleasure'.<sup>6</sup>

While the theorising of desire has been debated by feminists, Sheila Jeffreys maintains it is virtually impossible without 'a new language, and a new way of categorising our sexual feelings'.<sup>7</sup> In Baranay's text, these philosophical and theoretical issues are set alongside the slipping and sliding of bodily fluids and flesh, which constitute Violet's life.

### **Roles and Romances**

Although individual needs differentiate the clients, the men are very much the same – 'they were as infinitely variable as they were monotonous' (54). The section, 'The Way it Goes', slips from one client to the next as the text moves from one paragraph to the next. The last line of each paragraph is repeated as the first line of the next, emphasizing the repetitiveness of Vita's work and men's finite requirements. This montage of scenes has an almost cinematic quality. The next chapter, 'The Sex Part', scripts the combinations of roles available, which become predictably limited within the scope of this sexual play:

He moans, she sighs. He yells, she cries out. He doesn't make a sound, she's dead, slowly coming alive. She places her hands to check his heart. He's already quietly finished. He's just starting, building up speed, ready to pound furiously, announce his arrival; a fanfare. (24)

And again, at the end of this routine, the imagined division between 'real' and role is questioned: 'There's something about it that's rather like the real thing' (25). While Violet's actions are consciously constructed to conform to her character, the text suggests that the 'real thing' also needs to be examined in this light.

In Part Two, this imagined separation is collapsed when 'romance' is written into Vita's 'real' life. The construction of this romance is invested with the same theatrical discourse as prostitution. Violet is called out to meet an actor, and it is his recognition that Violet is as an actor playing a role which renders him 'different' from other clients. Throughout their talk about theatre and film, Violet 'sat there, wide-eyed, knowing it was a game' (64), while Brian's 'amused and knowing' looks were 'like a kind of acknowledgement of herself that included Violet as the façade' (64). This is disturbing: 'she felt as if Violet were being given cues meant for another character' (65). Brian's inclusion of Violet among 'people like us' lays bare their complicity as actors, but when Brian rings the escort agency to request Violet, in a chapter titled 'Other Roles', he insists he is 'not confusing the player with the part' (72). In a text loaded with theatrical language, however, they both become simultaneously players and audience: 'They were together performing and watching a staged romance' (73). Vita has pondered the possibility of combining a relationship with her work:

I took a look at all the stories about such unconventional liaisons – they all proved that a man who believed the promises of a whore was a fool and was inevitably had; that an unvirtuous woman who believed she could be both purchased and loved was a sad victim and was inevitably broken. I knew these stories had nothing to do with me. I had already decided to start making up some new stories. (89)

Despite wanting to create new stories for herself, Vita seems to slip into old ones all too easily at this stage. The endearments Brian and Vita exchange on the telephone are clichés, locking Vita into yet another role, a role that inevitably competes with her career – when she rushes one client to get to Brian, for example. The formal economy of Violet's work arrangements also intrude on her understanding of romance: when Brian leaves his payment she feels distinctly uncomfortable.

... and what is romance? You could say Violet's encounters were the more 'romantic'. (Inez Baranay)

As she lays bare the mechanics of sexuality as they operate in prostitution, Baranay makes it clear that romance cannot succeed within this narrative economy.



Part One of the novel charts the 'work' of bodies: their movements, shapes, and disabilities, their transactions and roles in the exchange of power and pretence. Deconstructed, power structures in sexual relationships become levers which dislodge the concept of romance – 'jamming the theoretical machinery itself', as Irigaray advocates.<sup>8</sup> Having done this, Baranay goes on to explore the power of writing to invent alternative storylines for life-narratives, and *Between Careers* becomes one of the 'new stories' of which Vita speaks.

### Writing Endings

One of the primary components of the romance genre is its resolution – the traditional happy ending in marriage, a social contract which seals women's position as subordinate labourer.<sup>9</sup> Within Vita's life, however, conventional beginnings and endings are deferred. While chapter eleven describes her getting started in prostitution, chapter ten recounts the finish: 'Soon after that Violet was no longer to be found. There is no chronology in my sordid history' (36). Vita's story is thus structured to subvert the closure and resolution of a happy ending, but Baranay is then faced with the problem of how to end her novel. In the title of her book, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis names this strategy, which she has located in twentieth century women's writing, as an effort to redefine the ideological foundations which operate through the trope of romance:

As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success ... In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative.<sup>10</sup>

By severing the narrative from these conventions, women writers 'formulate a critique of heterosexual romance'.<sup>11</sup> Baranay speaks of writing an ending as 'a wonderful challenge, to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for it':

And of course, in life, in everything there's no such thing as an ending. So that is kind of the ultimate artifice in a way,

where you end something, isn't it? ... And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end is not to be a victim poses a question too ... Especially writing about experiences that are meant to disempower and degrade women like in *Between Careers*. A lot of people couldn't handle that aspect of it, that it wasn't about being destroyed by those experiences. So you have to kind of write about a sense of something gained that mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either. (Inez Baranay)

Baranay writes the end of her novel as a coda, a strategy which attracted the particular – and frequently hostile – attention of reviewers, presumably because of its deviation from convention. Marian Eldridge writes that the coda 'doesn't have sufficient weight compared with earlier parts to fulfil its purpose adequately'.<sup>12</sup> Rosemary O'Grady wrote it off as 'eccentric' and Dennis Davison calls it 'curious', but then confesses that he didn't understand the device.<sup>13</sup>

The coda is initially disconcerting: it introduces many new characters, has a completely different setting and a new time frame. Vita is the only apparent link with the previous parts of the novel, and she is now a celibate writer. But it is her desire for new stories and new forms of writing, and the text's enactment of that desire, which makes the coda important. In part two Vita tells us,

One of my new stories was about living life without being obsessed by The Relationship ... What most people settled for was not what I had in mind for myself ... I wanted a way of life that I had not yet seen. (90)

A way of life without The Relationship is also described in a short story by Baranay called 'Living Alone: The New Spinster (Some Notes)'. There, the decision to live alone is a personal one: 'I am obsessive, moody, self-indulgent. I do not wish to change nor to see anyone put up with that'.<sup>14</sup> But it is also political: 'Living alone is about not living with men'. This new spinster has replaced the negative connotations of spinsterhood with freedom and contentment, with the indulgence of being able to

watch TV at 3am, sleep at 7pm. red wine in the morning and breakfast at night and no-one cares. You don't have to put clothes on, you can cry for no reason and talk out loud to yourself.<sup>15</sup>

In the coda to *Between Careers*, Vita is living alone in order to write. She is minding house for her old friend, Catherine, who is one of those who 'travel with their good jobs with the ABC' (103). Catherine's decision to return to work at the ABC was previously discussed as a form of prostitution, but Vita finds herself in an even more compromising situation with her writing. She would like to write 'a real play', in which she can 'make up the future' (111), but is instead employed in writing strictly formulaic science fiction dramas. Vita resents these 'obsolescent adolescent futuristic fantasies' and finds their potential for self-fulfilment dangerous: 'It's like, that's what the vision is, and if you accept this vision then you support the belief in developing that way. Muscly white men rescuing pretty girls in long dresses' (106). She finds herself powerless because she 'wasn't the one writing the storylines' (107). The prostitution of Vita's writing abilities in constructing fantasies for male readers is more invasive and offensive to Vita than her enactment of male fantasies as a sex worker. Her celibacy indicates a rejection of both prostitution and romance as storylines. Sheila Jeffreys sees what she terms 'chastity' as an 'honourable choice' in the struggle for liberation:

Such a strategy could only cause disbelief in a male-supremacist society in which sex has been made holy. Sex is holy because of its role as a sacred ritual in the dominant/submissive relationship between men and women. The importance attached to sex defies rationality and can only be explained in this political way.<sup>16</sup>

The coda discusses sexuality as a form of 'personal energy that you can turn into surfing or writing or sex' (104) and entertains some 'alternative' and 'Eastern' concepts of spirituality.

Also the Foucault idea that the emphasis on sexuality is to silence other desires. (Inez Baranay)

Despite this effort to throw off the cloak of Western androcentricity, these discourses still feel inadequate: as Joe says, 'I hate saying spiritual. But now no-one has any models' (110).

### **A Satisfactory Ending**

Joe and Judith are two characters who provide sexual/spiritual models to explore in the coda's time frame. Joe's promiscuous homosexual

presence acts as a site of conflict as the 1980s herald the deadly threat of AIDS. While apparently seeking a new way to conceptualise sexuality – to reinscribe himself – Joe is nevertheless guileless in his pursuit of high-risk sex. He implies that this danger is part of the attraction. In some ways, Joe is represented as no different to the men who pay Violet: ‘Want lots, fast and exciting, finishing at the peak’ (109). He tells Vita he would ‘give it all up’ if ‘there was one last time that was perfect, couldn’t be topped. I asked him his perfect scenario; it included several people and several drugs, videos and opulence’ (116).

Joe is granted his ‘happy ending’ by the text: he retraces his steps to look for the elegant old white building in which his remembered night of sexual exultation took place, but finds the structure was demolished twenty years ago. In its place stands a red-brick townhouse development. His ‘experience’ was a fantasy which ended two decades before it began, and Baranay keeps it as such, stored in the mind of the character rather than imposed on ‘real’ bodies. Joe’s response to this realisation is to feel cheated, but in recompense he elevates the experience through spiritual language, as ecstasy, exquisite salvation, exultation, reaching eternity’s boundaries (125). But Joe’s claims are again undercut by the text, and he is left listening to ‘a rundown of the changing real-estate values of the street’ (126). The yoking of economics and fantasy here seems ludicrously inappropriate, even irreverent, in direct contrast to Vita’s exchanges as a prostitute.

### **Desires Without End**

In contrast to his flamboyant fantasies of excess, Joe responds pessimistically to Vita’s ‘perfect scenario’, which involves fairly conventional literary desires:

I told him I wanted just one person, but everything. True love and anonymity, security and adventure, stability and variety, vigorous youth and wise age, respect and...

‘Oh enough,’ he said. ‘What do you want most?’

‘Love and romance.’

‘You’ll never get it.’ (116)

Joe is also shocked to find a stash of pornographic videos while he minds Judith’s flat. (Minding other people’s ‘houses’ is a way to explore other

sexual lives/stories in this novel.) Judith is presented as almost asexual. The gowns she wears, which she sketches, paints, prints and sews herself, express her personality, privacy and dignity and seem to offer her a haven of self-protection, covering her body in a cloak of comfort and mystery. Lesley, her boss at the casting agency, calls them nuns' habits, while Vita regards Judith as 'unsexy – good looking, but sexy – in those robes and drapes' (115). There is a myriad of sexual descriptors operating here. While 'drapes' speak of folds of domestic coverings, 'gown' has completely different connotations. It especially signifies women as (potential) sexual partners in formalised courting rituals like balls, high school dances and weddings. It is also the antithesis of the celibacy implied by nuns' habits. Baranay speaks of Judith's gowns representing a 'creative alternative to sexuality':

I was thinking also about celibacy not as negation of sexuality; but as another way in which to acknowledge/explore it.

(Inez Baranay)

Watching the x-rated videos, Judith 'watches herself watching them, alert for her own reactions. What is this remote, unreal feeling? Is this what people feel?' (121). Immediately afterwards, she approaches the fabric stretched out in her sewing room awaiting transformation into the curtains she has dreamed of in 'various greens lit with pale gold and shadowed in purple' (122). She keeps the videos in her sewing cupboard. Side by side: her means of creativity and a commercial production of actors playing out their sexual roles.

Judith's beautifully elaborate gowns contrast directly with the unfastened dressing gown she remembers her mother wearing, after men had stayed the night. Judith was affronted by her mother on those mornings, refusing to 'look at those breasts hanging wrinkled and heavy' (119). She was also offended by the smell that 'was on her mother and in the bedroom when he stayed' (119). Judith's mother complies with 'the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl' (14). Her advice to Judith corresponds to the pretences Vita acted out as Violet: 'Make him feel important. Don't tell him your troubles ... Never say no in bed. Don't be as silent, as secretive as you are, my dear girl. It is more attractive to laugh at jokes' (119-20).

Enduring this advice as well as the sexual banter between her mother and Uncle, Judith 'would stare and stare into the intricate designs on the embroidered cushions, the painted plates' (120). Her creative impulses become centred on artistic production.

Yes, the eternal question, the relation of sexuality and creativity – the kind of question that doesn't have an answer only different ways of asking it. (Inez Baranay)

When Judith seems to become pregnant, she has difficulty explaining her virginity to the doctor, so decides to 'borrow someone else's story' to explain not her virginity but her pregnancy: 'he came back for just one last night then went to South America' (127). She leaves her job and her flat, 'takes her grandmother's wedding ring and another borrowed story' and heads for anonymity in a country town as 'another deserted wife' (127). Judith borrows from other stories because her experience does not fit into any of the prescribed narratives: you can't be both a virgin and a mother, except as the Virgin Mary, but by fabricating a lover, a marriage and a desertion, Judith makes her story familiar. In this new setting, she depreciates her skills as a fabric artist by doing alterations and mending. In pre-natal class, a woman 'asks her to make a frock, but Judith says only if there's a dress to copy from' (127). She now wants a pattern to guide her construction both of clothes and of life-stories, but as she constructs her sexuality to conform to social expectations, her creativity is stifled.

Ironically, Judith's handmade gowns are perfect for covering her growing body/ies. They are fantastic costumes themselves and can incorporate Judith's version of her sexuality, which appears contradictory to others: a pregnant virgin, asexual and celibate, watching pornographic fantasy. As fiction, Judith's invention of her own sexuality breaks through those stereotypes by inscribing her body with her fantasy made real. Her creativity includes that of her sexuality so that the borders between the two, usually dichotomised as creation and procreation, merge into one.

Before her time is due, she is taken by an ambulance, drugged, and wakes with flattened stomach. There are women in 'stiff white dresses' who tell her to 'take these' and 'beg her not to talk' (127). This brief episode speaks of her being institutionalised and silenced, losing her

power over her body, and being forced to swallow things that make her life fantastical – ‘she floats and dreams and watches them come and go’ (128). The institution effectively flattens her body’s creativity, restoring its version of the body’s story. Whether it was a phantom pregnancy or a miscarriage, the evidence is erased, as Judith’s position in the symbolic order also becomes problematic when she no longer understands its language: ‘She recognises the words but they do not make sense’ (128). Her response is to re-invent her story in a different language that she does understand:

Judith tells the doctor what she knows: how to pour paint onto fabric so it looks like the rain falling on the sea, how to see that each colour contains all colours, how you can tie one piece of cloth into a turban or a veil or a sling to hold a baby. (128)

The multiple uses of Judith’s artwork enable it both to accommodate and to suggest a body’s stories through a twist or a swirl, a movement around a body. In a similar way, Judith participates in a number of the stories that can constitute women’s lives as if she were trying on a gown for size and, finding none that fit, she makes her own. This last passage, however, is hardly optimistic despite the creativity and beauty of the writing. The ending to the coda, however, seems to pose questions rather than seek resolutions.

You don’t just want a kind of other version of, ‘and then they lived happily ever after’ like, you know, ‘and then she went off and did her thing on her own and never had a day’s fear again’ or something. You know, it’s not like that either, but you want something with some sense of triumph about it. (Inez Baranay)

Baranay’s effort to intervene in stories that constitute women’s subjectivity and limit their lives is similar to what Elizabeth Grosz has identified as a need to adequately represent female non-maternal bodies, which requires ‘women’s autonomous self-representations beyond the patriarchal investment in collapsing the feminine into the maternal’.<sup>17</sup> The maternal body, she explains, is ‘both a neutered body (virgin) and a sexually active body (whore)’, a triad which operates in Irigaray’s discussion in ‘Women on the Market’: ‘*Mother, virgin, prostitute: these*

*are the social roles imposed on women*'.<sup>18</sup> Irigaray argues that while virgins are pure exchange value, and mothers are excluded from exchange so that they may remain private property, enclosed in the father's house, prostitutes are left in circulation indefinitely, without teleological endings to their storylines.

Perhaps this is why Vita is left telling stories in the coda, trying to find a story into which she might write herself between the careers of virgin and mother. If prostitutes are rarely acknowledged or 'legitimated', perhaps this is because they have so many stories to tell – stories that will disrupt romance and reveal it to be the same fantasy as prostitution. Despite the potentially disruptive position of prostitutes in Irigaray's argument and Baranay's novel, however, the sexualised non-maternal female body still seems to be left with very few narrative options except to express the need for new stories.



## Seven

*Could Irigaray be Eurocentric?:  
Exploring the Desert, Epilepsy and  
Lesbian Writing in Susan Hawthorne's  
The Falling Woman*

*The Falling Woman* ignores traditional notions of 'romance' to tell the story of a lesbian whose relationship, from the novel's beginning, is comfortably established. By constructing a narrative around the subjectivity of a woman who is lesbian and has epilepsy, Hawthorne immediately registers the terms of Stella's 'difference', as it might be perceived by the dominant culture. The narrative highlights and then merges or braids together her differences, as identifiable yet inseparable. This is made possible through interweaving three strands of narrative: the voices of Stella, Estelle and Estella form a constellation which represent aspects of her fragmented identity, revolving around the activities of her body over time and space. Stella's voice represents the growing, developing – and to some extent 'normal' – and purposefully linear narrative from child to adult; Estelle voices the experience of epilepsy that occupies a timelessness; and Estella's narrative voice is in the present during a journey across the inland of Australia. Unravelling the form of this narrative also raises questions about how we read Australian lesbian novels and desires, and how this novel fits with prevailing conventions.

### Three Voices.

Firstly there is Stella, the child of the past. Daughter of Theo and Coral, and sister to Fiona, Stella's narrative traces her life from birth (which was postponed for the benefit of the doctor's lunch), through her upbringing in the country to her consciousness-raising days at university. It marks her transition from child to adult, and from heterosexual to lesbian. It also charts the onset of her epilepsy from birth, its diagnosis and drug-controlled repression, and its return into her life. This part of Stella's identity is constituted through the discourse of Western medicine, not only through diagnosis and its associated stigmatisation but also as a direct result of the hierarchy of power on which the institution operates. Coral's story of Stella's birth is that,

The nurses had orders to be obeyed. No child was to be born without the presence of a doctor, in case of complications, but the doctor could not be found. His absence was the complication. The nurses stifled the birth. They held her back in darkness, in an unbearable state of pain ... Eventually the doctor came, late, his lunch still on his breath.<sup>1</sup>

From Estelle's perspective, the trauma of that moment is critical:

*The muscles contract. I am pushed. I am pulled. An unbearable pressure presses on me. My skull is crushed. I am choking. The pain begins at my crown and moves nerve cell by painful nerve cell to the base of my spine. (9)*

The doctor's presence at birth carries such cultural authority that his absence is inscribed in Stella's body for the rest of her life, through the erratic electrical activity of her synapses known as epilepsy.

In some ways, Stella's is the most 'expected' narrative in form and content. Its chronological tracing of life from birth to adulthood is a traditional linear growth narrative which is familiar in terms of reading patterns. It is set in contrast to Estelle's narrative voice, which represents the side of this character who experiences and tries to make sense of her epilepsy. Using italics to mark its difference, Estelle's first person voice erupts through the text, as epilepsy does in Stella's life.

It sort of deconstructs the text in a way. It disrupts it ... in the same way that when one has a seizure, life is disrupted and interrupted. (Susan Hawthorne)

In its demarcation of an alternative mode of existence, Hawthorne's translating of this state into language involves drawing on other knowledges, so the narrative travels in an/other space and time: backwards into an exploration of matriarchal myths and legends from ancient Rome, Greece, China, India and Aboriginal Australia, and forward into an optimistic reconsideration of those knowledges:

*We sing and we remember. We sing and we invent, creating new meanings for old stories, old chants ... On the dusty plains of Australia and in the island world of Greece, they tell the same story. (41-42)*

These story-lines rove across mathematical formulae, chants, hieroglyphs, dance, geometric shapes, seasonal changes, colour coding, astronomy and geographic landmarks. Hawthorne suggests that all of those knowledges are connected, and that a preoccupation with linear time – with finding beginnings and endings – ignores the cyclic knowledges available on a timeless continuum, a sphere inherently associated with

the experience of epilepsy in this book:

*You say there are miniature deaths. You describe the falls, the breathlessness, the cyanosis of the skin ... You say that beginnings and endings are merely arbitrary points, markers that allow us to comprehend the world. ... You say we should value these capacities. We should learn to read them just as we learn to read letters, or faces, or bodily expressions. (108)*

Through these insights Estelle is linked to the Delphic priestesses whose perspective on life and whose visions of the future are paralleled to the vortex brought on by seizures. As positive gifts these alternative perspectives are set in contrast to the stories of epilepsy made available to Stella: 'The only stories she'd ever heard or read about epileptics were ones in which they died or were regarded as mad or exotic. On the positive side, there was Dostoyevsky's idiot, or Van Gogh' (214). By drawing on all kinds of times, cultures, stories and knowledges, Hawthorne allows them to connect and clash while she actively writes another story.

The frequently shifting personal pronouns parallel the bricolage of the storyline. This ambiguity of identity/s is in keeping with the splitting of Stella's identity and Estelle's alternative sense of time fractured. Sometimes this has the effect of feeling alienating, however, especially Estelle's incursions which are addressed to a second person who is never introduced.

There is a sense in which the 'you' could be either a character in the book, it could be the reader or it could be a collective, sort of body of women or something like that. (Susan Hawthorne)

In addition to this mixing of personal pronouns, the narrative seems to be weaving a contemporary global hybrid mythology, with a privileged emphasis on its location in Australia and the inclusion of Aboriginal women's knowledges: 'You are teaching me the ancient iconography of this land: the coils, circles, spirals, figures and shapes drawn in the sand. You are teaching me the language of the landscape: to follow the routes to waterholes and hilltops' (191). The invisibility of this source of knowledge as eternally 'other', then, seems incongruous. Several reviewers questioned this 'borrowing' of Aboriginal culture and its implications

of white appropriation. At one point Dorothy and Iris, two Aboriginal characters, and their children 'instruct Olga and Estella in their ways' (244), but their naming here by two Westernised names seems at odds with their heritage on which Hawthorne focuses and her project to acknowledge the generations of stories being shared and compiled across cultures.

The names are in fact names I know some Aboriginal women have – there is the marvellous painter Dorothy Djulkulul whose work I admire. Iris is a Greek name meaning rainbow and messenger and it makes the link between the two worlds so far apart in time and place and yet there is an overlap of symbolism. I'm trying to show metaphorically/symbolically connections across cultures. (Susan Hawthorne)

The narrative's cultural crossings are interwoven with its interrogation of the discourses of its own cultural folklore about journeys across the body of land known as 'Australia'. This is traced through the present-day narrative which charts Estella's journey with her lover, Olga, to the inland of Australia, a journey that parallels Estelle's spiritual explorations. Olga is an archeologist looking for material evidence of the past while Estella tries to incorporate her bodily/spiritual experiences into a mythological herstory. Together, Estella and Olga map their perspectives for us, finding cross-references in the stories each has discovered, 'Estella retelling myths, Olga placing them in an archeological setting' (125-26). Hawthorne's retrieval of legends and myths based on women's knowledges is also a recharting of the cultural maps that guide how we see the topography of our bodies and lives. At one point, Olga sees Estella drawing mudmaps in the dirt with a stick but she is actually tracing a knitting pattern design passed on from her sea-captain grandfather. Together they identify the chevron and cross symbols of the bird goddess and the diamond shaped 'marriage lines' which symbolise women's two lips: 'To think that my stern Presbyterian grandfather and all his kin knitted cunts on to their jumpers!', exclaims Olga (48). Knitted into the fabric of lives and jumpers, these symbols codify the importance of women and their knowledges in the same way that Hawthorne's novel makes connections cross-culturally between symbols, shapes and stories and their significance to women's lives, spirituality and the land.

The tracks which Estella and Olga travel are largely unmarked on their supply of maps. Their geographical surveying also acts as a metaphor for the novel's rewriting of the Australian desert landscape. Punctuated with naturalistic description, this narrative takes pleasure in describing the sensuality of various sites – billabongs, creeks, sand dunes and mountain ridges. The women's journey also refigures that landscape through a female literary gaze. As Kay Schaffer argues in *Women and the Bush*, literary representations of the bush have often cast it as both seductress and adversary in a gendered ambivalence which implies male ownership and masculine efforts to tame and control the land, to make it productive. Olga's and Estella's exploration of the desert also genders the land as female, but in celebratory terms and as an extension of their own lesbian sexuality. Describing Olga 'sitting in the curve of a pink-grey rock that seems to enfold her' (45), Estella writes in her notebook:

There is a small hole with a pool of wetness at its base.

At some time water must have flowed here. Where the water has been it is rounded and soft, like a woman's body. The colours, too, are soft: pink and mauve and grey with a touch of yellow. (45)

Their exploration remaps the landscape in terms that are positively and powerfully female. This contrasts the notebooks of early explorers which Schaffer describes as noting 'pliant, virgin land' which they felt impelled to 'penetrate'.<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne attributes the site known as the Olgas, or Katatjuta, with the wisdom of age when she describe it as 'sprawling like an old woman with lumpy patches on her body, or like one of those ancient figurines that are all buttocks and breasts' (251-52). The landscapes take on suggestions of old stories, especially when touched: '*I run my hands over the rounded bellies of boulders, which are taut, smooth, warm. I can see the pebbly tears of women, weeping for their still-born children*' (253). This (re)discovery of the land-as-woman by two lesbian lovers becomes a celebration of its diversity, embedded in a narrative/journey which has no seeming beginning or end.

### **Forms of Desire.**

This factor irritated at least one reviewer who commented that 'we expect the long journey to the Rock to be significant, but it is too concerned with dust, punctures and getting bogged in sand'<sup>3</sup>. The site of Uluru is

evoked rather than named, and is treated with the same emotional response as is the beauty of every other rock, hill or creek on the journey: in this narrative structure, narrative climaxes are replaced by a long trail of sensual delights. This form corresponds to what Irigaray would claim to be representative of women's desires and their writing:

it really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse.<sup>4</sup>

This economy certainly upsets Davison's expectations of a single linear journey to the goal-object of a single 'Rock'.

I didn't actually want it to have, you know, this vroom sort of climax, because that went against the grain of what I was trying to do ... I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead, and other friends, other women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a women's novel could be different. I remember we used to make jokes about how the phallic climactic thing of a man's novel, you know, he has one orgasm and then the book ends, whereas what we had in mind was a multi-orgasmic book that didn't necessarily have this sort of shape. (Susan Hawthorne)

Moorhead's interest in feminist aesthetics in writing is well documented. Her novel, *Remember the Tarantella*, was apparently prompted by Christina Stead's challenge for her to write a book without male characters and was planned diagrammatically according to spirals, spider webs, tarot, astrological signs and dress patterning. In *Quilt*, Moorhead discusses her views on plot in relation to women's conversation:

*...so much in us is imbued with the male aesthetic. The suspense. The purpose. The point. The revelation. The relentless progress of the plot. Appreciation of this is stamped into our learning programmes and when we read fiction for pleasure we want it. We want to be teased, to be told what happens and then why, how, etc. We want to be made ignorant only to be given intelligence. This is a learned appreciation of a learned aesthetic of a style of story.*<sup>5</sup>

Like Moorhead, then, Hawthorne's narrative is consciously engaged in

a female aesthetic of writing. The last ten pages before 'The Fall' weave the voices together more tightly and insistently, waiting only a few sentences before the next one breaks in. It also brings the three narratives to a meeting point, so we are at both the end and the beginning of Estelle's trip, which is the end-point of Stella's journey, both of which are enmeshed in Estelle's timelessness. The effect is far from a resolution; it is quite chaotic, spiralling like the '*myriad [of] falling stars*' (269) which signify 'The Fall' at the end. Here, the complex temporality of the novel merges the 'she' and 'you' into an optimistic 'I',

Because the 'I' is sort of fluid then the temporal stuff is also fluid and that also ties in with the epilepsy theme, of a sense of timelessness or a sense of dropping out of time.

(Susan Hawthorne)

The title of the book, *The Falling Woman*, signals the idea that the book is engaged in shifting such cultural positioning. 'Falling woman' redefines the derogatory term for a prostitute – 'fallen woman' – into an active process instead of a static position. That focus on sexuality is subverted by its referral to a lesbian, who has fallen away from exclusive patriarchal models of (hetero)sexuality. As such, it resonates with the original sin attributed to Eve's fall. It also speaks of the physical bodily movement characteristic of epilepsy, which is often called the 'falling disease'. In the same way that the text challenges the assumptions of our society which tend to correlate 'health' and heterosexuality with 'normality', its complex form also disrupts the expectations of narrative and reading practices. This narrative form is a quintessential part of the politics of her writing.

I think that when you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective – because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read, and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice of what's in there. (Susan Hawthorne)

It is ironic, then, that Stella's relatively 'straight' narrative was the one



which propelled me to read; Estelle's and Estella's are the more theoretically vigorous yet less 'pleasurable'.

We all respond to the pull of storytelling /of narrative. Stella is there to keep the reader happy. (Susan Hawthorne)

This makes me question how I read and the conditioning implicit in that act which seems to require a 'driving' narrative to steer the story. The feminist politics of this novel and its innovative and theoretically stimulating form are aspects I admire and can celebrate. Yet, the experience of reading the novel was less than stimulating and, as some theory can be, even turgid and slow.

Estella's part is much more mundane and is there to de-exoticize and demystify Estelle. I would re-edit some bits of Estella now. But she's 'real life' in a sense – we'd all edit our lives if we could 'do' them again. (Susan Hawthorne)

Interestingly, my feeling of the novel being overwhelmed by the theoretical concerns but lacking in readerly desire is the opposite of Susan Hawthorne's experience of writing it, which acknowledges the interaction of theory with lived experience but clearly values the former as most influential to her writing:

The notion of the female body as a source of writing. Now I think that that very much comes out of my own experience of my own body and of having epileptic fits and things like that, so that in that sense it's writing my own bodily experience. But it was made easier to do that by the existence of those ideas ... I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the seventies, and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women. And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work than the French feminist stuff which was just the bit poured in at the end.

(Susan Hawthorne)

Reviewers also felt this tension between a desire to applaud the feminist project of the text and their problems with the novel's readability.

Davison and Falconer regard the book as 'ambitious', and Falconer and Levy comment on their difficulty with the writing style.<sup>6</sup> Claire Mills praises the book as an 'experimental and confronting endeavour in the (re)creation of female culture' but has misgivings about the sexual politics of its creative project:

Olga and Estella appropriate only the more aesthetic aspects of female creativity ... In the bad old world of patriarchy, heterosexual woman bore sons and heirs. In the brave new world of radical feminism heterosexual woman will provide sisters and lovers. Either way, heterosexual woman is left holding the baby.<sup>7</sup>

Mills's rebuking of the novel's lesbian and separatist politics reveals a different tension to the earlier reviews mentioned. It is significant that Mills compares *The Falling Woman* with Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella*, suggesting they both stumble 'under the weight of ... symbolism as well as ... politics'.

Obviously there are politics at work in reading (and reviewing) lesbian writing, so how do we /can I read and write (about) lesbian work? Judith Roof is concerned with the unrepresentability of lesbian sexuality (as we understand representation), given a patriarchal language and narrative formulae which rely on visibility. Using Irigaray's formulation on sameness, that the centrality of the phallus defines everything in terms of its own presence, Roof sees lesbian sexuality as fundamentally subversive:

Because of its superficial absence of penis, lesbian sexuality provokes a crisis in a system of representation which is reliant upon a symmetry, if not sameness, between the sexes, a crisis that reveals the mechanisms which suppress difference in the depiction of heterosexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Reading Hawthorne's landscapes as strategic metaphors that disrupt other discourses on sexuality means the land can be seen as body onto which sexuality is mapped in new configurations, configurations which are not always plain to see. This seeming displacement of sexuality onto the landscape avoids what Levy complains of as the 'rather voyeuristic position we are encouraged to adopt as readers' of Elizabeth Jolley's fictions depicting lesbian relationships.<sup>9</sup> Levy identifies 'a still largely masculine

construction of women's sexuality, of women's bodies being posited as such by the "male gaze".<sup>10</sup> Reading in terms of subverting traditional patriarchal heterosexual reading expectations seems appropriate in a text concerned with claiming a position for female centred sexuality. Judith Roof would support this strategy when she writes:

Rendering sexuality in terms of the visible engages the scopophilic pleasure of the male gaze ... The lesbian, instead of imparting the implicit phallic desire of the "normal" woman, conveys a different, concerted absence which frustrates both symmetry and visibility.<sup>11</sup>

Hawthorne has been actively intervening in the construction of women's sexuality by making public their writing on these topics. She co-edited *The Exploding Frangipanni: Lesbian Writing from Australia and New Zealand* with Cathy Dunsford and *Moments of Desire: Sex and Sensuality by Australian Feminist Writers* with Jenny Pausacker, both of which emphasise the sensuality of everyday life and the mapping of new mythologies of women's sexuality through language and its metaphors.

Exactly how women's sexuality, and lesbian sexuality in particular, can or should be represented is a highly contested field. While recognising techniques like Hawthorne's as an effort to diverge from the predominant construction of 'masculine' sexuality which has been imposed as 'normal' for so long, Jyanni Steffensen, for example, argues that such a strategy can become sanitised and prescriptive: 'Women's erotic writing "returning to the simple wonders of sensual awareness", as *Moments of Desire's* back cover advocates, is not going to make pornography or conventional heterosexual power relations "go away"'.<sup>12</sup> She also claims that such a selection acts to limit the range of women's desires. In her discussion of what might constitute erotic writing for women, Bronwen Levy argues that women writers have developed different textual strategies for writing about sexuality: 'Given a cultural context of repression, it is likely that erotic writing will often be heavily encoded as a subtext: allusions, suggestions, and symbolism may well be ambiguous'.<sup>13</sup> She advises that a critic may well 'need to attune herself to the possibilities of metaphor and symbol', and develop 'an ability to read texts for what is not there, for muted, subsumed subtexts'.<sup>14</sup> The texts she is speaking about, however, are pre-1970s books written mostly before second wave feminism which, she argues, is now based on sexual

politics: 'For women's writing, the connection of erotics with other forms of struggle is a crucial insight and, ultimately, politically unavoidable'.<sup>15</sup> Steffensen would support this when she argues that feminist erotic writing is about 'addressing the extent to which women as subjects/objects of their *own* (fabricated) desires have been excluded historically from discourses on sexualities. But why should this invention be a dreary des(s)ert?'<sup>16</sup>

In choosing the desert to explore, Hawthorne's novel does avail itself of descriptive metaphors of dryness, aridity, even infertility. But then this is also a myth, as the desert is rich and abundant after rain.

This is a culturally determined view and a Eurocentric view.  
My deserts are alive and rich and full of life *all* the time – if  
only one takes the time to look, to know, to see differently.  
(Susan Hawthorne)

Water is quite often a site of great ambivalence in this novel as it holds the potential for drowning, a danger especially pressing when combined with epilepsy. Estella often reminds herself of the potential hazard of three inches of bathwater to someone with epilepsy and she has dreams about drowning. During her outback journey, her seizure while swimming in a waterhole understandably casts a shadow on the whole idea of water for the remainder of the journey. So there is little in terms of lubrication in this story; no slipping and sliding of flesh nor nourishing waters: pleasure is purely aesthetic. Exploring the geographic 'heart' of the country is the nearest we get to bodily matter.

but plenty in terms of heat. Heat, warmth are important metaphors. Metaphorically I am (perhaps) saying that warmth of feeling is a precondition of lust. (Susan Hawthorne)

Irigaray maintains that fluid is a vital concept in reconceptualising women's sexuality and writing. Within the phallic economy, she argues, value is based on (its) concrete and visible form, its erect and solid image, while 'historically the properties of fluids have been abandoned to the feminine... Thus fluid is always in a relation of excess or lack vis-à-vis unity'.<sup>17</sup>

I am challenging the merely technical and mechanical basis of lust – lubrication alone is mechanical and possibly

Eurocentric. Heat, lust warmth is the lead up (like sensuality) to satisfying and multidimensional (sexual) relationships.

(Susan Hawthorne)

Irigaray's association of fluids with the subversion of patriarchal economies is directly related to her practice of writing the body. For her, writing and sexuality are intimately linked:

Must this multiplicity of female desire and female language be understood as shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality? A sexuality denied? The question has no simple answer. The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess.<sup>18</sup>

Hawthorne's fragmentary style was often commented on by reviewers, Davison in particular being distressed by the format. What interests me is Irigaray's association of women's sexuality/writing, fluids and 'excess', a term which seems to have been taken up in the reception of writings representing lesbian sexuality.

### Forms of Excess

Both Steffensen and Shane Rowlands in her review of recent lesbian writing use the term 'excess' to act as a particularly commendable, subversive and desirable signifier of lesbian texts. Celebrating lesbian theory 'for providing the vital detour around a number of theoretical impasses' in feminism, Rowlands cites participants who 'have emphasized the excessive qualities and eccentric discursive positioning of lesbianism' as critical to this success.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, she says, *The Exploding Frangipanni* tends to 'reinforce a sense of lesbian connectedness which suppresses the excess and tension' of its stories.<sup>20</sup> Bronwen Levy similarly argues that 'this collection begins, but then forestalls a more creative (because dangerous and exciting) conflict' in and of lesbian writing.<sup>21</sup>

Mary Fallon's novel, *Working Hot*, was particularly favoured by reviewers who heralded its excess and daring.<sup>22</sup> This is part of its radical politics. It is highly innovative in its discursive organisation and takes a very explicit, provocative and confrontational approach in its writing of lesbian sexuality. The publisher, Sybylla Press, was also praised for its

risk-taking in this project. Excess, then, is an apt term for Fallon's positioning of her text beyond those boundaries imposed by the canon of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism. I wonder, though, if this has become a prescriptive quality of lesbian writing in order to mark some sort of 'authenticity' in contrast to the sexual hegemony.

In her introduction to Linda Singer's book on *Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*, Judith Butler writes,

Singer follows the Foucaultian position that pleasure can no longer be understood in opposition to power, for power is the discursive matrix by which pleasure is produced and circulated ... Inasmuch as the proliferative capacity of this economy outstrips its regulatory means, it creates sites of excess value, mentioned above. Insofar as these sites of erotic value are constituted discursively, they become cultural positions from which a certain eroticized speaking and agency emerge. Constituted as excessive, outside the economy and yet as the very currency of exchange, women, for Singer, are in the non-systematizable position of being both inside and outside disciplinary structures.<sup>23</sup>

Erotics between women is presumably doubly so, so that the 'excesses' of lesbian writing like Fallon's speak from a position made available by the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and to a large extent enact that positioning *as* one of excess, beyond the boundaries, on the fringes, marginal. Rather than detracting from its radicality or subversiveness, Singer's theory suggests that the characterising and valuing of lesbian writing for its excesses is a critical position made available and actively generated by the dominant heterosexual economy in order to contain it. Ironically, it leaves no place from which to speak about Hawthorne's novel, either from the centre or the fringe.

In accounting for Hawthorne's writing neither is Irigaray's account of *écriture féminine* helpful in her emphasis on fluids and *jouissance*. Hawthorne's non-patriarchal textual politics refuses lesbian fetishisation generated by excess or erotics.

I am playing here – but showing how it might be possible to argue for a completely different erotic economy and metaphorical world view than the one we now inhabit (intellectually) and which is dominated by postmodern, i.e. European / Northern preconceptions. (Susan Hawthorne)

There is 'excess' in the trope of epilepsy, which is as much to do with the body as sexuality, if not more so. But excess doesn't seem to be convincingly necessary anyway. Does our position in Australia alter how those theoretical ideas are applied to this landscape, as Hawthorne suggests? I have imagined that if theorising the body was carried out in the tropics it might conceivably have a different emphasis, as the heat and humidity means we are constantly dealing with the cycles of fluids passing out, over and through our bodies – drinking, sweating, swimming, showering, and getting rained on for large parts of the day and year.

Connection with Eurocentrism is the simple difference in rainfall – in European imaginations deserts = fear; in an Australian imagination it could be different. (Susan Hawthorne)

Perhaps the lesbian unrepresentability Roof speaks of lies in Hawthorne's doubling back to refuse what is becoming an orthodoxy of excess, in her defiantly writing her lesbian characters and their world as ordinary. Sylvia Martin has commented that being 'branded' a lesbian writer has its disadvantages in that 'everything they produce [is] reduced to that one aspect of their complex identities'.<sup>24</sup> This is something that Hawthorne clearly undermines in her novel by using three narrative voices. Estella's epilepsy constitutes as much of her identity, and the novel's form, as her being lesbian. In fact, her experiences of epilepsy are certainly in 'excess' of the usual electrical circuits of synapses. Perhaps I'm doing the novel a disservice by drawing it into the arena of lesbian writing, but then I would be doing the same thing by not doing so.

Traces of Estelle can be heard in the poetry of Hawthorne's *The Language in My Tongue*, which almost exclusively hinges on the inevitable disorder of the symbolic order for those who experience epilepsy. The experience of a seizure here is in excess of the language available for its description. As in Estelle/a's case, it is both an exaggerated bodily event and also an out-of-body experience. In this sense, epilepsy is largely unrepresentable, as Roof argues for lesbianism, and is mostly invisible, except when it plays itself out through the body. The poetry also uses the body-as-land trope and has a particularly heightened focus on language, especially the physical and mechanical restraints holding back

'language' as we understand it:

The tongue swells with unspoken,  
unshapeable words

The words are swallowed  
so that the tongue may remain

caught between teeth.<sup>25</sup>

While taking up many of the themes of *The Falling Woman*, the concentration on the effects of epilepsy in poetic form seems to lend *The Language in my Tongue* more movement, vitality and passion: I found it absorbing and moving. Would this have anything to do with its distance from the feminist/lesbian politics of the novel? Or from the politics of the novel as a form of writing?

Shaping her narrative around the body of a woman whose sexuality is lesbian and who is subject to epilepsy seizures, Hawthorne's novel seems to have interrogated reading practices as well as writing conventions. In doing so, Hawthorne makes an important contribution to the practice of writing the body and to the body of 'Australian' literature through questioning some of the assumptions of writing (about) lesbians and of writing Australia.



# Eight

## *Writing Desire*



Maybe I can slip into something a little more comfortable here. Not that I feel discomfort with what I was in before. No, not uncomfortable. I just want to change, to slip into something that is easier to slip out of:

something smooth and silky and slippery;  
something that moves easily;  
that can glide with the touch of a fingertip  
or shift with beginning of a thought.  
Something flimsy: there – but only just,  
like a veil: a material covering (of) skin which is but a cellular covering  
of spirit ideas joy fear despair peace.

You can see through the veil if you care to look.

But the desire to see through the veils is thought to be more exciting than what lies under them. It's the dance of unveiling that is apparently desirable.

According to the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, desire is:

Unsatisfied longing, a wish or conscious lack (for, of, to do or be), thing one wishes for, expressed wish or request or demand.

So a condition of desire is that it be unfulfilled (as longing and lack), always in the future, to be looked forward to.

So when my desire is fulfilled does that mean it is no longer my desire?

I will be satisfied so will no longer desire?

It's all very teleological and linear.

Maybe my reading is off the track.

Irigaray maintains that:

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.<sup>1</sup>

So, what sort of language and logic might we use to think about desire?

Let's try the *Macquarie Thesaurus*. In between desertion and determinant lies desire. There are ninety seven terms, associated with eating and appetite, with money, with sexuality, with psychiatric pathology

and with religious sinning, as well as a few innocuous hankerings, itches and bents. So the thesaurus organises our desires around a bundle of drives – eating, sexuality and money – and their self-regulating profligacy through medical and religious discourse.

It's all very unsatisfactory.

We surely need a new language of desire, as Irigaray suggests.

Or is it desire that needs addressing? Is there a difference?

Maybe we just need to de-sire it. If there are only ever objects of desire, by removing the phallogocentric objectification what do we have left? What is the remainder?

Desire without end; is this what Irigaray is speaking about when she writes about the limitlessness of two lips kissing two lips?

When you kiss me ... the horizon itself disappears. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion: openness is never spent or sated.<sup>2</sup>

The pleasure here is in the continuity; in representing the moments of desire, to borrow a phrase from Susan Hawthorne and Jenny Pausacker, or maybe the moments of being, to borrow from Virginia Woolf; to be able to articulate and make representable the experience of desire instead of just the wishing for, the fantasy.

How, for example, do you describe the subtle taste of bocconcini as a wedge slithers between your teeth with a thin slice of lusciously ripe red romano tomato and a pert leaf of basil you just picked from the garden?

Or what about the taste of the first sun-warmed mango of the season, that bright orange flesh so firm and juicy – or tart if you get it early enough – dribbling down your chin as you suck the skin to get as much as you can of the sweetness?

Or what about the warmth and safety of a friend's kitchen; being so absorbed by a piece of music that tears are streaming down your face; feeling the full moon saturating you; the aroma of ground coffee mixed with the intimacy of a chat; the smell of rainforest fungus through a mist of fine rain; the feel and smell of slippery fertile mucus between your legs?

What about the moments of recognition in the doing?  
Has desire passed? Are there no words for happening desire, for the savouring,  
the prolonging,  
the moment  
that becomes removed from lineal clock time, an extended vacuum divorced from other beginnings or endings?  
And what about the memories of those moments – what do they become? Are they no longer desirable because they are past, or does one satisfaction signal the beginning of yet another desire for completion? Isn't the desire the dictionary and thesaurus list more like anticipation, or foreplay?

### To Desire Differently

Irigaray suggests women's desire might be more appropriately organised around touch. Touch? Sure, that sounds good. Touch, taste, smell, sound, sight, magnetism, intuition, auras, let's have it organised around everything. As Cixous extolls,

A woman's body with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.<sup>3</sup>

And Irigaray again:

*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere.* She finds pleasure almost anywhere.<sup>4</sup>

Which brings us back to the body.

And writing.

The desire to write  
the body.

Cixous infuses her writing with desire: with the desire to write:

Writing and Loving are lovers and unfold only in each other's embrace, in seeking, in writing, in loving each other. Writing: making love to Love. Writing with love, loving with writing. Love opens up the body

without which Writing becomes atrophied. For Love, the words become loved and read flesh, multiplied into all the bodies and texts that love bears and awaits from love. Text: not a detour, but the flesh at work in a labor of love.<sup>5</sup>

Cixous writes about the pleasures of writing so erotically. Writing out of love, writing out love, for the love of it. Writing with passion, with compassion and commitment, with a desire to get you going, to make the salivary juices flow, to work up a sweat.

Inez Baranay also writes about being seduced by writing, about it being ‘the most consuming relationship you will ever have’:

Writing is the most demanding of lovers, the most obsessive. Writing is the object, subject and creator of desire. It’s a desire that grows by what it feeds on, and can never be satisfied.<sup>6</sup>

Is desire always written of so sensually, so erotically?

Audre Lorde is saddened that the erotic has been confined to sexuality as she regards it as a powerful spiritual and deeply female resource. She describes it as ‘a well of replenishing and provocative force’ that has been ‘relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all’ leaving the other parts of our lives bereft.<sup>7</sup> The erotic is not confined to sensation for Lorde, but inevitably leaks over into all aspects of our life once we recognise its joy. She describes it as the bridge lacking between the spiritual and the political, the empowerment that makes work a ‘longed-for bed which I enter gratefully’, the infusion of pleasure into our politics, work, play – the specificities of our existence. Lorde identifies the erotic in the response of her body:

In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.<sup>8</sup>

It is a sensuality for every-day life. If we can touch it, it caresses our every movement. I imagine it’s like those moments when you see women washing the dishes slowly and rhythmically, their hands lingering over the surfaces of dishes, their gaze out the window in the middle distance but focused on something quite other – an abstract idea or plan,

wandering through their memories or imagination – until the absorption of the moment is broken and they are back in the here and now, hands still lingering over the surfaces of dishes being caressed slowly and rhythmically.

I know I value the landscape available from my kitchen window. As I write this, I have the rolling green hills that form a backdrop to Cairns to look out on when my hands are warm and soapy in the sink. So I can be there and not there.

But I am suspicious about investing ‘domestic’ tasks with spirituality, as if revaluing them makes it okay for women to continue to be domestic labourers. Someone has to do it, though, and I like the idea of doing it for myself with pleasure and spirit. Maybe it is in the same sense that Jackie French sees life:

Lives can be created. Work out what you love – and fill your life with it ... Every part of your life should give you richness, or it’s wasted – a house should be a place you love, not something to keep off the rain; a garden should be a place of fascination (what will bloom or fruit today, what bird will visit) instead of just a lawn to mow on Sunday afternoons.<sup>9</sup>

This is desire in practice, of ‘being moved, endlessly’.

Marie Tulip invests her sense of women’s spirituality with that same sense of pleasure in the moment, akin to Lorde’s erotic, which is anchored in and between our bodies:

Spirituality is concerned with who we are – in our body selves, in relation to others, to nature, the earth and the cosmos, and to the energy or spirit that is in and among us in those relationships. It is not a disembodied or spiritualised affair, somewhere out of this world, but very much in and of this world, our daily living and our personal, social and political relationships. It is about power. It comes from the Latin word for breath – it is as close as our breathing, and like the wind it ‘bloweth where it listeth’. It links us all in the cosmic dance.<sup>10</sup>

Tulip is contesting the abstract and intellectual notion of spirituality as it is represented in patriarchal religions in favour of a corporeal and present spirit of living which connects our lives.

It reminds me of an essay Marie MacLean wrote about the descriptions of women folding sheets together in recent women's writing as if it were a movement of ritual, a dance synchronised to the breath and tune of the other woman with the sheet acting as a material link between the women.<sup>11</sup> But that's not how she wrote about it: that's how I remember it. And is it the act of folding sheets together that I remember or the writing of the act, or do they fold over each other like pages interleaved?

The thing about desire like this, about Lorde's erotic, about Tulip's spirituality, about Cixous's and Baranay's love of writing, is that they are so productively creative. Susan Hawthorne, herself a creative activist, asks,

Have you ever noticed the persistent creativity of radical feminists? There are poets, novelists, artists in every medium, musicians, composers, filmmakers, builders and craftswomen.<sup>12</sup>

What they are producing is new meanings and increased possibilities, new ways of imagining story-lines and life-stories and new ways of reading the stories of our lives; new ways of writing which offer moments of being instead of plot, patterns and flows instead of linear journeys, questions instead of resolutions: new kinds of desires and new ways of writing desire. Not so flimsy, after all.





## Nine

*The Daughter's Seduction: Sue Woolfe's*  
Painted Woman

As Susan Hawthorne reinscribes the term 'fallen woman' with new and active meanings in naming her character the falling woman, Sue Woolfe performs a similar act on the synonymous term, 'painted woman'. Referring to prostitutes as well as to artists' models, the term hinges on women being objects of (men's) desire. In this story, however, the woman must transform the violence of such an act in order to give body to her desire to be an artist.

### Gendered Vision(s)

In bringing gender to art theory, feminist art critics have challenged the representation of women in Western art as objects for the pleasure of male eyes. Vision is especially privileged in Western epistemology as a medium which guarantees a certain knowledge: seeing is believing. The pathologising of women's bodies in the nineteenth century coincided with their use as objects of study by both artists and doctors.<sup>1</sup> Irigaray argues that phallogocentric logic privileges the visual as corroboration of the presence of the penis, which reinforces the symbolic power of the phallus. The reassurance gained through looking gives men pleasure, in contrast to the threat of castration represented by women as both signifier and signified. Not only do women 'lack' a penis, but their sexual organs are hidden from sight. Pleasure in looking, then, is 'particularly foreign to female eroticism' Irigaray argues:

Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject,' her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scopophilic lens.<sup>2</sup>

In trying to account for and intervene in these heavily gendered positions of looking and being looked at, feminist critics have found psychoanalytic theories useful. Finding that traditional narrative cinema was organised around the visual pleasure of an assumed male audience, Laura Mulvey was largely responsible for initiating the theorising of psychic mechanisms of film spectatorship. Drawing on Freud,

Mulvey posited two 'pleasurable structures of looking' which operate in tension in mainstream film but which both privilege masculine desire. The first, scopophilia, 'arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight'.<sup>3</sup> This implies a separation between the (presumed male) spectator and the eroticised female image on the screen, while the second structure involves a merging of ego identification between the (male) spectator and the active male hero on the screen who also has his eyes on the spectacle of woman. Within this framework, the male gaze has priority both on and off the screen.

The result of these structures of spectatorship for women is that they are continually subjected to the look, being objectified and fetishised for masculine pleasure. This effectively denies them agency to construct their own desires, so that 'she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants'.<sup>4</sup> To accommodate female spectatorship and entertain women's desires it is necessary for women to intervene in the reproduction of such gendered visual systems and also to invent imaginative possibilities in the intersection between looking and desire.

Sue Woolfe's novel, *Painted Woman*, addresses both these issues through the life-story of Frances, who is both artist and narrator. Theories of looking are particularly relevant here as the story is framed by a narrative in which Frances guides us around a retrospective exhibition of her life's work as an artist. As readers, we are implicated in the story by being positioned also as viewers of her artwork, as she tell us the stories she attaches to her paintings. Woolfe's tale, which dramatises the daughter's obsession with the father-artist, seems at first to replay Freud's imagined female Oedipal scenario. The father and Freud provide the framework for the story, but both Woolfe and the daughter in her novel decide it is not a frame they are bound by; they both step outside of it to tell their own stories.

### **A Genius in the Family**

At the start of the novel, the family dynamics are dependent on the male figure, for whom his wife and daughter compete. The first scene of the novel pictorialises Frances's identification of herself as her mother in order to be the object of desire for her father. She describes her father's painting on the wall:

My mother ... A man's face facing her face ... The man wants to kiss my mother. But now he moves up the wall again, and paints ... a big blue X. It's a bow, the woman's wearing a big blue bow like mine.<sup>5</sup>

The fluidity between mother and daughter in this image is due to their positioning by the father as objects of his desire. As if to confirm the inconsequentiality of their identities, he then turns to see Frances hiding between the chairs and enacts the painting she sees: 'It hurts but he's kissing me, my father's lips are kissing me' (4). Another episode shows how Frances's identification with the mother means that she lives her father's violence at the same time as her mother. In the bedroom, where violence is made an extension of intimacy, Frances sees:

His hand is coming down against her face, fast, thrilling the air, the exultant clap, the jerk of the chin, she reels, is reeling, it's a mad, wonderful game ... and I reel in her screams, that she should be so exposed, and when we fall down, I fall down with her. (7)

The daughter's attraction to her father lies in his apparent possession of knowledge. She imagines him, as a (male) painter, to be privileged in making meaning of the world. This is a skill she feels she lacks, a lack she terms 'The Gap'.

I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there are a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, 'Well the game is really not for me'. And that compels me to write.

(Sue Woolfe)

Even the language he uses to name the colours is powerful – almost sacred: 'Their names are like a chant: cadmium yellow, cerulean blue, alizarin crimson, viridian green, vermilion' (11). The importance of the colours' names which are ritually and regularly repeated, contrast with the value of her name which is used only once in the novel, and not until page sixty-four. When her father deigns to teach her 'how to be like me' (10), she forgets about The Gap, imagining she is being made privy to its secrets. 'The start of my life as an artist' (12) involves her

learning to see exactly as he does, of her becoming an exact reproduction of him:

My father has painted the sky his canvas with blue, the fire of cobalt blue, and now I have eyes all over my body to see the fire from my father, eyes on my neck and hands and thighs and in the spaces between my ribs, cobalt blue eyes seeing my father's sky and my father's sky seeing me. (13)

To some extent, the text is written in a way which seems complicit with this attribution of knowledge, and therefore power, to the father as artist. As narrator, Frances speaks to us about her father's art in terms which reproduce its elusiveness and sacredness, which are desired by her. Two reviews of *Painted Woman* criticise Woolfe's writing as reproducing that discourse of mystery and worship. Sue McLeod writes,

Woolfe's descriptions of the artists and the art they make are articulated in romantic and revering terms. She perceives artists as having a privileged access to meanings ... Writing straight from a tradition of bourgeois art appreciation, Woolfe confines the reader/viewer to a position of awe.<sup>6</sup>

This 'position of awe' is certainly played out in Hamilton Smith's two rave reviews of the novel in the *Canberra Times*.<sup>7</sup> He claims the novel is of 'such sensitivity and artistic merit' and that it contains 'philosophical themes' which 'may appear cryptic or unfamiliar to readers' and which he fears may not be fully appreciated by an 'Australian' audience. He even describes the novel as a work of art similar to the father's misunderstood paintings. The novel was mostly praised for its 'dazzling' and 'exquisite' prose, but Rosemary Sorensen fears that Woolfe's acknowledged use of

the theories of men like Girard, however intriguing in their powerful display of how to manipulate myths, are difficult to meld with the quite real social dilemma of the woman artist lacking the approval of her society ... perhaps like Girard, the story embellishes the myths that have shaped our perception of art rather than subverting them.<sup>8</sup>

I want to argue that Woolfe's prose and her use of Frances's narrative eye/I is what draws the reader into the novel's violence; in conjunction

with the additional burden of looking, it makes us complicit with the epistemic violence inflicted on women and women artists as 'others', outside of the Father's Law. By using a 'romantic and revering' discourse to form our impressions of the father's art, Frances's emergence from it and realisation of its falseness is all the more powerful.

The discursive construction of male artists that has produced reverence for their authority and knowledge is addressed by Christine Battersby in her book *Gender and Genius*. Battersby historically documents how 'genius' has been gendered male in a way which excludes women's access to the term: 'The genius was a male – full of "virile" energy – who *transcended* his biology'.<sup>9</sup> The notion of transcendence was necessary to accommodate his supposed 'feminine' traits implicated in his being 'instinctive', 'emotional', 'intuitive' and 'imaginative'. Being transcendent, though, attached additional power and reverence onto the position. While the male artist transcended his gender, biological femaleness only 'mimics the psychological femininity of the true genius ... Creativity was displaced *male* procreativity: male sexuality made sublime'.<sup>10</sup> The tortuous logic of this privilege is also noted by Griselda Pollock: 'The artist is one major articulation of the contradictory nature of bourgeois ideals of masculinity'.<sup>11</sup> Battersby goes on to argue that a woman who wanted to create rather than procreate (both was rarely if ever an option) complicated the patterns of exclusion by facing a *fait accompli*: 'either to surrender her sexuality (becoming not *masculine*, but a surrogate *male*), or to be *feminine* and *female*, and hence to fail to count as a genius'.<sup>12</sup> In Woolfe's novel, Frances is written into the role of the former. Foregoing any female identification with her mother in order to learn to be like her father appears to be the only way she has agency in his highly desirable world.

The extent of Frances's complicity with her father extends to her taking on joint responsibility with her father for her mother's death. Wishing for her mother's absence through childish magic spells, Frances is both guilt-stricken and awed by her own power when she finds her mother's body dead on the bed one morning. She sees 'there was no violence' (18), as if this confirms it was by her hand and not his. Because her father is 'a great man ... A man of genius' (20), he can get away with murder as the judge makes 'allowance' for his greatness and his maleness: 'Such an accident could happen to any man at the moment of

passion, said Justice Sorenson' (169). His acquittal of the murder charge reinforces the prestige of the father's contradictory position; as a male he is excluded from the law because it could happen to any man, and as an artist he is excluded from the law because he is not like every man.

### Women's Worlds

As if to reinforce Frances's desire to secede from femaleness, her mother and Auntie are given the role of instructing her in the rules of femininity:

learn to sit with your legs together  
learn to say thank you prettily even if you're disappointed  
learn to leave some tea at the bottom of the cup (5)  
Chew each mouthful 32 times, she says. That way you'll have a flat  
stomach. (12)

Alongside these laws of behaviour, which the women pass on 'grey with weariness' (5), sits another contradictory discourse, also attributed to the women. This imbues the women's daily domestic activities with rhythm, significance and an undercutting humour:

Mum and I are shelling peas.  
Love, says Mum, should mean everything to a woman.  
Peas ping in the basin. (7)

These moments could be likened to what Julia Kristeva describes as monumental time, part of the cyclic understanding of 'Women's Time'.<sup>13</sup>

I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic trivia and metaphysical truths, because that's to me how women's minds work. They're talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with lettuce the next. (Sue Woolfe)

Digging the garden, watching the vegies grow, feeding the chooks, making cups of tea, even hanging the washing 'at the line, we flap the sheet like angels' (20). These moments of detailing the spirit of the 'ordinary' are akin to Audre Lorde's understanding of 'the erotic';<sup>14</sup> they directly

contrast the father's use of violent erotica and the extra-ordinary status invested in his artistic perspective.

Very early in the novel, a female temporality is contrasted with the father's terrible importance and seriousness in a scene in which Frances slips between one and the other. Swinging on the gate to the chookyard (a sphere closely associated with her mother) she is rhythmically described,

swinging back and forth, back and forth, with my body drifting in a hazy circle of singing hinges and straw and dirt and manure and the dandelions bending back and forth, back and forth, and there's no Gap now, just this circle on my sun-warmed arm as I swing time and dandelions sway. (8)

At the sudden entrance of her father on to this entrancing scene, Frances slips into a position of relation to him to gain his attention: 'Dad, I ask, making my mother's eyes, Dad, am I beautiful?' (9). Frances immediately ceases her connectedness to the rhythms of growth and earthly cycles in which her body is free to swing and be warmed by the sun; instead, the imposed voice of the coquette asks for verification of her body as an objectified form of beauty. His disgusted response derives not from his dislike of a culture that would encourage coquetry, but at his distaste for her show of 'femininity' at all: at the reminder that she is female.

That scene, which precipitates Frances's rejection of her mother in order to be like her father, plays out Irigaray's imagined mother-daughter relations in her essay, 'One Does Not Move Without the Other'. According to both Woolfe and Irigaray, mother and daughter occupy positions which are identical, like 'living mirrors':

I resemble you, you resemble me. I see myself through you, you see yourself through me. You are already grown, I'm still little. But I've come out of you and there, right under your eyes, I am another living you.<sup>15</sup>

Irigaray suggests that the intensity of the 'consuming-being-consumed role' between nurturing mother and suckling daughter merges their subjectivities so that neither are (re)presented to the other as other, always



as self. In search of her self, the daughter turns to her father, the first man to whom her mother 'abandons' her:

I shall leave you for him who seems so much more alive than you. He who never makes anything to eat. Who leaves me empty of himself, open-mouthed for his truth. I follow him with my eyes, I listen to what he says, I try to walk right behind him.<sup>16</sup>

This is the substance of Irigaray's metaphor, 'I drank ice with your milk, mother'.<sup>17</sup> The identification between mother and daughter is paralyzing and self-perpetuating, Irigaray argues, unless mother and daughter can relate to each other as women, with different subjectivities, rather than 'exchanging each other endlessly'. They must find time for each other:

You change according to the clock. Dressing up according to the time. But which time? Time for what? Time for whom? I'd like you to break with that time, to find the time to show yourself to me. And to look at me. So that we might play at being similar and different.<sup>18</sup>

Irigaray's sense of time here is not unlike Kristeva's but it involves finding the time for each other instead of being 'already captive somewhere else. Already caught in someone else's look'.

The father's escorting of his daughter into meaning entails her reformation by him, as Lucy is transformed in *Cardboard* by Tim who escorts her into the meaning of sexual subtexts. Frances's father is not interested in her body as such but in creating her in his image. Most importantly, he wants her to see as he does. As a patriarch, he has a particularly strong attachment to the visual which indicates sexual difference and yet also alienates the material body, as Luce Irigaray explains:

Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.<sup>19</sup>

Appropriately, Frances's father uses an image to show Frances what she must not be like: 'It is, he says, a warning' (14). It is a portrait of her mother done in slashes, 'as if the canvas has been struck ... Just like you, he says' (14).

### Body Trouble

Even though Frances can try to see through her father's eyes and invent herself according to his needs, her body is a 'problem' reminder of her femaleness. Her father largely ignores her as a body, or as a body which is separate from his imagination. At one stage, 'He steps back, almost collides with me. He looks me up and down as if he's surprised to see me here' (27). At other times, however, he forces her girl-child body into the position her mother used to occupy, as the object of his violence. The link between mother and daughter is strengthened by his appearance the next morning with a plate of buttered toast and a cup of steaming milky tea.

Her father 'invents' Frances only in relation to himself and his art. He tells her 'You're my mirror now' (57). In a perversion of Lacan's mirror phase, which is the stage at which the child has a sense of itself as a separate entity, the father here is about to make his child mirror him, instead of herself. In this way, he will 'escort her into meaning' and all that the symbolic order represents under his Law. Frances's entrance into the symbolic is an entry into a male domain of thought and perception. As her father's daughter, she is seduced into believing this is 'the' place to be, a universalised arena outside of which others count as nothing or as unknowable. Frances's notion of The Gap might then be linked to what Lacan calls the Real: the unrepresentable at the limits of language, but also that which approaches feminine *jouissance*. Alice Jardine explains the 'Real' in Lacanian literature as,

designat[ing] that which is categorically unrepresentable, nonhuman, at the limits of the known; it is emptiness, the scream, the zero point of death, the proximity of *jouissance*.<sup>20</sup>

Within this paradigm, Philippa Kelly has also argued that Frances's paintings of female desire can be represented as Lacan's 'unarticulable remainder'.<sup>21</sup> In the same way that Jane Gallop argues in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* that feminists like Irigaray are seduced into/by

psychoanalysis, so Frances accepts this paradigm as desirable. Woolfe's text, however, is not so beguiled. The narrative of Frances's 'invention' involves an awareness of two indistinct subjectivities: one she is forming and an-other the father is re-forming. At the same time, however, her pubescent female body begins to assert its difference from the disembodied self her father prefers: 'I tell myself there are no black hairs sprouting between my legs or under my arms and no new breasts poking against my jumper like jeering fingers' (58). While her father ignores her physical presence, he can deny her femaleness, and it is on this condition that she pins her hopes of entry into his world:

Dad and I never talk about my body. We pretend that from my head to my feet there's a space. I drift around some distance above the floor, like a ghost, like his portraits of me where I end at my neck. (74)

When she begins menstruating she tries ignoring it: 'don't think, don't look ... I must live in my head, five and a half feet above the dust balls, the grit, the blood' (75). This visible difference from her father she translates into fear of ostracism (oestrocism?): 'The blood's still seeping out of me. And with it, my hope' (75). She finally tells him she must go to her Auntie's – 'It's my Insides' (75) – to which he sighs a 'Yes' and transfers the conversation to his leaking bottles which prove to be much more containable than leaking daughters.

Auntie coaches Frances in the passive and secretive behaviour recommended for menstruation, reinforcing the cultural negativity inscribed on this visible sign of difference:

I must not swim, run, hurry, walk barefoot, walk in high heels, sit on damp grass, stand for long times, drink cold liquids, drink hot liquids on the days of The Curse, but I must not explain to anyone. I may have the power to curdle milk, rust metal, dull mirrors, stop clocks, I may be untrammelled violence itself, so I must rise stealthily at dawn to wash the cloths and peg them out, as unassuming as white clouds. (77)

The mention of female power contained in this passage is the reason given for containing it. To be 'violence itself' in a female body is something to be hidden, while in her father it means he can quite literally get away with murder. To the daughter violence is the most significant threat

to her acceptance into his world, while for him it is his libidinal/artistic source and overtly mythologised as such. 'Patriarchal passion', argues Somer Brodribb, 'sees violent sex as the essential creative act ... this is patriarchal aesthetics'.<sup>22</sup>

Frances's concern to erase her femaleness, to become a 'surrogate male' in Battersby's term, can be read not only as a choice she makes to give her agency in the world of art, but also as an exercise in creating her own self-image. It is a strategy which, in this text, can also act as a mirror for the social values which necessitate this mimicry. In a historical corollary, Janine Burke tells the story of a self-portrait Margaret Preston was commissioned to paint in 1930 by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Burke describes Preston's presentation of herself as 'stark': 'Her hair is severely bobbed. She wears an artist's smock that resembles a monk's cassock. She clasps palette and brushes. Her gaze is alert, her mouth unsmiling'.<sup>23</sup> The image Preston paints of herself is 'a time honoured image of an artist, of a male artist' Burke argues, which asks us to 'read Preston [as] a woman who takes her vocation so seriously that she has appropriated an image sombre with prestige and respect, and sexed it to her own advantage'.<sup>24</sup> That this portrait is an image Preston appropriated and used to her advantage becomes obvious when set alongside what other information is left to us of her life:

But wait, Preston is 55. Contemporary photographs show not this lean clean jawed artist, but a chubby smiling woman with masses of hair. So who is this? Preston has made an artist, a woman artist, fit for history.<sup>25</sup>

Preston's portrait recognises the power of a work of art as a social signifier of meaning. In *Painted Woman*, though, Frances does not yet have licence to use such tools, despite the narrative being named 'Self Portrait One' up until this point.

### Other Romances

The next discrete set of stories, 'Self Portrait Two', oils on concrete, slate tiles and venetian blinds, are concerned with Frances's relationship to Tim. As in Inez Baranay's *Between Careers*, this romance comprises the centre section of the novel and is set up to 'fail'. As Battersby observes earlier, entrance to the world of creativity for a woman does not include

her being a woman, but being as a male. In this paradigm, then, a romance would mean acknowledgment of female sexuality: for Frances, this would signal a premature end to her apprenticeship into her father's world.

During her association with Tim, however, she acquires some 'other' knowledge of bodies, looking up Anatomy in a textbook at the public library. She is 'astonished at the equipment for possession ... Auntie had never got around to telling me about the Male Organ and the Female Inside' (95). This anatomy of Organ and Inside, which is based on visibility, further inscribes Frances within the 'masculine parameters' of female sexuality which Irigaray would dispute, but it comes as a revelation to Frances. From the woman at the corner shop, Frances also finds out that her mother loved to paint. This knowledge about her female heritage is accumulated at a time when Frances also begins to steal her father's used tubes of paint, a 'betrayal' which might indicate a loosening of the ties that bind Frances to him.

To some extent, the meetings between Frances and Tim involve some transference of power by Frances from the father on to her lover who, in Freudian terms, is a substitute. Frances assumes Tim will be the authority, the escort her father claims to be, in providing for her self definition. Tim, however, refuses this authority, unlike Fiona Place's Tim in *Cardboard*, who becomes a more potent psychoanalytic father to replace Dr. E, who is in turn a replacement for Lucy's father. The irony is not lost when Frances rejects Tim's proposal amongst the picnickers on the cliffs of the Blue Mountains: the diamond ring is lost and he ends up presenting her with an empty pink satin-lined box. This image symbolically replicates Frances's newly found knowledge of her 'Insides'; Tim therefore unwittingly presents her with her sexuality without the possessing ring, pre-empting Frances's exploration of her gendered creativity by herself. The farcical wedding scene, which goes ahead despite Frances's misgivings, is made perversely significant by the father reinstating his claim over Frances instead of 'giving her away' as he is supposed to do. Amidst the chaos of the dance-hall music the organist plays and the 'wrong sides' Frances and her father inadvertently occupy, of Tim losing another ring and the minister losing his sleeve, her father whispers a last temptation to Frances: to stay and be his amanuensis. Frances's fleeing from the church is not a flight to freedom, as the older

narrator recognises, but a journey into another gendered role traditionally occupied over the centuries by talented daughters. The third and final section of the novel begins with her more firmly entrenched in another patriarchal institution as her father's amanuensis.

Painting his pictures means that Frances finally gets to paint, albeit within the 'outline of his authority' (128). From the beginning of this partnership, however, Frances is more conscious that she has desires which begin to compete with his. Over twenty odd years, they regularly enact the power dynamics on which their relationship exists, he accusing her of 'breaking away from my outline' (136), she resubmitting to his authority. Molly immediately notices the tension in their paintings and tells Francis that her rebellion is her strength.

Molly's entrance into their lives has an ambivalent effect on Frances. On the one hand she usurps Frances's place as adorer and believer; Molly hero-worships the man and the artist, 'contriv[ing] to look up at Dad although she's his height' (132), describing his life as an odyssey (145) and echoing, 'Your father is a great man' (147). So physically and noisily present in her plastic mac, nylons, silk and leather, Molly gradually allows herself to become less and less visible in deference to the magnified presence of the great man. And when she dares to show them a painting she has done, he reduces it to an excess of technique and her to a bodyless void. Following the inaudible footsteps of the women before her, Molly's taking up of that female position is a source of jealousy and loss for Frances. Her grief especially hits her 'between the E and the O of Geoffrey' (143) when she is signing his name on a painting. The alienation present between these letters for Frances, in the very interstices of language, is similar to the desolation Lucy finds when confronted with the letter 'e' in Fiona Place's novel. The loathing for those particular letters and the words those letters help build focuses their oppression by the symbolic order very precisely onto the basic components of language.

On the other hand, Molly acknowledges her potential threat to Frances and negotiates her position in the household with her in a way that is almost collaborative, as if conscious of their shared cultural script. Molly also suggests outright, like Tim, that Frances paint by herself. Frances's part of the house – the downstairs domestic domain as opposed to the upstairs studio where 'life' goes on – becomes the site of her painting projects.

Frances again begins stealing tubes of paint, but this time whole tubes. Again using the kitchen as her haven, she improvises materials: sewing machine oil to mix the colours, 'palette knives from kitchen knives, I make brushes from meat skewers, rags and my own hair' (141). The insides of cupboard doors are primed as substitutes for Tim's provision of canvas. This act involves naming herself, signing her signature on the work instead of his. Within a text which uses terms of relations – Auntie, mother, daughter, father – rather than signature names, this symbolic act is transformative.

### **Painting (and) the Body.**

Her father's reliance on Frances as his producer of art means that she has accrued some power over him. This power, and part of her rebellion in her painting for him, is also linked to an increasing construction of her self as embodied. As a residue of her experiences with Tim, she has formed a habit of running her finger down her nose. This small action is significant in that it signals the beginning of Frances's self-construction – of tracing the lines of her body by her own touch rather than Tim's, and in her own eyes rather than her father's. She begins to take courage from her heels, and the impressions they make cracking the old lino (141). She also notices her hands:

They're not pretty, it's true, there's a lot of spare flesh pulling this way and that, I'm embarrassed to see them in a portrait, not that there's much of that these days or even that Dad and I consider them my hands, but that's the point. They're mine. My hands. My. I. They're joined to my invisible body but they're visible. (140)

She is conscious of her hands doing daily domestic chores for him: cooking, cleaning, threading elastic through his underpants (140). The concept of having hands is so alien to her that she speaks of them in the third person. When she is painting, she loses consciousness of her hands but afterwards, in the evening, she notices their absence: 'it's numb on my wrist, slowly it recovers, becomes mine' (153).

Woolfe's text can be read as a project which charts the writing/painting of Frances's body as a woman. In combining the theories of *écriture féminine* and its visual corollary *la peinture féminine*, Woolfe makes overt

the sexual politics embedded in art when read as text.<sup>26</sup> To be able to construct one's own body, to be a *painting* woman rather than a 'painted woman' subject to the constructions of others, has been one of the motivating forces of feminist interventions in the visual arts. Griselda Pollock argues that feminism is 'seeking to secure women's equal right to the "body of the painter"'.<sup>27</sup> This project is

as much about wanting the right to enjoy being the body of the painter in the studio – the creative self in a private domain – as it is about wanting to express individually the none the less collective experiences of women.<sup>28</sup>

While access to being the body of the painter is important, as Frances finds, there is also a need to demystify the process of artistic production. Pollock critiques Abstract Expressionism, which Frances's father might be said to privilege, as 'a celebration of the "expressivity" of a self which is not to be constrained by expressing anything in particular except the engagement of that artistic self with the processes and procedures of painting'.<sup>29</sup> Problematising the creative self as a network of convergent social constructions with access to certain cultural positions has complicated the basis of this modernist discourse, Pollock argues, making its textual politics more explicit. She goes on to suggest that 'painting' is given its value in this discourse through 'secur[ing] by metonymy the presence of the artist. These inscribe a subjectivity whose value is, by visual inference and cultural naming, masculinity'.<sup>30</sup> This thinking erases the body of the artist as gendered or even embodied, instead privileging them through their association with art, culture, intellect, abstraction and all those other binary oppositions that mark sexual difference to relegate women as body and other.

Woolfe characterises Frances's father from within this art discourse. He denies the existence of bodies to the extent that he must be reminded to eat. His treatment of female nude models – refusing them a heater to keep warm – is similar to his lack of respect for the body of his wife. Part of what enables Frances to begin painting herself is the gradual realisation that her father is an aging and disintegrating body. More importantly, it is her awareness of her own self and bodily knowledge.

The turning point which enables her to take charge of her body/



painting is the painting of *The Dance*. Spurred by threats to be taken 'off the painting' so she can 'get on with the housework, uninterrupted' (144), Frances decides to secure her position by seducing her father with an 'irresistible' image to paint (149). *The Dance* becomes the daughter's seduction of the father-artist, exciting him into the possibilities of paint. Appropriately, this painting is a representation of movement, rather than the 'still-life' landscapes her father values. This is in keeping with Frances's sense of embodiment in contrast to her father's denial of bodies. Elizabeth Dempster claims modern dance as a paradigmatic example of the feminist project of 'women writing the body'. The practice of dance, she writes, is 'surely the most bodily of cultural productions' but should not be reduced to that. It is also 'thoughtful action, a movement of embodied mind' and part of a social signifying system: 'dances ... can be considered as texts written of and through precisely inscribed bodies'.<sup>31</sup>

Molly finally puts the painting into words: 'Those are hands, aren't they?' says Molly, peering. Dancing hands. You've painted a picture of dancing hands' (157). The image of her actively moving hands can be read as a synecdoche for her painting body. When her father starts to paint again, she sees him as an 'old man with his trousers gathered around into his belt' (159), his stature diminishing both literally and figuratively in Frances's eyes. His god-like authority as the 'inheritor and maker of a firmament of greatness' is deposed when she realises the very ordinary ways possible to gain knowledge about art – the same way she found out about bodies:

Now I know, it falls around me like light, that he doesn't pull his words out of an incandescence. He probably reads them in the books he won't let me open, rehearses his phrases as he walks on the road. (163-64)

The awe surrounding the production of art which is attributed to genius is demythologised by Woolfe. The Gap finally becomes a linguistic construction, a lack which puts a name to Frances's exclusion from her father's laws. When the father/artist is seen as a man enforcing power, that power becomes opaque along with the discourse that enables it.

The catalogue for 'Self Portrait Three', the last section of the novel/exhibition, includes oils on fireplace, umbrella stand, sink, lampshades. There is no containment of her pictures and they are unframeable, extending beyond the confines of her father's limited canvas. This is a

symbolic act: 'My purpose is the rooms of Dad's house. To put patterns of paint everywhere. And one day, all over his studio' (164). The studio is on the top of the house, above Frances's domestic sphere, symbolising its reification on a vertical architectural scale. Griselda Pollock locates the artist's studio as the privileged site of art production, particularly in modernist art discourse. It can assume that status only by neglecting the material and social conditions which enable it. Pollock goes on to suggest, however, that 'Of course women share the fantasy of the creative self, desire that privileged space of imaginary freedom called the studio'.<sup>32</sup> When Frances can finally 'gain his studio' (174), this fantasy is fulfilled, but she refuses its discursive status: 'I'm in a house which is, after all, a smallish house, in a studio which is only a room and all I'm doing is painting' (174). This reminder to herself does not undermine the significance of her gain. As Virginia Woolf needed to murder 'the angel in the house' in order to write, Frances had a similar need to symbolically murder the father in the studio to have the freedom to paint. Frances's painting is to her, as Pollock suggests it is for other women, a desire to 'express individualistically the none the less collective experiences'. She paints stories, 'not just my own, [but] everyone who's spent their lives waiting' (174).

### **Acts of Violence**

The position in which this older narrator leaves us as both readers and viewers of a very private and traumatic life-story can be uncomfortable, partially due to the confluence of reading and looking. Perhaps this is because the narrator has insisted on telling us her stories which lie in the paint, insisting that these representations have a history and are related personally to the painter's life. Reading these imaginary artworks, then, means being confronted with the violence of their production. The very private nature of this public exhibition destabilises the traditional detachment of art as transcending the personal into universal vision. Frances's work is both individual and collective, personal and political.

The violence associated with this pictorial story seems especially significant to the impact made on the reading process. Frances tells us that, 'I paint my violence into patterns and contain it. But there's more violence than mine in the world' (174). The violence contained in her paintings is often a result and a representation of her father's violence,

which he let loose on the bodies and minds of the women contained within his house. For much of her life Frances translated her father's violence as part of the act of painting. In her art, however, Frances transfigures the violence inflicted from her father's hands:

I've painted here my pantheon ... It's not a pantheon my father would've painted. He'd have put himself on that bench, with violence in his hands. I've painted violence as a wanton schoolboy. And that's my father in the schoolboy's hands. (155)

Because of its visual emphasis, the violence implicit in Woolfe's writing of Frances's story might be likened to watching a violent film; being privy to those (fictionalised) private moments of horror and, like Auntie standing outside the door, also being complicit because of our position as spectator.

I was very worried about whether art is a violent act in itself. I mean that goes right to the depths of what I'm doing as an artist. (Sue Woolfe)

This exhibition of violence in Woolfe's narrative forces us to see the oppression of Frances through the violence of the father and then writes her out of those patriarchal frames into her self-construction as a woman artist. Woolfe's writing directly addresses what Griselda Pollock regards as a primary objective for feminist interventions into the histories of art: to study women as producers of art. In the same way that Woolfe's text invites feminist readings, Pollock considers what is at stake in imagining female spectators and concludes it is,

the very possibility that texts made by women can produce different positions within this sexual politics of looking. Without that possibility, women are both denied a representation of their desire and pleasure and are constantly erased so that to look at and enjoy the sites of patriarchal culture we ... must assume a masculine position or masochistically enjoy the sight of woman's humiliation.<sup>33</sup>

The discomfort of confronting that violence is made possible only by Frances's active production of such images and by the possibilities Woolfe offers in her representation of a woman as artist.



## Ten

*The Art of Desire: Davida Allen's*  
Close to the Bone: The  
Autobiography of Vicki Myers

Unlike Frances in *Painted Woman*, Davida Allen's artist figure, Vicki Myers, is given the opportunity and encouraged to paint whatever she desires, flouting the historical strictures placed on Frances. Where *Painted Woman* centres on the procession of women through the father's life, *Close to the Bone* uses the woman artist Vicki as its focus and charts the procession of men through her life, only giving them space as and when they relate to her desires. Where Frances takes on the social imperative to be 'as a man', Vicki's art is sourced in her life as a woman; where Frances is taught to see through her father's eyes, Vicki paints what she feels. Interestingly, while Woolfe is informed by those theoretical challenges to art posed by feminism – I cobbled together some theory (Sue Woolfe) – Allen says she is ignorant of them:

I am not aware of Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray. I did not write the story to give out answers, or philosophies Alison,,,I just had a story I wanted to share.!!! (Davida Allen)

Allen's texts may not be informed by feminist theory but it is a product of her cultural position, including her lived relations as an artist of international renown. Working mostly in oils, Allen has won the 1986 Archibald Prize, exhibited in the Sydney Biennale and in several Australian Perspectives, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, as well as in regular solo and joint exhibitions over twenty years. In that time Allen has developed a very public persona as an artist whose activities in many instances resemble those of her fictional character, Vicki Myers. This recognition intercepts the reading and reception of the novel, a complication which Allen encourages. Her reputation rests on her translation of her life – as a woman artist mother daughter lover wife – into images made available for public consumption as art.

### Autobiography

Allen's writing, then, brings with it an array of already established constructions of the author as artist, and at the same time it acts as an extension of that image. These links are endorsed by the cover illustration which reproduces a painting by Allen, by the back cover blurb which includes her artistic achievements, and by the companion volume of

paintings, *What is a Portrait? The Images of Vicki Myers*.<sup>1</sup> The resemblances between Vicki Myers and what is publicly known of Davida Allen's life also reinforce the continuation of Allen's construction of herself as an artist. In writing the novel, Allen says she is,

playing with a fictitious character as an excuse for Davida Allen to continue in her output of what she has always been up to.....expressing her own life. (Davida Allen)

Unlike the interviews with the other writers for this project, I was unable to speak personally to Allen so our 'interview' was through correspondence and consequently is likely to be a more mediated and considered response. I therefore insert her 'voice' in this chapter exactly as she writes it, complete with her emphatic capitals, multiple exclamations and unexpected spelling and punctuation. This is not only to be faithful to her voice but also because it seems like an important extension of her artistic persona.

In trying to articulate a schema which takes into account the personal as a source of artistic production and its difference from the implications of autobiography, Sue Rowley suggests that artworks are not simply an 'expression of that experience', but are 'mediated by the process of making the artwork'. The process of making art, of being an artist, is also a process involving the ongoing, lifelong project of subjectivity formation. Rowley suggests this happens in three ways:

that the artist constitutes herself as a subject, and is constituted as subject in the process of the work, and that this subjectivity is inscribed in the product of her labour, but not in ways that can necessarily or fruitfully be read as autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

Autobiography, she argues, endeavours to present a seamless, consistent and 'relatively uncontradictory narrative'.<sup>3</sup> To read an artist's work in this unified manner, as critics often read Allen's work, would be to ignore the activity of production. It also ignores the subject position of the artist, which is implicit in their choice of how to represent those experiences out of a range of possible representations. As Ursula Prunster notes in her commentary to part of the 1985 Australian *Perspecta* exhibition (which included work by Davida Allen),

All these [women] artists are drawn into working through an involvement with process and medium – the materiality of their chosen language is vital to their individual transformation of personal experience into a visual form.<sup>4</sup>

In what could be considered a reconfiguration of Frances's notion of The Gap, in *Painted Woman*, Rowley writes that, 'Between the idea and its expression there's an uncertain gap, and it is in that gap that the work begins to be shaped'.<sup>5</sup> The gap is now a place for movement, freedom and activity if the artist and her work are read as decentred subject and incomplete text, constructing images and making meanings of experience. The 'seams' are important as sites where previously divided material is stitched together. If they are gaping or torn, or the stitches are loose and visible, then a larger array of possible meanings is made available: 'It is in the breaks in the narrative, in the omissions, silences, conflicts and inexplicable connections, that an artist turns her experience into material out of which fictions are made'.<sup>6</sup> The theoretical techniques Rowley is applying here to reading artworks are not new in literary terms, but seem particularly relevant to Allen's novel, its reception and the construction of her as a writer and a painter. The 'uncertain gap' in which the process of art-making happens, however, is not always considered in discussion of Allen's work, partly due to the expressionist genre in which she unproblematically locates her work:

I am concerned with the ordinary truth of living....family, sex,  
a vase of flowers on the table, frogs muscus on the windows,  
children reaching puberty (Davida Allen)

Her former art dealer, Ray Hughes, endorses this 'ordinary truth' when he speaks of her:

In exposing herself she makes compelling pictures because she is painting from something she has experienced. Perhaps a critical audience feels uncomfortable with images formed from real experience because they want them to be backed up with pet theories.<sup>7</sup>

Much critical commentary does seem disconcerted by Allen's confronting images, although it is doubtful whether that is due to the 'realness'



of her images or their apparent lack of theory which Hughes so easily dichotomises. Whatever the reason, many commentators seem fascinated more by the persona of Davida Allen as they see her represented in her art than by her art as representation.

### Representing the Artist

At the risk of repeating that preoccupation with the woman rather than her art, I want to pursue the terms in which Allen is constructed as an artist as they produce a discourse which plays a powerful role in her commodification, and one which Allen encourages. Discussion of her art tends to concentrate on her 'maternal obsession' and her sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

*There has indeed been articles about my work, describing the images or ME being obsessed with motherhood.*

*THE TRUTH IS = I AM.*

*HAVING 4 DAUGHTERS ...IF I WASN'T OBSESSED BY THE DUTIES IMPLICIT IN THIS ...IT WOULD BE A VERY SAD STORY I FEEL.*

*I AM GLAD I AM OBSESSED WITH THE ROLE.*

*WHAT FRIGHTENS ME THE MOST IN MY LIFE IS NOT BEING OBSESSED ABOUT ANYTHING. IT IS MY WORST FEAR.*

(Davida Allen)

Barrowclough clearly shows how Allen is regarded primarily as a sexual subject, a characterisation reputedly drawn from her work:

Her work has always been welded to incidents taken from real life: her rich and imaginative sexuality, her relationship with her doctor husband, Michael Shera, her concept of motherhood (she has four daughters ranging in age from nine to 18), her fantasies about priests and, rather more fantastically and famously, about the actor Sam Neill, with whom she became publicly smitten and followed obsessively on to a film set – resulting in her best known, but not necessarily her best, series of paintings.<sup>9</sup>

Allen's 'real' life as it relates to her work is here represented as entirely sexual. Critics often identify the energy of Allen's creative work but confine it (and her) as 'sexual'. Commentary that uses sexual terms to emphasise the energy often represents this as excessive and threatening. Her work is described as 'strong', 'vigorous', 'violent', 'direct', 'brutally

abrupt', 'sharp', 'chaotic', 'rampaging', 'out of control'; her figures are 'dislocated', 'severed', 'haptic', 'twisting', 'frozen', 'pinioned', 'intense', 'menacing', 'sliced', 'entrapped' and 'animated with bristling sexual energy and vitality'.<sup>10</sup> She is described as 'raw, innocent, fierce' and her writing process as 'frenzied'.<sup>11</sup>

In 1986 at my Survey Exhibition at M.O.C.A. [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Brisbane...one critic wrote about my art... 'she paints about life, death, sex without shame...' this was aimed at being a derogatory review...it is probably the most apt thing that has ever been written about my work!

(Davida Allen)

While Allen remains undisturbed by and actively encourages the discursive slippage from her work to its producer, her sexualisation by that discourse can produce anxious moments for some critics. There is constant reference to the artist in terms of her nakedness. Reviewers often use the term striptease, or speak of Allen 'exposing' herself, as Ray Hughes does. One critic writes of 'Allen's apparent relish to rub our noses into intimate matters' as 'shocking', describing her process of art-making as 'stripping', as an 'uncontrollable and cathartic creative act' so she can 'sublimate her sexual appetite for other men'. He is in the end disappointed in her literary striptease: 'Allen/Myers may claim to bare all, but in fact she reveals nothing'.<sup>12</sup> There are two contradictory expectations operating here: firstly, that Allen does expose herself (to him), that 'what she admits to us and perhaps to herself as well is all there is to her act of painting'; and secondly, that there must be something more than what she shows (that she's teasing him). By locating her art firmly in domestic life and bodily matters Allen threatens the institutionalised grandeur and mystification of 'Art', and so seems to be subjected to criticism on the basis of her position as a (sexualised) woman. This is the same grandeur Woolfe works against when Frances claims 'all I'm doing is painting'. Allen may or may not be in control of this process of media representation, but she certainly appears to participate willingly in it.

Alison...may I say at this point....the underlying need to write and draw both books was my insatiable greed for audience!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (Davida Allen)

In a reverse strategy to Margaret Preston's imposing and contrived self-portrait, then, Allen's construction of herself as a painter and her construction of Vicki Myers revels in the femaleness of her creativity. Allen's selection of autobiography as a genre and her preference for painting (self) portraits suggest an interest in constructing images of the self.

### **What is an Artist?**

From early in the novel Vicki Myers is conscious of the need to construct for herself an artistic identity. Turning her cubbyhouse into an 'art room', she feels 'a freedom in living up here trying to cultivate the 1903 wild painters' look'.<sup>13</sup> Her art teacher, Mrs Lowry, provides Vicki with a model, wearing 'interesting clothes, and Egyptian looking beads' (26). Clothes are used here as signifiers to construct a particular image, as the narrative similarly associates Greg with corduroy pants. As in Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* and Fiona Place's *Cardboard*, clothes are also used as indicators of sexuality. In a visit to her art-dealer, Barry, Vicki informs the reader that her deliberately provocative dress is a disguise so that Barry will compliment her artwork (51). Masquerading as a 'client', in black fish-net stockings, white patent leather skirt and make-up, she acts 'flirtatiously' in response to Barry's 'ravenous' look and 'game of seduction'. Vicki's desire for her paintings to be looked at is here transferred to herself, as if they are easily exchangeable commodities. Vicki's sexuality (including her 'to-be-looked-at-ness') is an important part of her characterisation and commodification as an artist. Barry is later represented as prostituting her art/body: 'Barry knows I'm just a kind of stripper! I perform naked in my painting; he puts my body up for sale' (116). But Vicki asserts that her need for him is unconnected to his role as pimp: 'I need Barry for something money just can't buy: his bottomless, fathomless, insatiable belief in me' (61). He is elsewhere described as her 'art husband' (58). Husband or pimp, Barry is inevitably named within the context of Vicki's sexuality by his connection through (selling) her art.

For Vicki, sexuality and art are both sourced in her body and these connections are made continually in Allen's writing.

I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy...because it's as much part of life as any thing else (probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche.) (Davida Allen)

In her cubbyhouse, Vicki 'squeezes her unrequited love out of tubes of acrylic paint' (43) until marriage to Greg legitimises the beginning of an active heterosexuality. To mark this event, Vicki's art teacher presents her with a set of oil paints, blessing both her fertility and her art production. Vicki paints at night then falls into bed with Greg, one pleasure precipitating the other. Sexuality and painting become linked through the strength of their smells, which are then mingled for Vicki: 'I can smell my own sex scent in the oil' (113). As the smells and fluids of body and paint merge they become metonymic figures of her desires. Standing next to the art student Hugo at his easel she smells his sex: 'And there is nothing more powerful than the combined smell of sex AND paint' (85), she tells us.

Smells and fluids proliferate in this writing, leaking out over nearly every page in descriptions of anticipatory saliva, dribbling semen, gooey baby food, poohey nappies, sweaty bodies and smells from the toilet wafting with oil paint. The narrative delights in the bodily secretions provided by Vicki's (hetero)sexuality as a source of energy for her texts.

THE OOZES ETC...ARE NOT THESE THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS PERTAINING TO LIFE. I can't imagine writing a story and not mentioning them. But ..you must understand..this is a painter writing....the thing I love most about when I am painting ..is the smell of the oil..!!!! (Davida Allen)

These expulsions from various bodies (and paint tubes?) are all abject as Kristeva uses the term: as in some of Walwicz's pieces, Allen ignores the discrete inner/outer bodily 'borders' in her writing as her paintings similarly refuse the three-dimensionality and proportions of bodily forms.

Like her writing, Vicki's paintings are sourced in her sexuality. She uses it both to celebrate her fertility, 'to boast on canvas of purple pink female genitalia stripped bare before a virile red triangle' (117), and to rage at the browning nipples of her pregnant body; it is a confessional for her lust for Hugo and inscribes the torment of her punishment through the aggressive male shape of Dog, the bull terrier. Her passion for the priest, Charles, is intellectualised rather than acted on this time – 'it's not your penis I want, it's your God' (115) – and her desires channelled into art: '**Passion holds the paintbrush. Vicki, cautious, tentative, in her smudges of halo, female legs spread apart**' (111-12).

The profuse energy Vicki invests in her images of female sexuality can be compared to the libidinal economy Cixous speaks of as *jouissance*. Cixous calls for women to proclaim their 'thousand and one thresholds of ardor',<sup>14</sup> to exclaim:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune.<sup>15</sup>

The female forms Vicki puts in frames unmistakably assert their desires as females, rather than as objects of masculine desire. The overflowing 'excess' of fluid of a woman's (desiring) body, however, is threatening to patriarchy and its model of masculine sexuality which is limited in reserves and dependent on solidity and form. Vicki learns that painting with 'the energy of my desires' (116) is more acceptable than enacting them: 'My partner is Fantasy' (111). She repeats this formula with her 'obsession' for actor Sam Neill: '**Vicki orgasms her desire for the Movie Man in paint.**' (150) This is very different to the father-artist in *Painted Woman* who inflicts his violent sexual aggression on to the bodies of living women, or the men who buy prostitutes on whom to play out their fantasies in *Between Careers*. Vicki's channelling of energy into painting is similar to the way Baranay discusses creativity in her coda. For Vicki, though, this is an enforced redirection, a channel to control her sexuality which would exceed her marital confines. The threat Vicki's (uncontrolled) sexuality poses to the institution of the family is reminiscent of the censuring of 'fallen' and 'painted' women, whose sexuality threatened and reasserted those same Victorian familial structures. While those women were controlled through their commodification, Vicki is directed to her painting, which is then commodifiable.

### Maternity

In contrast to the violence of the father in *Painted Woman*, the construction of Vicki's libidinal economy includes the plenitude of the mother. Vicki's pregnancies and her children are part of her material conditions and are therefore incorporated in her work.

For instance...There is a painting called 'Mother driving children to swimming class.' It is an image of abstract Mother and children.. a woman behind the shape of a steering wheel and three togged shapes of children behind her, each with a black seat belt shape in front of them. The whole canvas depicts the inside space of the car. The colours are hot mauve and pink and yellow. Emotionally it is the mother's havoc. This specific image is a frozen example of the plight of the woman at home with the children. (Davida Allen)

Vicki's images of motherhood revise its iconographic representations in art which have traditionally been presented by non-mothers. One of these icons is brought to Vicki's attention early in the novel in the form of a nativity scene 'gorged' into the expensive stained glass windows at her Catholic boarding school. While Mother Pascal comments on the monetary value of the window, Vicki notices the value of the scene, 'its potential as ART' (83). The nativity scene incorporates a cultural idealisation of motherhood and women's sexuality for Western society. In a commentary to an exhibition called 'Mothers' at The Women's Gallery in New Zealand, Robyn McKinlay examines images of the madonna and child as they have been traditionally represented in art:

In those paintings I know best, the madonna is holding the child. The baby may be quite active, but she is invariably calm and passive. Her face, either turned down to the child or staring into the distance with a look of inner contemplation, shows very little emotion, only an expression of patient tenderness and concern ... We are left with the impression that she has no feelings of her own, no worries, anxieties or challenges, in fact no individuality at all, but that her whole being has been reduced to providing a response to the needs of the male child she has borne.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to this tradition, Vicki constructs less idealising and more equivocal images of maternity, based on her lived experiences. Her role as primary carer means her time for painting is restricted and often interrupted, but her children, and Vicki's responses to them, are also subject matter for her drawings. Vicki regards her artist-self as a 'scavenger' (130) of material from her life as mother and lover, even if the combination often leaves 'the artist struggl[ing] inside the mother' (112):

‘This isn’t how I imagined it would be. I always wanted to be an artist, not a mother and cleaner. I’ve no imagination left ... I wish I was a man’ (70). Being a mother and an artist is neither valorised nor regretted, but constructed as a contradictory state, especially in its divergence from the traditional cultural expectations of an artist. This sometimes causes Barry anxiety. He ‘tries to intoxicate his clients into believing in The Artist’ (51), Vicki tells us, but then:

Most of Barry’s artists are men. Naturally he’s nervous about women – they get married and have babies and do more housework than art. Personally I can sympathise with him. I DO in fact do more housework than art and I’m very neurotic about it! (60)

The tension generated by combining these roles is, however, always productive for Vicki:

**Panicky paint is squirted onto drawing boards. Images of a nude woman glide luxuriantly from the boards’ whiteness, the body floating around into dissected pieces.**  
My own nakedness growing outwards and inwards with fertile elasticity ... I AM a dismembered woman: artist’s womb with pubic-hair apron; wife-and-mother with varicose veins. (75)

Vicki’s roles in fact overlap to such an extent that they are largely irrecoverable as distinct tasks. As her art and her sexuality are inseparable, the text also takes pleasure in the multiplicity and fluidity of Vicki’s subjectivity. Her identity, like ‘her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*’.<sup>17</sup>

I just happen to be female, mother, wife, artist...and I wanted creativity to be exposed in all these roles..NOT JUST IN THE BEING AN ARTIST!!!!  
THE BOOK.....I HOPE.....SUGGESTS...THE ARTIST FEEDS OFF VICKI MYERS BEING FEMALE, MOTHER, WIFE, LOVER.  
(Davida Allen)

The painting of the Paris mural exemplifies the dynamic relationship between Vicki’s artist/mother/lover selves. This is to be a work of massive

proportions – ‘The Biggest Canvas She’ll Ever Do’ (131). Vicki compares it to giving birth as Barry and Greg ‘escort the woman-artist-investment to the labour ward, the hall of terror’ (134). Vicki’s creativity is paralysed, however, mourning the absence of her children: ‘I smell my children. I want to call them, hear their voices. I should not be here. I am a mother-deserter. Guilt everywhere’ (135). The mother’s grief of desertion is amplified by Vicki’s Catholicism to a sin (137). Here, the cultural and religious expectations of motherhood (generated largely by nativity scenes like the one Vicki responds to earlier) collide with her desires as an artist, but find a productive intersection through her painting:

Shapes of a male child nestling into a shape of mother-pink flesh-woman, her other breast lurching towards her girl dependants swirling around her ... The brushstrokes wail Vicki’s estrangement, with a ferocious hunger she confesses her desertion to the wall and exorcises her guilt. (136)

With the project complete, Vicki celebrates in the French bath with Greg and is presented with a pair of crutchless French knickers by Barry; mother, artist, lover and wife all satisfied.

Allen collapses the traditional gendered separation of creativity and procreativity when she speaks of the process of art production in terms of birthing: ‘The ‘Baby’ is the Painting ... the whole thing is VERY LIKE THE BIRTH ACT’.<sup>18</sup> By doing so, she situates women’s fertility and birthing capacity as a source of creativity. Irigaray argues that western culture has ignored this association, a denial that also fails to take into account our debt to the mother for giving life: ‘The between-men cultures have deprived us of the expression of meaning through images, which for the most part constitutes our female and maternal genius’.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grosz clearly summarises the implications of Irigaray’s notion of the maternal debt:

women must not only be seen as autonomous sexual beings and carnal subjects, subjects as well as objects of desire; most particularly, the cultural debt to women’s maternity must be openly acknowledged. The debt of materiality, life, existence, that both men and women owe to the mother *cannot* be paid back, it cannot be reciprocated. But in exchange for this life which comes from the mother’s body, the child/



father/culture must acknowledge that, beyond her maternal roles, the mother is also a woman, a subject, with a life, sex and desires of her own. The mother cannot be entirely consumed in/by maternity. The excess or remainder left over is her specificity as a woman.<sup>20</sup>

Allen's text gives space for Vicki to articulate her specificity as a woman outside of her maternity, but finally decides that they are inseparable. Vicki's lecturing job, for example, initially provided a space in which she could carve an identity outside of the familial roles which inscribed her at home: 'No longer am I mother, my mouth filled with baby goo; no longer am I wife ... Now I am WOMAN again' (80). To Greg, however, it is an indulgence, '**to go out and do what you imagine is going to fulfil you more than the housework and children**' (79). Greg, of course, is proved right in regarding Vicki as straying from her roles when her desire for the art student, Hugo, is rendered incommensurate with her position as wife and mother. In this way, the text complicates the relationships between Vicki's different roles, as they leak over to inform each other.

### A Teaching Body

Vicki's decision to paint her domestic environment, for example, is in part a reaction to her own art lecturer's seduction, 'mouthing in my mouth the truths of art's wildness': 'Just at this moment now I am breathing my air of foul domestic horror inside the four walls of a house, and this is what I'll paint' (63). Vicki's 'room called Studio' (62) is located within those four walls of her house and signifies a space which overlaps mothering and painting. Traditionally represented as mutually exclusive, these two positions are competing yet interrelated spaces for Vicki, as they were for Frances in her mixing of domestic and artistic surfaces in *Painted Woman*. When Vicki is in the position of lecturer, facing her first class of art students, she questions how to fit her experiential knowledge into her pedagogical practice:

I have no truths to offer them, my own attempts to paint have been met with relentless frustrations. Being bound by Greg's love has made me a cripple ... But I am angry at myself for having such thoughts when I think of myself as a mother. (82)

Vicki's position as a woman – married, mothering and painting – informs her approach to teaching as it challenges the 'truths' mouthed by her art lecturer. Accordingly, Vicki collapses the authority of the artist and lecturer as an objective receptacle of truths by proclaiming herself to be the nude model for the class. By claiming her embodiment (as a woman) Vicki asserts herself as an experienced and experiencing body, rather than deriving her authority solely from her position of power. The combination of being looked at as a nude and being listened to as a lecturer complicates the normally independent relationship between the two and their attendant differences in power. Vicki undermines those institutionalised power relationships as blithely and confidently as her images confront the art world with female sexuality and maternity.

I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants!!!!!!

Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written when my fourth child was at school.

I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!!!!!!!!!! (Davida Allen)

In writing about these issues Allen also begins to fill in what Sue Woolfe and Margaret Coombs noticed as an absence of stories about the experience of mothering as it affects the lives and bodies of women-mothers.

But I am not painting or writing these issues Alison. Rather I am more interested in shining a congratulatory light on the woman in the house doing the nappies ... on the woman struggling to contain some sense of sexual self in her tired marital bed ... Some sense of worth of her demeaning day's housewifery. ... I believe it could be any woman's story if she had the chance to have a loving husband!! (Davida Allen)

## **Marriage and Desire**

Allen repeatedly stresses Vicki's privilege in being supported in her art practices and the vital role played by her husband in her domestic conditions. Vicki's radical interventions in art are, to a large extent, dependent

on the benevolence of her loving husband: Greg provides Vicki with emotional support and stability, indulging her fantasies and encouraging her creative channelling of them. As an employed doctor he finances the material conditions of her artistic production:

There is a truth in the old saying about behind every great man is a great woman....The story of Vicki Myers is quite bluntly exposing the truth behind this artist is the husband. I am riddled knowing there are so many potential Vicki Myers who do not have a Greg. (Davida Allen)

Marriage is constructed as a framework that provides for Vicki and the text questions her positioning in this marital structure only once, while Vicki is negotiating time and space for her art practice:

Vicki's words are tight with explosive control. 'I'm so lucky to have married you.'  
Surely I'm in this mess because I married him? (79)

This passing comment momentarily dissents from the novel's reinforcement of marriage as positively enabling for Vicki.

The traditional marital structure in which Vicki's sexuality and desires are located and through which they are constructed does produce some contradictions. Alongside the assertions of Vicki's sexuality which are actively creative and productive are more conventional and arguably oppressive representations of female sexuality: for all Vicki's public refiguring of art values in terms of women's sexuality, her private life unequivocally registers the patriarchal power relations through which her desires have been produced. Contrasting the actively sexual figures in her art, Vicki takes pleasure in being positioned as the passive receptacle for Greg's satisfaction: 'I like being the one ravaged, I don't ever want to be his equal sexually. I want to be the victim of his seduction ... I am the vessel of his male intensity' (110-11). The passivity of Vicki's sexuality here is the antithesis to her public representations. Painting her *Movie Man*, for example, she screams, 'Don't worry, Mr *Movie Star*, all I want to do is to gobble you up!' (149). Unlike those public representations, however, Allen flaunts Vicki's private pleasure in a male sexuality discursively constructed as violent. This reaches a 'peak' when

Vicki confesses to Greg her fling with Hugo and Greg's reaction is to rape her:

He pins Vicki down with his body's weight, his hands holding hers back above her head. Panting rage, his hands manic at her nakedness, he writhes ravenously all over her, reclaiming lost property. (89)

Adding to this the terms of her Catholicism, Vicki thinks she deserves such 'penance for my sin' (89) and her resulting pregnancy is seen as a condition of forgiveness. The narrative is convincing in showing Greg's pain at Vicki's transgression of monogamy but her *mea culpa* attitude passively accepts and justifies his behaviour.

### Feminism Confronts Heterosexuality

If, as Irigaray argues, the 'artificial scission between private life and public life maintains a collusive silence on the disasters of loving relationships',<sup>21</sup> for me those disasters are registered in the division of Vicki's public and private sexual personae. Cixous argues that the very act of women writing (their bodies) will mean incorporating the social contradictions of being a woman.

To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ...) <sup>22</sup>

Vicki Myers's life is written in terms of 'her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal'. As the same time as Vicki is free to represent those pleasures on canvas, however, her positioning in a traditional patriarchal marriage reimposes the 'superegoized structure' which put those pleasures under seal to start with. While making new space for Vicki to operate as an artist, there are

few, if any, new stories about the operations of families and sexual relationships. I squirm with discomfort reading about Vicki liking to be 'slain', being 'Greg's vessel' and her feeling of virtue when paying sexual 'penance'. It seems to make a virtue of oppression: if there were no imbalance of power in sexual relations would we bother fantasising about making oppression sexy?

Reviewers were charmed by the traditional values wound into the domestic family life of Vicki Myers. Thomas Shapcott sees the story as 'about the triumph of an enduring marriage ... a psalm to love'.<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Porter, on the other hand, celebrates 'the lusty urges and the spurts of paint [that] come, and come most emphatically, from a female source' and assures us that the text is neither academic nor feminist:

This is not a feminist cautionary tale of the female artist thwarted every which way by male envy or tyranny. Vicki's closest relationships are with men, often loving and abnormally patient men.<sup>24</sup>

Porter makes an interesting comparison, though, between Myers's paintings and the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's. While both are interested in self-portraiture and source their art in their bodies, Kahlo's representations of her body are very different to Myers's in being marked with the violence of relentless pain and injury, surgery and disability.<sup>25</sup>

While I resist the politics of Vicki's sexual relations with Greg, I must admit to finding something refreshing about her daring to speak about enjoying her sexuality with a man, something which feminists seem very reticent to discuss beyond critiques of oppressive practices. For all our theorising of sexuality and bodies and deconstructing of heterosexuality, there is very little debate on how heterosexuality fits into feminism for those of us who have chosen male partners at this stage of our lives. I remember a very anxious moment in an edition of ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show* when Jane Gallop and Moira Gatens almost broached the issue in a discussion of 'the politics of pleasure'. Their discomfort is registered in the tentativeness of their dialogue in an otherwise fluent discussion:

Gallop:           What women do with men, what women want to do with men, what women enjoy with men, has remained left out of most feminist discussions. But, on another

level, what occurs to me, I mean, I just keep thinking, I just keep imagining, well, what if Moira and I had to, like, move out of our positions as theorists and try to talk about, like, our practice. I mean, if I said, "Listen, I, like, live with a man, I sleep with him, what is it I like to do?", I mean, I can't...

Gatens: I have to go home now.  
[giggles heard, interrupted by fantasy dialogue between a call-girl and a truck-driver, 'Killdozer: Not a Parody', by Mary Fallon and Sheri deLise, which periodically interrupts discussion.]

Gallop: I'm not suggesting we do this I'm talking about why we can't, how we can't. And, it seems to me that ... you can talk about your practice of being oppressed, and women have ... but to talk about your desires or your pleasure feels so guilty because I think there remains – however sure you are of your feminism – there also remains a fear that you're going to be heard as, you know, some woman who is just trying to please men, who's totally deluded.<sup>26</sup>

For all of Vicki's feminist art I find I am still reading her as 'some woman who is just trying to please men, who's totally deluded'. Like Gallop, I also feel the need to relate theory to practice here but am quite uneasy writing about it. 'Sometimes our own critiques overpower us' writes Robyn Rowland in trying to address the apparent taboo on speaking about a practice of feminist heterosexuality: 'Monolithic institutions like motherhood and heterosexuality are revealed as insidious, pervasive and obdurate. Often we solve the problem of their nature by absenting ourselves'.<sup>27</sup> Like Gatens, I would be relieved to absent myself from this discussion, but because I live the seeming contradictions of feminist heterosexuality every day, I am constantly addressing it.

Ironically, discussions and critiques of heterosexuality have largely been initiated by lesbian feminists. Denise Thompson argues that 'lesbian desire is central to any feminist debate on sexuality ... because of the challenge it poses to the compulsions heterosexuality imposes on the lives of women'.<sup>28</sup> Long after Adrienne Rich urged an examination of heterocentricity, compulsory heterosexuality still remains an unchallenged assumption in many texts.<sup>29</sup> When the editors of *Feminism and Psychology* decided to devote a special issue of the journal to

heterosexuality, they self-consciously inverted the usual practice of dedicating special issues to lesbian women (or older women, or women of colour, or third world women or disabled women), which assumes a white, middle-class, young, heterosexual, able-bodied readership. Celia Kitzinger, Sue Wilkinson and Rachel Perkins, the editors, were also 'aware of the irony that three lesbians should be creating space that heterosexual women have, apparently, been unable or unwilling to create for themselves'.<sup>30</sup> As one of the contributors to the 'Heterosexuality' edition, Robyn Rowland borrows the term 'wilfulness' from Sheila Jeffreys when she asserts her ability to make an informed choice about her 'current decision to be heterosexual':

This does not mean that I do not think I am as socialized as the next woman into heterosexuality. I know all of the pressures on us to conform ... every woman has to live a life where she is and according to her own sense of political and personal belief.<sup>31</sup>

She outlines the oppressions of heterosexual institutions and practices and argues for the reality and necessity of stomach-wrenching analyses like Dworkin's *Intercourse*. And yet, not all sexual relationships between women and men are based on dominance and submission, on violence and abuses of power: this is a patriarchal concept of heterosexuality which contrasts to what Rowland proposes as a feminist-defined heterosexual relationship. This would include,

equitable power distribution in terms of economic independence, where the woman does *not* engage in domestic, sexual and emotional servicing ... Heterosexual sexuality is not always intercourse. And intercourse does take place which is *not* degrading. Penetration is *not* always rape ... What is important in a sexual relationship is for each participant to feel integrity, self respect and self-empowerment – and not at the cost of another.<sup>32</sup>

Rowland celebrates the articulation of woman-centred values and women's friendship as provided largely by lesbian writers (citing Adrienne Rich and Janice Raymond) and affirms their importance in women's lives. Claiming we can have it all, she calls herself a 'woman-identified radical feminist whose partner is male' and argues for the importance of

love, friendship and shared politics from both her woman friends and her male lover which, she points out, is what any woman seeks in relationships whether they be with males or females as lovers or friends.<sup>33</sup>

## Portraits

Like Lucy's writing in (and of) *Cardboard*, one of the most enabling features of *Close to the Bone* is its writing (and painting) of Vicki's life. As a producer of meanings circulating publicly, Vicki's insistence on representing herself and writing/painting her own body signals a shift in the tradition of objectifying women through male perspectives, even if there are still patriarchal constraints to contend with. Maybe my discomfort with Vicki's masochism is, like the violence Frances endures, part of her story which has to be explored to begin imagining women's desires. As painters and viewers, writers and readers, women's images and ideas about themselves are part of the production of new meanings and possibilities for our life-stories.

SUBVERSIVE??? FEMINIST??? I tend to shy away from these words, as firstly I do not understand their current meaning...and also, I simply had a story to tell, and still have stories I want to tell..and images I want to paint..and they arrive out of my own angst. (Davida Allen)

The last chapter of Allen's novel repeats a motif: 'What is a portrait?' Like my reading of Allen's portrait of Vicki, the meanings of a portrait are complex and often contradictory: powerful at some angles, impotent at others, depending on what discourse the subject is read through. At the start of the book, Vicki critiques a portrait painted of her as a child. She is speaking as a child but also as an adult speaking (and writing) as a child:

The portrait lady sticks all her paint brushes in a jar of terps. and dips them all in lined oil, and then the tube of paint. The collar of my hands isn't anywhere NEAR the collar in the tube and my hands hav got FREKKLES all OVER them but shes not putting them in the portrait. Mum says theres nothing rong with having frekkles. And I should be thankful to GOD for what Ive got so why isnt the portrait lady painting them on my hands then? And anyhow, what is a portrait?



Vicki's written portrait of herself – her autobiography – highlights the warts-and-all freckles the portrait 'lady' chose not to paint but also inevitably leaves out other bodily markings. The differences between Vicki's autobiography and her description of her painted image suggest that all representations are inherently selective and, at times, misrepresentations. If Allen's novel of Vicki's autobiography constructs some of her faces, it also contains others in its action of trying to articulate some.

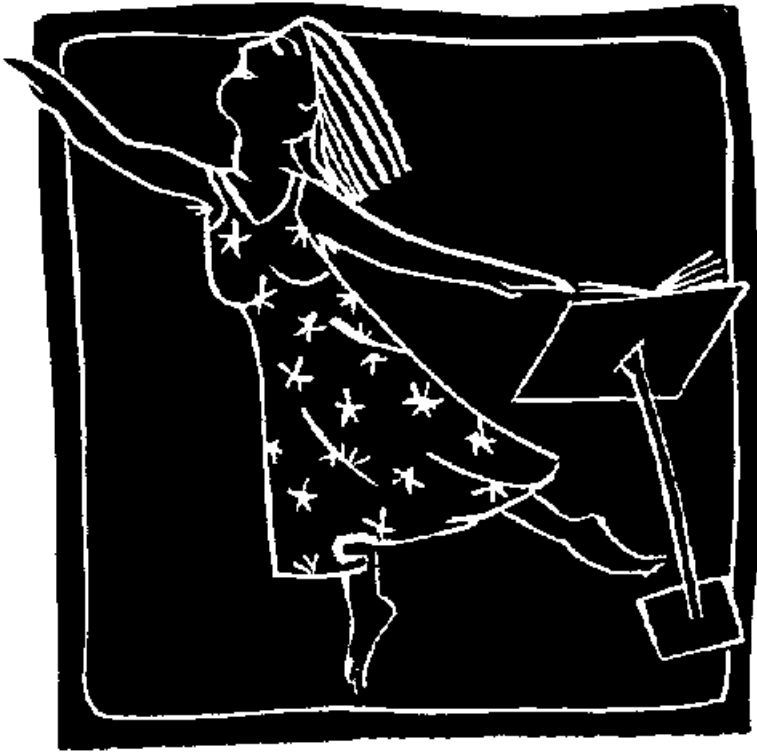
Vicki's solution to her question, 'What is a portrait?', is to paint what she sees – the latest object of her desire, the Movie Man. In doing so she continues to paint and to shape further images of her desires. She has moved from the freckle-less state described at the beginning of the novel – from being the object of a portrait – to being the painter of (her own) portraits; from being represented by how others see her to producing images and meanings of her own and consequently of her self.

My art output is initially simply carthartic in a true selfish sense....and when it does get born and is viewed by critics and discussed in university theses ... I only hope to God the simplicity of the work is not analysed into complexity beyond it's reason to be born. (Davida Allen)



## Eleven

### *Performing Bodies*



Today I want to talk about the notion and politics of performing theory by staging some ideas that have recently caught my attention. They relate to my thinking about what I am doing with theory in my writing, how far I can enact it, and also contribute to it through my practice. This also relates, as my writing inevitably seems to, to my life and how I can live it in response to the feminist theories I've been reading – reading as an audience, as you are here listening. But I selected them to read, and you elected to be here, so neither of us is being passive in this act. Now, I am reading them to you, I am speaking and performing these theories for you. And I am wondering how the performance will go, what terms will be used to measure my 'success' and what paradoxes are employed by feminists performing theory.

Somehow, standing up here in front of you and speaking makes this work seem curiously disembodied and yet, paradoxically, it is me giving body to these words I've been reading on the page which makes them come alive outside of my head, now circulating between you and me and made available for discussion. Hélène Cixous believes women have a privileged relation to the voice as that which moves through our bodies:

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering [as I am here] (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice ...<sup>1</sup>

It's the publicness that renders the speaking woman out of place, because of the authority with which patriarchy imbues public speech, an authority to which women supposedly have limited access because of our position in the symbolic order.

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public.<sup>2</sup>

Public speaking belies its relation to theatre – I am here in person, with my body, performing this (theoretical) act: it is not just my voice speaking.

If speaking in public can be likened to a stage performance, then Cixous regards such a stage in need of reform to accommodate women's expressions:

If the stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. She will want to be a body-presence; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for 'staginess,' going beyond the confines of the stage, lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them.<sup>3</sup>

Ania Walwicz emphasises the cultural ambivalence of women speaking out in public places when she performs her prose/poetry:

When I actually perform my work in public there is a mad persona that I do create. You know, when a person's constantly having pressure of speech, the language sort of comes out at great speed and velocity ... I remember doing a reading where I had to laugh or shout. Of course it absolutely horrified people at Monash University. You know, that's not the area they're interested in.

Taking on a 'mad' persona might in some way mediate the extravagant performances of her radical work. I would have thought this disguise would let her get away with more but, on the contrary, maybe it signifies a more extreme version of 'femininity' in need of social control:

Well, it is curious how a woman appears doing the work that I do, especially if I do it on the stage; it might seem slightly indecent. I did a reading in England, and a Bishop complained that my work was obscene. If it was medieval times I would be burnt at the stake! A woman in public doing very emotive work is always seen as some expression of sexuality if she is emoting too much.<sup>4</sup>

Judith Butler writes about our acting out of gender as a performance which simultaneously regulates and produces behaviour according to familiar cultural scripts – those which we have already seen staged.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.<sup>5</sup>

This act is also subject to improvisations, 'although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations'.<sup>6</sup> These experimental acts are clearly necessary to establish the transgressive limits on which the dominant (heteropatriarchal binary system) will act to censor. But they also show that gender is staged, however ambivalently:

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.<sup>7</sup>

So what kinds of signifiers am I consciously or unconsciously performing here today? I speak as a woman and a feminist, but what does that mean given the circulation of meanings around those terms. What do I invest in my narrative 'I'? And what do I leave out?

Vicki Kirby is concerned about attitudes to bodies and where they are positioned, particularly in academic discourses. One of her favourite stories is about a speaker at a philosophy conference who gave 'dramatic expression' to the conflicts involved in performing theory about bodies:

We were told that corporeality in Irigaray's writing was to be understood as a decidedly literary evocation ... I was left wondering just what danger this exclusion had averted. To what *does* the nomination 'biological or anatomical body' refer? Or to put this another way, what secures the separation of its supposed inadmissible meaning from the proper purview of Irigaray's textual interventions? When I asked a question to this effect ... the speaker dismissed me with a revealing theatrical gesture. As if to underline the sheer absurdity of my question, she pinched herself and commented, 'Well, I certainly don't mean *this* body.'<sup>8</sup>

I've had a similar experience. I went to a conference on 'Bodies' where the speakers appeared as talking heads, the rest of their bodies hidden behind a very solid rostrum. They were performing the body-mind dichotomy. It was also winter in Melbourne, so everyone was wrapped in layers of clothes. Faces and hands were the only fleshy bits to be seen. I wonder what a difference the material conditions make? What would happen if 'philosophers of the body' were to be relocated in the tropics where clothes are kept to a minimum and wetness is normal, either from body fluids or rain. Some of us even come to enjoy our slippery bodies and take pleasure incorporating wetness into our lives. Akin to the fecund growth of mould and fungus (and I'm still talking bodies here), a writer's environment must stretch out over her page in all sorts of intricate patterns to inhabit her writing. But this is theoretical.

Philipa Rothfield argues similarly that representations of the body in theory – philosophies of the body – are precisely 'acts of representation, the body does not appear or, if it does, it is not regarded as *present* in any sense'.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting here how 'acting' seems to take on an element of duplicity, as if there is something else, something other, which is there beyond the acts of representation. But of course there is. There are bodies. It's just the way in which we talk about them that is subject to questioning.

I'm always fascinated by the way people speak about actors rather than the characters they play, as if the actor has somehow become their character and their name can be unproblematically substituted for the character's. Maybe this is an effort to attach a presence or a body to the 'scene of representation'. Rothfield draws on this phrase of Irigaray's to credit her with an acknowledgment of 'a performative element in theorization: that the theorist is a performer, one who cannot absent him/herself from the goings on'.<sup>10</sup> Kerryn Goldsworthy has also written about the connections between performance, writing and bodies with reference to the curious popularity of writers' festivals, of the desire 'to see the writer's body and to hear the writer's voice'.<sup>11</sup> Audiences, she argues,

regard the writer's body as a prolongation of the textual 'writer's voice' that they already know: they want to see the writer's body and 'read'

that as well. They want access to and knowledge of the writer's 'self', an identity they can identify, and identify *with*. They are dangerous, like people in love.<sup>12</sup>

In an earlier anecdote, Goldsworthy describes a reading by Helen Garner about people in love wanting to see the face of (their) love and, like Psyche, risking its disappearance. Is this dangerous when it comes to watching writers, I wonder? And dangerous to whom? Goldsworthy then distinguishes between reading and speaking as two different acts with different effects:

Writers reading from their work can use it to protect themselves from audiences. Panellists who have written out their 'talks' verbatim are likewise protected: as with a reading of poetry or fiction, it is really the text that is doing the performing. But if someone chooses to speak impromptu or consents to be interviewed, there's no sheet or sheaf of paper mediating spatially and otherwise between the audience and the performer. As the performer, you *are* your body and your body has become the text: you are stuck with whatever it produces in the way of comment, voice and gesture, Freudian slips, idiot giggles, imperfect breath control, awkwardness of angles, the lot, spinning talk out of your body like a spider.<sup>13</sup>

Is this the danger, the risk, of facing audiences? There is no mention of gender in here, but this is a woman speaking (well, she was writing). But if in one situation the text is performing and in the other 'you *are* your body and your body has become the text', would this render a reciter invisible? Is it only my text performing here? Where does the blood, sweat and tears involved in the production of writing leak out? Or is it clotted and cleaned up when the writing is preserved on the page – this performing page, dancing before our eyes?

How much of those processes of production can I inscribe onto the pages of this text in order to embody those words, to practice *écriture féminine*? I want to enact those theories of the body I've been reading. I also want to put out my foot and trip up their discursive biases, to make my presence felt in the form of my work, to make the writing more than an 'act of representation'. So the concept of performance seems important.



Important, but also ambivalent. I mean, performance carries with it the idea of being subject to critical appraisal, which my writing inevitably must be, given the arena in which it is being performed. (I'm making it sound like a circus trick now.) It is tricky: having theorised how public stages are culturally hostile to women, how they demand a disembodied authority to which feminist theory is opposed, there is still a need to be heard from those platforms, to make our presence felt in order to transform them.

But in the end, is this possible? What and who have I been performing here? Have I made my presence felt? Can I? Which I? Is voice enough? Have you heard me? Have you heard *me*? Or does this even matter? In the final outcome is it only the materiality of this body of academic work that matters? Is my materiality academic?

Thank you for coming.

I'd appreciate hearing your thoughts on this matter.

Please help yourself to the chocolate cake.



# Reading Conclusions

Reaching the end of a book is always disappointing for me, either because the entire book was unsatisfying to read or because I loved it so much I want to keep reading. Either way, my dissatisfaction has very little to do with the ending as such. It is more to do with the process of reading; how the writing interacts with my desires, including my desire to read. In response to that same process, stories continue to resonate in my head long after I have finished reading, in much the same way as I might carry a song around with me in my head for days, whether willingly or not. Scenes and voices, characters and ideas enter my everyday life at any moment, whether I'm washing the dishes or talking to other people, pottering in the garden or writing a book. It's like ripples on water, or waves that continue to wash over, making the connections between life and text, between theory and practice, across cultures, time and place.

A conclusion then, does not seem to matter in itself as much as the 'body' does. The patterns of desire have already been established in the process of writing and reading up until this point. In a text which has debated the artificiality of endings and their investment in the logic of linear plots and climaxes, a conclusion here seems somewhat contradictory. But contradictions abound in bringing theories of *écriture féminine* and contemporary women's writing in Australia together in a feminist text. The politics of how we read and write, and of how women might desire differently, away from patriarchal narrative patterns, have been integral to this discussion. While all the writers' texts I study have been concerned with the ways in which women are constructed and positioned through discourse, a number of discourses have emerged as significant in their production or limiting of sexual differences. Medicine, psychiatry and notions of health are issues explored by Coombs, Place and Hawthorne, in particular, and are always linked with female sexuality. Violence and economics often meet as discourses associated with women's bodies, as they do in the texts of Woolfe and Allen, and to some extent in Baranay's. Their intersection is particularly intense when associated with the visual arts, a sphere of representation particularly reliant on patriarchal desires. Notions of the family, romance and heterosexuality are disrupted in almost all the texts, and the relations between maternity and a woman's body are also challenged by Coombs, Allen and Walwicz.

While 'Australia' does not feature significantly, except perhaps in Susan Hawthorne's text, our location in Australia does affect our practices of reading and writing. My reading of French feminist theories undergoes a cultural translation as well as a literal one when I relate it to writing which has been produced in Australia. Writers do the same: the connections they make between life and text, between theory and practice, continue to resonate in their texts long after they read or hear the ideas. While French feminist theory is not widely read, its ideas articulate part of a cultural milieu; as Susan Hawthorne comments in her interview, she was talking about what shape a woman's novel might be in the 1970s, when she was 'thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women'.

One of the most significant ideas to emerge from both theories of *écriture féminine* and the contemporary writing being produced by women in Australia is the potential of writing to produce new meanings, other desires, and alternative structures through which to imagine our life-stories. Sue Woolfe describes the need for such stories as being, 'when she holds herself up to the light she sees an interweaving of many stories who tell her what she is ... that to me is a political agenda'. My writing of this book is a contribution to those politics of writing, not only in attending to those new stories and their writers but also in attending to the ways in which I might write an academic text as a feminist.

Appropriately, this conclusion does not conclude the book; what follows is an edited version of each writer's interview and the endnotes of all the intersecting texts that have touched my writing directly. As such, this point might be considered intermediary rather than concluding, just one more ripple to resonate from women's writing and writing women's bodies.



# The Interviews

INTERVIEW WITH ANIA WALWICZ

*This interview with Ania Walwicz took place in her home in Fitzroy, on a cold Monday in September 1992 huddled around her kitchen table accompanied by Mr Boopee, her cat, and a cup of herbal tea. Walwicz has an infectious friendliness and we talked on for some time, going out later that night.*

Alison: Well I really enjoyed reading *red roses*, and the length seemed to make a lot of difference as to what you were able to do. Was it easy, the transition between writing small pieces and a major novel?

Ania: Yes, it was a natural transition, the next thing to do after *boat* was to do a very long piece and to have many things happening within the piece so it's like a collage, and also like a musical composition. To me it has different movements in it, beginning softly with a lullaby and then the movement becomes very circular and rounded. Then it comes to a centre which then explodes and then the movement becomes slower and ends with an easy ending, I feel. But it's very connected with the personal experience described – the whole anguish of mourning really.

Alison: Of what sort of mourning?

Ania: For my mother.

Alison: Yes? Is that what prompted it?

Ania: The death of my mother prompted the book. I actually started writing it nine months after her death. It's very curious. Like having a baby. But of course it was a wrong decision to write about it so soon, after her death, because it was distressing to actually write it. It's the only time in fact that I became frightened of my own writing. The writing was haunting me, and I had to abandon it, because I think I was touching upon very



painful areas within myself. Then I came back to it years later. And then I wrote it from a different perspective where it included my own anguish but also included other things, you know, other texts, and became an intertextual combination and became everyone's mother. It ceased to be just my own mother.

Alison: You've often said that you start writing from your personal experience, like diaries.

Ania: Oh yes, but that was a very detached sort of medium, I think. No matter what you write it's never fully direct, because diaries deal with somehow trying to capture experience, note it. One never reworks experiences. It's putting experience at ease, putting it to rest. Whereas with my work, although it began from diaries then it got involved with enactment of experience through language. And then that *red roses* to begin with because the mourning for my mother was so vivid to me at the time it began as a sort of re-enactment of it in language – a redoing it and intensifying it, then I, it frightened me. So it's a personal catharsis happening in there too although I point out that it's not a complete solution – writing never is. Although, partially it was. In lots of ways the book actually had very symbolic beginning and end. It began nine months after my mother's death and then it was published exactly seven years after her death, which is supposed to be the period of mourning. So I think in writing my work there's a tremendous sort of personal significance happening too. You know, on the conscious or unconscious level.

Also the way the book was actually written physically. Half of it was written in Australia with references to Poland or sort of nowhere place of memory and then I went to England and then to France and I was writing it as I was travelling. So it became my mother was re-emerging through other images that I was looking at. Even though she died in Australia, there were her origins, and the second world war and all this I was re-living while travelling and thinking about her. But I think

the process of mourning is there, that one does, you know, think about someone and it returns to you through all the media of other images too. It's not a direct memory. Or sometimes it is, but often it's something that comes through another image, and that's the level that interested me: an image of my mother which is suggested, or an image of a mother which is suggested *through* other images. But I also would like to see how people read it because I only know of two readers who have read it in a particular way. One found it distressing reading. Another person didn't. It's interconnected with the way they actually related to their own mother. Did you find it distressing reading?

Alison: No.

Ania: No. May I ask you a personal question?

Alison: Yes.

Ania: Well I wanted the book to be at the mirror too, so that the reader could project their own mother onto it. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?

Alison: Aah, it's ambivalent.

Ania: I feel the relationship with the mother always has ambivalence, but it's a good one?

Alison: Well, I guess we get on, but, you know, there's things that need working out still.

Ania: But it's strange, the person who liked the book has a good relationship, the one who found it harrowing doesn't. So I am suggesting areas of experience in the reader which are not fully conscious for them.

Alison: Well maybe I do have a good relationship! How do you imagine your readers? I mean, do you write it hoping that the readers question themselves while they're reading?

Ania: Oh yes, yes yes. Yes I hope that the reader has all kinds of emotional reactions of their own to the work. I am trying to touch a nerve in people, or touch upon their own experience so then it releases further images within them, so that the work being presented is an open text without closure of meaning, closure of approach. That means that they can have many personal reactions. That's the interesting thing, because it started off as my mother, my mourning for my mother, my relationship with my mother and then the text – by including so many different texts, and opening itself to different ways of actually questioning itself or having a conversation with itself, because a text proceeds in this way, setting up this conversation with itself, proposing other images all the time. So in a way it's sort of innumerable texts are included. And actually when I was proof-reading the work I found each time I read it was a different reading for me even. So I become the reader of my own work too, which is a fascinating thing.

Alison: I find that it also makes people question the way they read as well. Instead of reading passively they have to renegotiate your work, try different ways of reading it, otherwise they don't get very far.

Ania: Well it's true, so it's demanding of the reader. They have to engage themselves with the text. They have to participate in the formation of the text, and I'm stating in the text that I wanted intelligent readers. I flatter the ones who can do it. Most reading is seen as passive sort of entertainment, escapism. Here I'm doing the opposite: confrontation. So, it can be a frightening thing.

Alison: Sometimes it reminds me of Gertrude Stein's writing. Did you read a lot of her?

Ania: Oh yes. Not an enormous amount, but actually when I first came across Gertrude Stein I hated her work. And then, when the rhythms of her work actually appeared in my own, could

I actually read her with pleasure. Very odd. How do we read? Maybe all kinds of reading are a form of absorption. One is forever like a sponge. Well I think everything that I have read has entered into me and I can recollect it in some way, even if it's a tiny memory, so maybe we just accumulate everything and then, there's ways of showing it in that book. But I have bits of books in *red roses* like Vera Lynn's childhood, and actually when I was in England I got this book about her childhood, and included bits there. It's strange because I showed *red roses* to a person who started reading that and said 'Oh, I like the bit about your childhood', but it wasn't my childhood at all. And that book questions autobiography too, because everyone's experience whole, maybe it's all the same, all the same – one thing.

Alison:     So what sort of reactions do you get when you perform your work?

Ania:       Well all very varied. Nothing gets thrown! Well I think a lot of people enjoy it, they enter into it. It's a form of hypnosis I actually do too. Well, indirect induction, where people then listen to my voice and my voice is melodious when I do the readings and then they follow the voice and they have to concentrate on that voice and look at me only – that's a form of hypnotic suggestion you know. Well, not a major one, they don't pass out – maybe in some way they do. Well that form of language, in the first place language [that] is not grammatical, which is fragmented, and which deals with unconscious experience. That does draw people on to a level within themselves. So I do that. But it's not everyone's cup of tea, this form of writing or this form of reading. It is a very extreme work which has no antecedents in Australian culture. German literature, European literature, yes, that's the background, it comes through. There's never been expressionism in Australian culture. It's basically English culture, it's very restrained. There's a certain polite, you know, message of good taste. In lots of ways my work has been seen as an extreme

work, expressionist work, but also work which upsets people too, or is found to be somehow contravening good behaviour. The rules of good behaviour are broken, by me. And yet I've had attention from serious critical situations where people have accepted it so it does fit into serious critical situations like Universities, literary studies, or it fits into *avant garde* literary circles connected with art and so forth.

Alison: What about, you seem to be included in a lot of the anthologies under multicultural literary debates.

Ania: I do my work. The way it is perceived is not up to me. I can't stop anyone from perceiving it whichever way they like. The multicultural aspect, well that's a fair enough argument. At the same time it didn't deal with my work in terms of *avant garde*. It just presented it as a sort of remnant, or some fragmentation within the person as a result of displacement. That's one way of looking at it. Maybe that is correct. But I'm not representing multicultural views. I myself should be an expert on my work. Interestingly enough, a writer is never seen as an expert on their work. Someone else has to approve of them, talk about them. I should turn the tables. Professor Walwicz speaks about herself! Why not?

But I see myself as *avant garde*, that my work stems from literary consciousness. It doesn't stem from dispossession or fragmentation due to migration, because I started to write as an adult with tertiary education done within Australian milieu, so I can't claim to be such a European, really. I am interested in European modes because that forms my interest and of course innately connected to me as a person. But that's a more indirect process than actually me arriving here, being dispossessed and writing out of this dispossession. I arrived here at the age of twelve, so some time has passed. At the same time, multicultural argument is fine, but I would see multicultural content of my work as more related to my interest in European literary modes. And that's not a straightforward multicultural explanation. But then, I've never

been happy about anything that's ever been written about me, if I were to be totally honest because I would like to write it myself.

Alison: The way that I'm looking at your work in my work is through the perspective of feminist theories of women's writing. Are you familiar with those theories?

Ania: Some of it. I like psychoanalytic approach to literary work, and the feminist, well, how my work would be seen as babble, and, the female speech. Definitely.

Alison: And are you conscious of those theories when you're writing your work?

Ania: I include literary theory in *red roses* – as inserts – but I don't think that one has to be conscious of those theories. I think they're quite elementary when they arrive from the writing process. A lot of actual consciousness of writing as it is produced comes from the actual process of writing. But I've got a lot of reading in psychology. That area interests me. So, but I am aware of the theoretical background too, but I'm not sort of coming to it from some sort of inquiry or research. Once I come across books like this I absorb them but I am not getting the idea of the way to write from those books. There is a difference. I don't have to have direct acknowledgment of sources, too, which an academic does. It's a different business. But I am aware of those sources so of course it comes from this and also my writing stems from the eighties which was the beginning of a collection of women's work and it was feminist awareness and readings that were set up by women, so inevitably my work was produced within context of feminism right from the beginning. And I think that shaped it. Absolutely. Because probably works like that might never have been published earlier on. Or I'd have been seen as too extreme, or not legible. Amazing. So feminism actually formed the writing practice and also formed the way of looking at my

work, reading it, and has formed the writing of it. But the relationship between me and theory is much more indirect than your relationship between me and theory. But I still absorb it but it comes out in a different way. And it doesn't have to be a direct relationship. But it's curious how authors are seen as always naive as though they didn't know about basic theoretical things. Why is that? That's the old idea of looking at the author as a sort of *idiote savante*, you know they have this marvellous talent, but they're sort of idiots, or mad. [laughs]

Alison: They've just got creative genius maybe but don't know what they're doing.

Ania: Yes, and the creative genius comes out and they don't know what they're doing and someone has to elucidate it. That was the old framework, the theoretical framework to begin with. When I was at university it was like that: the author produces out of this wonderful source – god knows what it is, and never mind about it – and then the process is then intellectualised and then understood. Curious, because I was spending some time with a student who actually asked me that question seriously you know, not believing that I had covered what she had covered because I was an author – that put me in the category of a disabled person.

Alison: So how do you see the relation between you and universities and institutions and critics?

Ania: It's changing, it's changing. Because I feel that I can have more of a voice now because the author's voice is invited back again, whereas when I was studying it was totally totally hushed up. No-one was interested in some diary statements – it seemed naive, idiotic. Now, that sort of form of speech from the writers is, well, welcomed. And now, you're welcoming me, that's part of it too. But I do want to write articles and essays on the process of writing. Because my form of writing is so fragmented there can be a sort of belief that I actually speak in

this way or function in this way. Now, the author's voice is welcome back again because of creative writing becoming a subject at universities. That's the difference. The actual process of writing is seen as an important thing, but in America it was always taught, but in Australia following the English tradition it wasn't, and the creative side was seen as belonging only to this genius, the mad genius, and thus not capable of being intellectualised.

Alison: What sort of books do you enjoy reading for pleasure?

Ania: I have a wide taste. I was reading Dumas – he was a hero of my childhood – recently, *The Black Tulip*. But I don't have a great relationship with contemporary Australian literature, no. But I don't know if Australian literature has a tremendous relationship with me either. I don't really know how I get seen, so it's hard to gauge one's popularity. I think I'm seen as a very, *outré*, extreme figure which creates unease, and is sort of embarrassing and, ah, odd. At Melbourne University I gave a lecture recently, they all had my book there, dog-eared. That was a little strange because everyone *had* to read me and there was no choice. Suddenly I appeared like a living textbook. There's a sort of element of horror involved, you know.

Alison: Is there much overlap between your artwork and your writing?

Ania: When I actually perform it in public that is a form of theatre already. It's very theatrical work. My art-forms have been shown very little. I have very few shows. The writing has had more attention, and so the writing forms my sort of, I don't know, 'fame'. So the writing is the body of work that people have responded to. I never try to combine it because, it's been suggested that I do, but it wouldn't be of any value because the work is separate, in identity. I've always wanted to keep it separate, because, when I paint I don't write. I go through periods like that when I won't write anything, I'll just paint. So it's a different level.



Alison: So is there anything else that you'd want to make me aware of, as someone writing about your work?

Ania: Hmm. I always worry about saying anything about my work because later on, you know, I say 'Oh what did I say?' or I disagree with myself very strongly. But that's the best way to think of things, that one can change one's mind. Sometimes it seems to me that way or another according to my mood. Because the work is very related to my moods too, or how I felt at a given time which I'm recording because that's the aim of the work, really. The aim of the work is sort of notation-dash-enactment of inner states of feeling/being within me, so it is my diary too. No but I think the best way to look at the work is that it is a very changing situation. It always makes me think of an image of something that is sparkling and altering and moving in space, a sort of motility is being maintained, and I think that's the way to perceive it, in that sort of way rather than as rigid or categorised in some way. It is forever changing its shape and forever undergoing metamorphosis within itself. But that's why, you know, being placed in any category, then the work assumes a finite shape or set of rules that one has to follow. I don't want to feel then trapped in my own style or format too. But the *avant garde* area, to me that seems a lot more flattering, and what I really want to do, because I've never consciously set out to be multicultural. No no that was something that was said about me, so it's a form of gossip. But I did set out to be an *avant garde* author. But the multicultural argument can be, well, it has been taken on a very simplistic level. People actually believed that I wrote like I do because of insufficient grasp of the English language. Yes, taking it at an absurd sort of level. And also once I was employed at a community arts job where the person in charge thought that I should work at migrant centres, because that's where multicultural writers worked. The poor sods couldn't speak English so they all wrote multicultural works. God! Astonishing, isn't it? No, the area of feminist criticism appeals to me more, where I can actually shift perspective again, and

that I can never be pinned down. But inevitably, after death perhaps something could be said. But then maybe a woman who refused to be pinned down. That's what I'd like to do – constantly come out with something different. You see with *red roses* already that idea of using other texts or playing on genre is exploited. There are bits of Mills and Boon, you know – that Abby, that constantly walks into her arms – his arms! Yes, so the book to me had all this sort of interweaving things, but then that then leads to an idea of exploiting these formats, other formats, you know – the romance. The romance has always fascinated me. But through teaching writing, which I've done too, areas of writing about writing are occurring to me now. So there's more to be done.

Australian? Hmm. Yes when I was performing in Geneva I was seen as Australian. Yes, no-one saw me as a European. I was there representing Australia. Like a sports event.

Alison: How did you feel about that?

Ania: Well, I make big attempts to explain where I was born. See I was actually born in Prussia, what used to be Prussia. So I make points you know about where I was born, but it didn't matter to me either way because I think writing's the international business. I don't want to just be published in Australia and be here for the Australian public. I don't want to read Australian authors necessarily either. Australian culture – two hundred years. How can major works be produced necessarily, when, I mean why should one negate someone like Tolstoy, you know? My first idea of literature was someone like Dostoyevsky, you know, serious, Russian literature, you know, something with passion. When I was thirteen I read *Crime and Punishment*, you know just agony, profound choices, suffering, you know that sort of thing? And actually the first introduction to literature came from my father who knew a lot of poetry by heart in German. Goethe. Erbkönig. He'd say to me in German, over and over, translated, before I went to school, before I could read. That was my first impression

of literature. That it had to be emotive, powerful, and it was of course connected with sound, that he was saying it, but it was powerful, you know. And something that would emotively engage you. Or something that could make you cry. That was my child idea of good literature. But you see, the whole tradition of Australian literature, there isn't that. There is an interest in the opposite: how to tell an amusing story, you know? How to be detached, or how to engage the reader in a polite sort of level of entertainment. But I want profound things. But how does it come across? Who knows. Maybe I'm seen as some grandly annoying creature, you know, all the time harping on doing this mad stuff. People have said that. A person said 'You do this sort of manic stuff?' You know, 'mad person'. There could be connections. When I actually perform my work in public there is a mad persona that I do create. You know, when a person's constantly experiencing pressure of speech and I'm sort of, the language sort of comes out at great speed and velocity.

Alison: And does it take a lot of preparation to prepare those readings?

Ania: Each time I read there is a different persona. But some of them are very extreme personas so I remember doing a reading where I had to laugh or shout. Of course it absolutely horrified people at Monash University. You know, that's not the area they're interested in. But it is, the sort of theatre which interests me would be like Grotowski's work which was Polish theatre, experimental theatre, dealing with an extreme of physical presence and voice production. These are areas which are not at all familiar in Australian culture. But I am a nice person – not too over the top! The areas that do interest me are areas which are beyond the norm of human experience too which, other areas could be seen as female hysteria. But what is female hysteria but also the hysterical, you know. How does feminism see that – with great pleasure. But I would be epitomising this kind of female hysteria, a repressed voice which arises and erupts in an abnormal way too. I'm quite happy to

be considered like that within my work, yes. Sort of psychotic element is used there too, in my performance, I'm sure. That frightens people. You know, like someone speaking in the street uncontrollably or, putting on a funny voice too – uncomfortable. But I like to make people uneasy with me too, in performance. But they're not areas that people are familiar with, nor are they promoted areas within Australian culture necessarily. But the European scene is not so excellent. It just sees pockets of things just like here. In America the most popular thing would be like you know Tama Janowitz? That sort of magazine culture. So there's no country that I could really go to and feel this is home. Because here I appear to people as a foreign figure. If I went to Poland I would be even more foreign. So, that's the multicultural argument.

But I will have to do some more teaching. I do like teaching and I also realise now when I want to write essays about the process of writing it all comes from teaching because I did do that different level there – and this work can be accepted as an academic work, this actual text about the process of writing. Everything about the physical relationship to the body has been written [into my work]. I don't know, I suppose because I am performing the work in public, that already becomes the embodiment of the work. That's an aspect. But even the writing itself has, embodies a gesture within it. The work for theatre I have done, where I've actually envisaged certain movements which I would then write in terms of language – not describing them necessarily, although hinting at them. Then the writing itself then conveys this, to the reader, directly or indirectly. So it can be done, the actual movements can be suggested through language. But there's such a close connection between the language and the body for me. One embodies the other and of course the breathing factor is the crucial thing in the writing.

Alison: So do you think it's related to yourself as a specifically female body, or just as an embodiment?

Ania: Well it would definitely relate to a body – anybody's body, but I think the female form does come out there, because obviously being brought up as a female, or being seen as a female, being told that I was a female. Although I was brought up in a very unusual way. I wasn't really told I was a female, because, I was told in a way by my father, I was called by a boy's name. Very odd. So my sense of myself was always sort of a transvestite sense of myself. My view of gender has always been a form of parade of gender. How does that fit into feminism?

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET COOMBS

*This interview took place at Margaret Coombs's home in Petersham, Sydney, on a Wednesday afternoon in January 1993.*

Margaret: One thing I suppose that I wanted to say was that I do feel there is a problem from the point of view of the writer like me, that there tend to be a handful of writers sort of very self-consciously interested in theory and who are mostly working within the academy and so sort of don't actually need to make a separate reputation outside of it. They've sort of got a ready-made power base so they can afford to publish very little and, you know, be cryptic. And on the other hand the vast majority of Australian writers seem to me to be extremely hostile to theory and, you know, well, sort of, irritatingly naive and some of them are technically brilliant and so it's terribly frustrating to me when these people can write beautifully and not be aware of the, what their work is doing, that their work is sexist or, you know, supportive of values and power systems that are really odious. And that there's an idea that ... like it's just a gift and 'what you truly feel', that that's going to be somehow okay and, you know, it's *not* going to be somehow okay at all. And yet it's quite difficult because on the other hand I feel a great deal of kinship with *that* group of people whenever I'm confronting the heavy duty academic who doesn't understand how hard it is to acquire those technical skills and survive in a literary market place where the prevailing ideas are very romantic and, you know, the values modernist and I get frustrated that those sorts of academics when they kind of under-support you. You know like it's *very* easy to alienate the romantics – very easy. The minute they sense that you've ever read a piece of theory, you know, they're threatened and you've alienated them. But if you haven't read *everything* you won't get the support of the others. That's basically the kind of position in my most paranoid moments I feel I'm really in. That I sort of don't get enough support from the academic critics and that I've severely alienated the mainstream people partly

by trying to be a mediator between those two worlds and bring those ideas to these people out here. But *you're* here, so that's nice. I mean, interested in theory and eager to, well I like what you said in your letter. That sounds like a good thing to be doing. It really does.

Alison: Thank you. Do you have much to do with, those academic worlds, I mean, do you come into contact?

Margaret: Well I have by choice, or by chance of friendship. There used to be a group at Sydney University English Department called FELT back in the days when everyone was all enthusiastic about opening up the academy and all that kind of thing. All those ideas have totally disappeared now as far as I can see. It was a great help to me to sort of have, the encouragement of being welcomed back, you know, into that kind of setting, and being amongst people who were reading those sorts of books and who supported that whole idea about *that* being a worthwhile thing to do. Because the hardest thing about the isolation of the job [writing] is that you're just not daily surrounded by people who think what you're doing is a worthwhile way to be spending your time. Then I used to have a very close friend, Elin Howe, who was originally at art school but then became an art lecturer at University of Western Sydney, and visual arts theorists obviously read much the same stuff as we do and so that was somebody to sort of discuss theory with in art. And then, somebody that I really admire in the academic world is Terry Threadgold. She seems to me to know the kind of theory I'm interested in better than anybody else I've come across, and to be a really good mediator of difficult and 'foreign' ideas to people with an Australian sort of education and cultural background. And she's been outstanding in encouraging Australian writers. That lecture I gave at Sydney University, was at her invitation. And she also asked several other writers to come along and, you know, I mean I was I would say probably the *most* 'theorised' of the lot. But although she knows it all herself she's prepared

to sort of, you know, expose her students to actual practising writers and try to set up some kind of dialogue. So she takes risks, those sorts of risks, and that's really important encouragement to a writer like me. Hugely important because I've sort of felt a bit under-rated by the mainstream, by people who I would have thought I would have got more support from, considering what I'm saying. And the way I'm saying it – the *literary* experimentation.

Alison: So do you have much contact with other writers as well?

Margaret: It sort of has varied from time to time. I suppose, at one stage I did attempt to set up a, well first of all I got involved in Redress Press, which was a fairly small feminist publishing group back in the early eighties, and we were naïve but it was a start for me in sort of getting interested in feminist theory because I wasn't, well I felt threatened by it before that but then after that I became very interested in it. And it also, it was very good for me because I'd been an isolated mother, you know, it gave me a sense of, an awareness of my own competence, you know, opportunities to discover from experience that I could do things, all sorts of things, and better than a lot of other people there who were a lot more self-confident and surer than I was.

Alison: One of the things that I'm interested in is how theory and practice intersect in your books.

Margaret: Yes, well there's a paper that Terry Threadgold's written on ficto-criticism, I really enjoy doing that. I really enjoy letting adjacent quotes comment on each other without spelling it out. And it's terribly frustrating when people just don't see the point at all or find that alarming in some way. I mean, there was quite a lot of reviewer hostility. People have said to me that the way I put quotes in *Regards to the Czar*, they couldn't see the point and certainly didn't like them being in black borders, framed. And, see, a lot of people tried to read and indeed a lot succeeded in reading *Regards to the Czar* as a



very conventional, identify-with-the-heroine narrative, which I put quite a lot of effort into trying to prevent them doing. Do you know what I mean? And so, yes, they tended to read it in those terms and overlooked the attempts to block that approach – regarded them as ‘failings’. But there were a lot of people who really did like *Regards to the Czar*, you know, obviously they were reading it in that, ‘Let’s ignore the hiccups’ way, who really don’t like this sort of thing and sort of kindly tell me that they hope I get back to writing in that ‘nice’ way. And the great success of my work in mainstream terms has been ‘Nothing Happened’ from *Regards to the Czar*, that, just that story by itself without any of the stuff around it to try to question and point out that it’s not that simple. I think it would be easier in an academic environment where, there’s a hugely strong immediately surrounding support for doing it the risky way. Because then it’s not risky, it’s become safe *in that context*. But I find it, a struggle. It makes it hard to write sometimes, this feeling that, they’re not going to like this.

Alison: So are you very aware of readers when you write?

Margaret: Not when I’m actually writing, but the rest of the time I am, yes. Once you’ve had a book published and experienced reader response, I can’t imagine how you could not be painfully aware of it. I think before that you can think there are these imaginary creatures that are going to be perfect readers from your point of view. You can be totally unaware of them, even banging around in your head, you know. Well it’s like with a performance. Paul (the man I live with) works full time as an entertainer, a mime clown at various R.S.L. clubs and festivals and all those sorts of places and I used to work with him as a, you know, just as back-up, not as a performer, but all this made me hugely aware that the audience really does contribute fifty percent to the performance. I mean the concept of a good performance with a totally hostile audience is just – it doesn’t even make sense. You know, there couldn’t *be* such a thing. And so, you know, well this sort of product is what you

write *plus* what the reader reads, and being a good reader is hard work and takes a lot of education and skill and practice, just like being a good writer.

Alison: Most of the theory that I'm bringing to your work is French feminist theory and Australian interpretations of them. Do you have much to do with those?

Margaret: Yes, well I've been very interested in Liz Grosz's work. And also Terry Threadgold, Hélène Cixous, and I've certainly been exposed to part of Irigaray's work and I'm much much less familiar with Julia Kristeva's work, as far as, you know, like maybe I've had it in mediated form from other people but Cixous and Irigaray are the ones that I've, I suppose, admired. Well I think it's extremely hard to say precisely how theory influences your writing. You know, I sort of guess I think that if all this stuff has been fed into you that it's likely to change the way you write and affect the way you write. I'm certainly interested in trying to convey identity as fluid and the complexity, you know the idea that as soon as I articulate 'I', I am no longer that me - I mean identity is a process, not a fixed essence. And that, what Foucault said about it, I mean, I know he can be a sexist old hopeless creature, but, you know, I'm really interested in what he says about the relationship of power and knowledge. As for Irigaray, I found reading 'Divine Woman', for someone with no sort of religious background, let alone a French Catholic background or whatever, and no special knowledge of the kinds of mythologies that she draws upon and assumes that you'll know immediately who that was and so forth, you know, I have to stop myself saying, That's just gushy blather. But then I see the point of what she's doing but I find that sort of particular material she uses, the angel, divine woman sort of imagery a bit, *not to my taste* I guess!

Alison: I was also interested in the references to *The Daughter's Seduction*, to Jane Gallop. Do you think theory is seductive in some ways?

Margaret: Yes. I really enjoy reading theory and, you know, there's a part of me that would happily be a philosopher and of course you know this is another thing: I mean I know I could be a philosopher, a feminist theorist. I know it. And I, especially in the last three years or so I've put an enormous amount of effort into reading and learning this sort of stuff and I sometimes go to academic things that I know a lot more of that sort of stuff than a lot of people who have nice comfortable jobs as tutors, if not lecturers, do. And, you know, it does sometimes tempt me away from writing, partly because I guess I can see that theorists get taken so much more seriously in a lot of contexts than a mere writer. Unless you're a writer who's, you know, *up there*. But I don't approve of myself for letting myself get *preoccupied*, sometimes, with theory. Sometimes theorising *does* distract me from writing rather than help me become a better writer, which is what I want it to do.

Alison: Would you consider doing both?

Margaret: Well, I think it's extremely hard. I mean in a way, I've tried to do both in the past couple of years in the sense that I put a huge amount of thought and energy into a few little things I've done. In 'Protect me from what I want', I put a lot of work into that and I found it terribly frustrating that, you know, some academics sort of liked it but. Another thing I did after that was a thing on organ transplants at the beginning of this year that was broadcast, and I also put a huge amount of effort into sort of making it, you know, not read like a conventional media academic essay. I mean I thought, especially in 'Protect me from what I want', I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have a rigid, linear argument, sort of stripped of all metaphors and so on and so forth. But what happens is that unless you can somehow *announce yourself* to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be *from somewhere* and all that, it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a 'proper academic essay', you

know? Some professor in Melbourne thought of asking me to re-write the organ transplant piece for publication in some academic journal but he (mistakenly I think) thought it not sophisticated enough and in need of re-writing. And so, it is, it's very difficult. I've self-educated myself to a point where, you know, I can do that stuff and feel I know what I'm doing, but that I can't get it taken seriously because I haven't got the right credentials or I'm not in the right institution. So I probably will continue to do both but with the academic stuff being in a small way rather than knocking myself out over it because it's just not rewarding enough. And doesn't get taken seriously if you're positioned as 'a fiction writer'. I used to take on the whole idea of a fiction writer not being separate from other sorts of workers. I used to, you know, see the fiction writer as a cultural critic – see fiction writing as just part of the job of being a cultural critic and, you know, my whole life as a similar project. And I still agree with that idea but, I just, well particularly the organ transplant piece, I found that incredibly draining, and I just, haven't got that desire to do as much of that kind of thing. I mean, I got letters from, you know, heart transplant patients' mothers saying what a horrible person I was. It's ghastly, I mean I'm positive I'm right as far as cultural criticism goes. I mean if I needed a heart transplant I'd go and have one immediately. Of course we've all got to try to survive and of course you'd do anything for people you love and so forth, but it's just a farce to pretend that this is a service available to *everybody*, that it's serving 'Humanity' because it's *not*. It's the first time in my life I've ever got hate-mail and I thought, Ooh, not for me thank you very much!

Well one of the things I sort of thought that I'd like to make a point of, is saying, you know, what a huge difference it makes to me that I am a mother of two children. And, I think being a mother, at least in our culture, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't, and I think being a mother of two rather than one, or seven, is also, has it's own particular sets of problems and pleasures. And it's really important to me to look at things like, you know, motherhood, class and

economic position and, well they're the things that particularly interest me. I get very impatient with feminists who are unaware of the complexities of class, money and motherhood. And, that's sort of, that's made a big difference to me as a writer. For instance I've spent the past twenty years, or the years, you know before I was actually trying to write full time, say ten years, I was spending that time being a mother rather than, say, doing a PhD or being a lecturer at a University. And they, people that I sometimes feel envious of and exasperated by, are writers that did have academic jobs and then with a great display of, you know, 'nobleness', retired to write full time and give up their jobs. But they take with them this huge amount of cultural capital in terms of a network of friends, the status of having been 'from' there and knowing, of having been known to be, to have that background and so on, and so it's very much harder if that lump of your life was spent being a mother, which of course in our culture is to be sort of a nobody. And from that life you don't bring a whole network of friends who are useful in your career as a writer. There are still very few women writers who are mothers or, you know, except for a couple who, you know there's always some sort of an explanation here, sort of had their children when they were forty or had a mother of their own who looks after their children or has a lot of money or something. And, it's not just writers that motherhood makes life difficult for. I think it's difficult for all mothers. It's part of how the body affects writing because, you know, motherhood is the ultimate isn't it: the consequence of having a female body as it were. I've been thinking about strategies, I mean *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*, I now realise, I should have marketed as the first Australian novel that had ever been written about 'post-natal depression'.

The relationship between reading, readers and writers, it's interesting. This whole business of conflating women with their characters in fiction is a real problem. Especially for somebody like me whose work reads as, and to a large degree is, extremely autobiographical, as people usually use the word.

But, you know, of course again, one of the really big things I'm trying to say I hope with all my work is *people change*, you know? And also that writing is writing and it's not the same thing as the writer. And, you know sometimes people are really sort of disappointed when you're not the character in the story.

Alison: So do you think a lot about structuring?

Margaret: I think a lot about how can I make this so that it's absolutely impossible for anybody to read it other than the way I want them to read it and of course there's *never* a way!

And another thing that's a big problem for me as a writer is the problem of the guilt and the suffering you have to endure because people read fiction as a transparent window onto 'reality' and take it all very literally or, worse, sort of imagine terrible things you've said that you haven't actually thought about them personally, you know. Because I do definitely like to work from things that have happened to me. But then it sort of becomes a very, well for a start it's my point of view and for another thing, you know, I'll sort of sacrifice anything for the sake of trying to produce the piece of writing I want to produce, and it is just terrible when people read something and read it as absolutely about *them* and assume that's your whole attitude to them. You can say to them 'representation isn't "reality"' and so forth, but, in a culture like ours where most people see writing as, the way they see photographs and they see each other; they've still got to put up with all *their friends* thinking that you've done this terrible thing to them so that even if you manage to convince *them* they shouldn't be upset they've still got to suffer *all that*. So that the sooner, you know, everybody gets the education to problematise representation and read in a more sophisticated way, the easier it will be for writers to write.

I suppose another thing that I wanted to say is that sometimes I have the experience of readers who read everything I've written and then still, I feel, don't 'get it', I mean that's sort of complicated too, but I mean there was one woman

who is a psychiatrist who read all my work and thought it was wonderful and then said she thought it was a pity that *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing* didn't have a more optimistic ending. Well I felt that spoilt the whole thing, do you know what I mean? So you do feel discouraged at those moments as well.

Alison: Do you think it's possible to write exemplary female characters?

Margaret: I suppose it depends what you mean by that. Even in *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*, I thought that character was really remarkably strong and determined in a lot of ways and still, you know, it's impossible in those circumstances in that world and in that culture to not be in some way destroyed, you know.

Alison: I'm interested in how women writers are redefining women's bodies and aware of the things that happen, are 'happened' on their bodies.

Margaret: I've always in my life been acutely aware of being in my body, and for me it's been mostly really difficult, a nuisance. And, yes, I just, it was just sort of automatic to me to write of myself as an embodied self, you know, as a body. Because of all that, it really does fascinate me, you know, what a difference a body makes. And, well maternity ties into all that, you know? It's sort of, the difference that being a mother makes, is a product of all that.

## INTERVIEW WITH FIONA PLACE

*This interview with Fiona Place took place in Andiamo's Cafe on Victoria Street, Paddington, Sydney, on a Tuesday morning in January, 1993, accompanied by the aroma of coffee, the sounds of a lot of other people talking, cafe music and traffic.*

Fiona: I actually read more non-fiction now, than I ever have in the past. But I also like reading stuff like: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian Financial Review*, business magazines, sport magazines. I'm fascinated by how, what metaphors each of these discourses are using. When I read fiction, it's often that I'm so much aware of the technique, if a book can actually engage me and I forget that well then it's absolutely and utterly wonderful.

Alison: One of the things I found really fascinating about *Cardboard* was the structure that you wove into it.

Fiona: I had been writing poetry before I wrote *Cardboard*, right, and I was always going to stay a poet. And I was living with a guy who was a poet but he wrote epic poetry. And one day he just said to me, 'Fiona, are you just going to write pissy one page poems for the rest of your life?' And I looked at him and I said, 'Oh, do you think I should write something longer?' He said, 'Yeah, why don't you try a novel?' And I thought, 'Well, okay'. So I went upstairs. I got down the 25 000 words that I'd written six years ago which were the beginning of *Cardboard*, completely forgotten about them and never looked at them. I took them out of the cardboard box. I started with the first sentence and then it just occurred to me, somehow there needs to be something else in here. And I guess because I had been writing poetry I had thought about it, I just tried it. And, yeah that worked. It took me six months to get it finished and then I spent, say three or four years doing another four drafts of very fine tuning stuff. Like what I'm writing now is really hard, tough work. Every sentence, every step of



the way I don't know where it's going; it's much harder. *Cardboard* very much knew itself before I wrote it. I hadn't been back to University. I hadn't had anything to do with post-structuralist theory, I knew nothing about any of that. I had spent six months before I wrote the novel writing an essay on language, which was, appeared in, some of the chunks of it appeared in the novel. And that was very much about how the medical discourse is essentially middle class and shapes people's pain in a certain way and all those ideas that I had in *Cardboard*. So I'd written that essay first so I had some theoretical background from where I was coming from. But essentially I hadn't been informed consciously by any theories, by anything. I mean I didn't even know poststructuralism, didn't even know who Derrida was! I wouldn't have known any of that when I wrote the novel. Obviously later on, I can see how a lot of the stuff that I'm saying in that is very very poststructural. There's a whole lot of images and connections, but they came later.

Alison: Yes, I think that poetic voice is really important, having that certain amount of distance from Lucy.

Fiona: Oh yeah, and also you've got a voice that can then comment from a different perspective in time. Well I'm convinced that if you took it all out, it would just, it would be relentless. Just far too relentless.

Alison: Were you happy with how it was received?

Fiona: Oh yeah!

Alison: Did it have any response from, say the medical community?

Fiona: At the time I was published I was actually working out at Prince Henry Hospital as a writer in residence. So in that way, yeah, it's quite different having also worked within the area. Your reception is slightly, well, you sort of get people who also know me, but the book has been picked up by various people in the medical profession. I mean they might use it for

means which I would find quite spurious, but, I mean it's fascinating; I had one psychiatrist ring me up out of the blue and she said, 'You know, my patient and I, she reads a chapter out of the book each week and then comes and talks about it, and she can only talk about it to talk about her own personal experience.' Now, I would never have intended *Cardboard* to be used in that fashion, but, if that helps, if that, for that particular person in that particular situation is what they're doing well that's fine. I mean I know that it also became *de rigueur* for all the girls who had anorexia in the hospitals in Sydney to read *Cardboard*, and that sort, like you think, 'Ooh.' But, I mean it's had an impact. It definitely has. I get a lot of people who will ring me up and say, 'My daughter's got anorexia, can you help me?' So, I think it has had a meaningful reception within that community. People have been affected by it.

Alison: It must feel good, to have that sort of feedback.

Fiona: Yes, yes. To be able to have, yes I think working within the field made it a lot better and I also admit that I was quite good at self-promotion. Like, I did a lot of marketing. Because it was produced by a small publisher, and they had no money whatsoever to do that, I had so much energy and enthusiasm for the book, that I was able to do an awful lot of publicity and sell the book. Because, partly because I really believed a lot of the things that I had to say and I did think it would be of use to people.

Alison: So do you think the way you're writing now has been influenced by the theories that you've come across?

Fiona: Oh, heavens yes. I went to UTS and I did my Lacan, I did my Cixous, I did my Irigaray, all that sort of stuff. A lot of it I've found really interesting, but now, a sense that I want to go off and write. I mean, yeah, obviously you can't help but be informed by it. I mean, the paradox was *Cardboard* was informed by it, anyway. So yeah obviously those ideas have been, I've found a lot of them quite useful and interesting, but I think I'll also move on from them. But yeah they'll always be there.

Alison: Do you have much contact with other writers?

Fiona: Well I would have had more contact when I was doing my Graduate Diploma of Communication. Well, not necessarily writers, but other people doing theory and stuff like that, and I miss that. The only person that I'd see regularly was Amanda Lohrey, who wrote *The Reading Group* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*. She's a close friend of mine and we will often have long discussions about books and things and I love talking to her about it. Stephen Muecke too, he's a good friend and I'll have long discussions with him. Yeah I do miss not being able to discuss my work. I mean yeah that's why I really enjoy talking to people like you because other than that I get so isolated I lose a sense that it has any value.

Alison: I was really interested in the way that romance operated, like it was the thing that kept me reading. But it was really interesting that the language of romance and sexuality was the thing that Lucy felt was holding her back as well.

Fiona: I wanted the book to represent the complexity of life. I mean I know there are a few feminists that got really angry at me that I had a male protagonist, like the doctor should have been a woman. And I say to them, 'Well look, life is more complex than that. It's not as simple as wanting it to be completely and utterly some feminist statement.' I wanted to include the complexity that not all men are absolutely and utterly hopeless, not all women are absolutely and utterly fantastic. Romance doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing: it can be a good thing, it can also be slightly bad, but they can all be absolutely and utterly interrelated.

And I think most people were, at least if nothing else, got an understanding of what it's like for someone to have anorexia. And I think essentially that was my bottom line. I wanted people to have some understanding about what that process was like, and to understand how it's not just a matter of, I don't want to eat that because I don't want to be fat. It's incredibly more complex than that. But by the same token I

have to say that it is only one person's experience of anorexia, that different people experience it in different ways. But that was one of my main reasons: for people to understand that process of recovery, to actually go through it and see that it wasn't, was all bitsy and piecey, and one thing might go right and something else get right and that process of putting it all together, and that people can come out of that whole experience. And also I suppose it was a book of hope, you know, that things can change.

Alison: So how do you relate to feminist theories?

Fiona: I find them really interesting. I guess I'm not an absolute and utter disciple, but I'm definitely fascinated by what people have to say about women writers and how they write about space and how they write about gender and all of those sorts of things. I find all those ideas very interesting and I would use them, but I'm not going to expound one particular theory. I'd rather, question them, challenge them, or see where they fall down.

I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed within phallogentric discourse. Like *Cardboard* in many ways shows you where women are positioned in language. I mean, you've got, I think it's impossible to come up with a female language. I don't think you can from where we are situated – in a way that essentially it's men that set up the way we talk about the world. So I think women's writing can do interesting things in at least showing women how they've been positioned, where they are in language, and how they might at least try to redefine their sense of self. But I think it's important that women are made aware of that. I mean, when I was younger I was one of these people who just simply said, I couldn't understand feminism. I don't understand, I've got jobs, I've done this, I've done that, I've wanted to do things - why do people whinge about being women? I just couldn't understand at all. And then once I got politicised, I realised. I mean, Oh yeah okay, I understand,

blah blah. But that was, I don't criticise myself now for not having understood before. And I know that there are lots of women who do not have any idea, like they'll say to me, 'Oh women can get jobs just as well as men and blah blah' and like all on that and rather than criticise and say, 'God don't you understand? You're so stupid, you're this, you're that.' You're much better off finding some way that it becomes accessible to them, that they can understand that. Because, and I don't hold it against women that they can't understand, I mean, I suppose I've become more accepting in that way and realise that you've got to work from where people are rather than just say, 'Tsst you don't understand'. Because, I mean, what right have I got to take the moral high ground? There's that choice.

Alison: So do you have struggles with language when you're writing or do you find it easy to access?

Fiona: I guess I've always found it quite easy to write. It wasn't hard, no. No I didn't have that sense, like, as a woman not being able to find her own words, no. I didn't. Not in the particular way where the words were difficult. But that doesn't mean to say that I think language is easy for women if you know what I mean. But yes, okay it was easy for me. I think my, I've always been good at words. So, yeah.

Alison: One of the main themes I've been working on has been how women have been sort of redefining the body.

Fiona: Some people have said, like, Why didn't you talk about the body in *Cardboard*? And it's really interesting: I think one of the reasons I steered clear of the body in *Cardboard* was because I was sick to death of everyone assuming that anorexia had something to do with your body. I mean, I know that it does. But I think I just wanted to flesh it out in a much more psychic way with people's, with ideas and feelings. But I felt that the body was a trap in that situation. I actually didn't want people to be all that interested in what Lucy looked like, or what she was like physically because I wanted them to actually be in the place of that character. If I gave too much away about the

body then the character would have become much more ‘out there’, they could see it was somebody else that was not themselves. And different people reacted to it in different ways. I mean one woman asked me, Do you hate your body that much? And I was really shocked. I mean it wouldn’t even occur to me, because it’s never been an issue for me.

I hate the way women are always tied to their body. You know, whether she’s got good tits, or rear, I don’t like connecting women’s identity just, and immediately then slapping it into a body. It almost seems too fixed, like squashing her into somewhere. Matra Robertson, she was actually using *Cardboard* to say that I was expounding what the French feminists were saying. And I would say, ‘Yes she has a point and I can see how she’s reading it, but also no, I was also saying a lot of other things besides that’. But yeah, but I would hope that it does deal with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and it maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does interesting things with them. That’s what I would hope to do most. That you can then use it as even further, a further understanding of what the French feminists are on about. Because I think they themselves have many contradictions and many areas that they don’t explain or many things that they can’t talk about. So that I’d see it as a complement to them.

Alison: Sometimes I find that the fiction actually works through ideas of French feminist theory.

Fiona: For me, I would hope that I’m dealing with a lot of the ideas that they’re interested in, but for me the only way that I can deal with them is in fiction. Like, and I hope that most people can read it in my fiction. I’m not sure that a lot of people do. I find it extremely difficult to deal with them in academic language. I just find that so hard. And yet, I understand them in academic language and I go yeah yeah yeah. But then my only way of talking about them is through fiction.

## INTERVIEW WITH INEZ BARANAY

*This interview took place on a Sunday in March, 1993, at Machans Beach, Cairns. We jointly edited a version of this interview for publication (LiNQ 22.2 (1995)). Over strong coffee and scones in a house right on the beach, I began by asking Inez what kinds of books she read for pleasure.*

Inez: Um, I don't know what, see this is one of the things – how do I describe the sort of books? I read the kind of books I like to read and that covers a whole range of things. I tend to read a lot of fiction, I probably like it most, and biographies. Now the thing I read recently was Colette's *The Vagabond*. It's wonderful. It re-awoke my adolescent passion for Colette so I've been reading a whole bunch of her books again lately which has been wonderful. But a lot of the time I'm really restricted by what falls into my lap. I can't afford to buy books lately. I'm interested in books written in English that are not from England.

Alison: And do you read many Australian women writers?

Inez: Um, I really don't like thinking of books like that. I don't go looking for things just because they're by Australian women. I can't relate to the demands I identify as primarily an 'Australian' writer (rather than, for one thing, an English-language writer, or a writer who'll fall in love with Colette every couple of decades). I would have said *No*, Puh-leeze, no! to 'as an Australian of non-Anglo Celtic background' but would have been lying. My piece 'You Don't Whinge' [in *The Saddest Pleasure*] was put together for an anthology of 'multicultural women's writing' [*Beyond the Echo* (UQP)]. But this thing has now happened: the Multicultural Industry and so on, leave me alone! But writing *Pagan* I was very aware in writing of Nora and Magda that I *know* these people and in writing of migration that what I know is not seen in what I read and that people have talked such bullshit about us migrants all my life and now I'm saying something about it. But finally knowledge comes from imagination always.

Alison: So have you come across any feminist theories in regard to writing?

Inez: Well I probably have but they're put in disguise in novels or something I suppose, or in life itself, or something. A lot of these things are just names to me and they've been on my Must Read This One Day list, but haven't fallen into my lap. So, not really. I mean, where do you? You have to go to University don't you, to come across that thing?

Alison: I suppose so, yes. Most people probably do come across it there.

Inez: See, and I don't have any truck with universities. So, I don't know how you would, because it seems to me it's a real academic thing. Like all the kids – now, teaching creative writing there are a lot of kids who are going through, or are just graduated from University, or often UTS in Sydney where apparently they're big on this kind of thing. And they're all, you know, they've all done their essays. I think they did semiotics in high school. By the time someone got around to explaining *that* to me I said 'But that's all obvious! Everyone knows that.'

Alison: One of the things that I was interested by in *Between Careers* was the coda, which seemed to get a lot of ambivalent comments by the reviewers.

Inez: Yeah. I get such extreme responses to things, or extremely contradictory. Like 'that's the best thing in the book' to 'that's the worst thing in the book'.

Alison: Yes. It seemed to me, that what was happening in there was looking for alternative ways to write about 'happy endings'.

Inez: Yes, oh absolutely. What is romance? You could say Violet's encounters as a sex worker were the more 'romantic'. In *Between Careers* the last words before the coda are 'happy ending', and that was kind of one of those tricks, like I'm going to put in a happy ending but this is how I do it by asking really a question about it. And of course, in life, in everything there's no such thing as an ending. So that is kind



of the ultimate artifice in a way, where you end something, isn't it? Where you end a piece occupied my mind. Because it's the end of the book but it's not the end of it. And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end is not to be a victim poses a question too. Because you don't want a kind of other version of 'and then they lived happily ever after' like, you know 'and then she went off and did her thing on her own and never had a day's fear again' or something. You know, it's not like that either, but you want something with some sense of triumph about it. Especially writing about experiences that are meant to disempower and degrade women like in *Between Careers*. A lot of people couldn't handle that aspect of it, that it wasn't about being destroyed by those experiences. So you have to kind of write about a sense of something gained, where the something mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either.

Alison: I thought it was interesting that there were lots of links made between creativity and sexuality, and then at the end when Vita is writing she chooses to be celibate.

Inez: Yes, an eternal question, the relation of sexuality and creativity – the kind of question that doesn't have an answer only different ways of asking it. The question of is it either/both focussed or/and dissipated. I was thinking also about celibacy not as negation of sexuality; but as another way in which to acknowledge/explore it.

Alison: So did you find it difficult writing about a relationship from a woman's point of view that got out of that romance model? It seemed to me that by having Violet be a prostitute it sort of undermined the whole concept of the romance which happened in the second part.

Inez: Oh yes, absolutely. I never felt drawn to or dominated by the 'romance model'. Was it difficult? It was a wonderful challenge to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for it. And of course it was difficult. It took a long time to get it the way I wanted it. It was my first book. I wrote

this massive first draft of it, of which hardly anything remains. Yeah, see I don't think necessarily that the kind of corny romance is such a dominating thing, about how a relationship has to go.

Alison: And Judith provides that nice counterpoint too, with her creativity invested in her clothes.

Inez: Yes, the virgin. It has been a while ago since I thought of these things, these issues that seemed most important to me then. *Between Careers* was written 1979-82 though it wasn't published til '89. Judith: the phantom pregnancy: the virgin who maybe gets 'pregnant' when watching porn videos. In an era when sex seemed to be talked about in every aspect except as the way babies are made – maybe Judith knew unconsciously about this meaning of sex: the first thing about it (and yet it's not always the first thing learnt, her first thing 'known' though not consciously, is the odour of her mother when the men stay). Joe's phantom orgy: in an era of the quest for the perfect fuck – but longing is not stilled by acquiring the object (or experience) which longing creates. So the perfect fuck/orgy could not have been 'real'?

Alison: Is there any particular reference, having Vita and Violet, back to Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis?

Inez: I was aware of that connection and it was just a thing to play with. It just amused me that it would have that kind of meaning. I thought of Violet first, from Violetta of *La Traviata*. Vita came because of that association. And then it just seemed like they were the right two names. Violet/Vita – one woman or two? – is the question. Who has the 'romance', which one of them? Which one does he want? The way women split themselves to have a romance thing with a man; the part of a woman who engages in romance is not the whole woman; the way many women 'feel like a whore' with a man.

Alison: I was interested in *Pagan*, because it seems to present an alternative construction of a female outside of the mother-

virgin-whore sort of triad and tries to make positive that witch image.

Inez: Yes. It was amazing that story kind of coming to me at a time when suddenly all this material was available on exactly that, a whole range of really interesting new, women's thought, you know, on the spiritual area, looking at our unconscious and archetypes and all that kind of mass psychology level of feminism I guess. I did a lot of research for that one, I enjoyed that. Researching and writing *Pagan* I thought very much about what I termed 'the patriarchal colonisation of our spirituality': that feminism/s had looked at the social, the political, the domestic, etc – and not (as far as I could see, not in the mainstream, though a tidal wave of books on goddess spirituality, newage-ish stuff, seemed to start around then) not the spiritual aspect of our lives and culture – which is, in a way, fundamental. *Pagan* is different because it has all the different voices. And Nora, I mean, to write that young lover couple and make that believable but, you know, not the corny, 'will you marry me darling and live happily ever after,' nor the 'now that I have found myself I don't need him' kind of ending either. That was a challenge. That was fun to think about.

Alison: In most of the writing I'm working on the form seems to be as important as the content.

Inez: Well, it's one, really, like the body and the mind, isn't it? Yeah. I don't see how it can be otherwise. Do you?

Alison: No. But it seems to be talked about, divided. So do you have any, sort of, relations with the universities or academics?

Inez: No no. None. I just don't. When I was in Papua New Guinea I met these two lovely guys who teach at Goroka Teachers College, and because they were academics but absolute darlings and interesting people it really made me think that, you know maybe this is what's normal. So I'm sure I gave a much kinder reception to your approach than if a young academic a year ago said 'I'm writing about you.' Apart from, you know, it

sounded more interesting. I suppose some writers are university people. At university I got to read all these great books from the eighteenth century. But, I had to get over it. It was like, you know, you had to grow up and leave home. But that was, kind of, partly because of when I went to university I think.

Alison: When was that?

Inez: My first year was in '68. So '68 to '72. So this is a time when there was a clash between the old conservatives who were like really – patriarchal is the word we'd use now – and the people who were responding to all those exciting ideas who were around at that time, in the sixties. And I went to university at a time when the English school was extremely conservative. I was much more interested in the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll of that era. But I didn't see that reflected anywhere in the way the classes were conducted or in what we were reading. Not only what we were reading but how it was talked about. So, I was really impatient, I didn't find where I wanted to go in my mind there. And yet it gave me the discipline to kind of read all this stuff, that would have taken me a lot longer: the nineteenth century poets and novelists and Chaucer and a bit of background in Old English and all those things. That was good.

Alison: So are you happy with the ways in which your books have been received?

Inez: I wish they wouldn't criticise a book for being what it is and for not being something else or assume anything's in there by accident, as if you haven't spent months and years thinking every last thing about it. Now that I've had four books out and I'm working on something completely different again I think that what I do each time is just look for some really new thing to challenge and excite me about, you know, form and content. I try to find all over again the appropriate voice for each piece. I am interested in the idea of 'woman' as a 'culture' and, now, while trying to tell as simply as possible the story of my year in PNG, I am coming up against personal and general ideas of what is a story, woman, race, culture, postcolonialism,

development/aid, and so on. People say to me 'Are you a, do you call yourself a feminist?' You use the word, don't you, feminist? And then, it's like, 'what do you mean by it?' and 'this thing is about women but it's not feminist' and all that. It's something that I'm thinking of writing about at the moment, in connection with the whole thing of, whether women's development in third world countries is feminism or not. It's a whole lot of questions. Is feminist whatever you choose it to be, or what?

Alison: Well I call my approach feminist. French feminist critics argue that women's writing is, or might be, woman-centred rather than male-centred. One of the main things is finding a language in which women can speak, which doesn't necessarily mean another language, but finding the words, or making new words and using them in different ways, to construct different ways of knowing, of knowledge. One of the main things they say needs to be done with words is to be able to describe the female body in our own terms rather than in medical discourse or in a sexual discourse. So one of the things they say women's writing should be is sourced in the body.

Inez: At this women's writers' workshop somebody wrote this story about this menstruation disaster, so we talked a little bit about what you're saying: how it's not written about. In *Between Careers*, the sponge that sprays blood in the shower, and things like that. I really want to show these things that you don't usually see. In critical writing about women who write about menstruation it's always 'Oh, really, you know, please!' I am sorry when a female critic 'playfully' calls for the destruction of books that go on excessively about menstruation and not only because I think she means me. I love to see women's truths in writing, and menstruation fascinates as I was brought up to deal with it competently and then considerably to ignore it, but I believe our lunar/lunatic cycles must be expressed in order to feminise the world, which is something I also kind of believe in at present. Speak the unspeakable, find words for what is not said. I love it when I see something that does that.

## INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN HAWTHORNE

*The interview with Susan Hawthorne took place in the Malthouse, a performing space in South Melbourne, amidst Melbourne Writers' Week, in September 1992. Sue Hawthorne's responses to the chapter draft I sent her in March 1994 (not included here) comprised the sort of dialogue I envisaged in wishing to construct a many-voiced format. It was the passion and self-assuredness of her ideas, I think, that makes her dialogue interact so strongly and productively with mine in the chapter, especially when she took issue with some of my points. I began this interview by asking her if there was a history behind the publication of The Falling Woman.*

Susan: Well, there's history in a sense. I actually started it about ten years ago, back in '82. And what had actually initially inspired it was a trip I took to the Flinders Ranges in South Australia in '82 after the Women and Labour conference there, and somehow, I don't know, it was the place – it's such an amazing place – it just sort of inspired this idea for a story. But now, I mean, that's not even a recognisable part of it really.

Alison: When I was reading it I thought that the structure was really one of the most interesting parts of it.

Susan: I spent a lot of time thinking about the structure. I love structure. I'm really fascinated by it as a concept. I wanted the freedom to have a range of viewpoints and yet still retain one character as central to it. And I like the idea of having, not a multiple personality, but not a false single personality structure. I don't think any of us are that straightforward and that was a way of being able to look at things from different angles.

Alison: There seems to be a shift also, especially in the italicised part, with a perceived sense of time and space too.

Susan: It's in the 'I' voice, there are a number of different kind of areas that that 'I' is in and there are a number of different uses of the 'you' in that as well: there's the singular you and the

plural you but I don't actually signify that but leave that up to the reader to figure out. I guess also the thing was a way of trying to capture a sense of inner experience. The I is sort of fluid then the temporal stuff is also fluid and that also ties in with the epilepsy theme, of a sense of timelessness or a sense of dropping out of time. And so it deconstructs the text in a way. It disrupts it. And yet I don't mean that in a deconstructionist sense. I mean it in the sense that, in the same way that when one has a seizure, life is disrupted and interrupted then this also does that. So it's partly a formal thing but it's also the nature of the voice and the themes coming together in that.

Alison: The way that I'm looking at your text is in relation to the French theories of women's writing and *écriture féminine*, and I was wondering if you were familiar with them and if you are conscious of them in your writing?

Susan: Yes, I am. I'm familiar with them in, I guess the period between about '83 to '87, I did read a fair bit. What disturbs me about some of the French feminist theorists is that sometimes they're said to be the first person to come up with that idea, when in fact a number of American radical feminists had come up with very similar ideas about five or ten years earlier. What I was drawing on was much more my experience of the women's movement in the 1970s and the sorts of theories which were floating in the air but which were not written down at that time. And also reading from the States in particular about women's literature. And it was only then after that I came to the French stuff. And they seemed to be saying very similar things. So, what I've got in there is a bit of a mix, I mean, I've used everything. And I certainly found some of the ideas interesting. I mean, for example, the whole notion of playing with the idea of a mirror, I know that came out of some of my reading at the time but I also know that it's wider than that. Or the notion of the female body as a source of writing. Now I think that that very much comes out of my own experience of my own body and of having epileptic fits and things like

that, so that in that sense it's writing my own bodily experience. But it was made easier to do that by the existence of those ideas. And by the fact of taking a female body, a woman's body as *the* central thing, in a world view, or a woman-identified world view rather than a male-identified world view. And I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the '70s, and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women. And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work than the French feminist stuff which was just the bit poured in at the end. I remember in the late '70s there was a lot of discussion of the idea of 'Is there a female aesthetic?' And this was before the French feminist stuff was available in the English translation, and I don't read French. And, I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead, and other friends, other women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a women's novel could be different. I remember we used to make jokes about how the phallic climactic thing of a man's novel, you know he has one orgasm and then the book ends, whereas what we had in mind was a multi-orgasmic book that didn't necessarily have this sort of shape. So those ideas were there in my head and certainly I know that that has fed into the structure, that actually allowed me to have a complex sort of wave formation going.

Alison: I noticed that one of the reviewers noted that even when Olga and Estella reach the Rock and the Olgas there wasn't any excitement, it was just treated as one of the events in the book, as if he was expecting some climax.

Susan: Well, there are a couple of little climaxes, but I didn't actually want it to have, you know, this vroom, sort of climax, because that went against the grain of what I was trying to do.

Alison: So do you think that women's writing does offer something inherently different to men's writing?



Susan: Well I think that women at the moment are experimenting more with form and with content, and style and with genre – the whole thing. I think it's also happening amongst other groups like black writers, indigenous writers etc, people coming from cultures which are not currently in dominance. I think that part of the reason that's happening is because we haven't had a voice, and the old forms don't necessarily suit us. And it is, it's much more fun to write something that you think has your own stamp on it, or you think is a bit different from what's been done before, and there's that challenge also to do something a bit different. When you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read, and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice of what's in there and not just read it as a trash novel then throw it away.

Alison: So how would you regard your relationship as a writer to the reader, is it confrontational like that?

Susan. Hm. I guess I feel a kind of sense of friendship with potential readers and although I want to startle them and I want to challenge them, I don't want to hit them over the head and I don't want to undermine them necessarily. I don't see it as a confrontational thing. I see it more as a sort of give and take thing. And I think that each reader does bring a set of different expectations and experiences to whatever it is that they're reading. But I also think that the author also brings a whole lot of things and cannot, doesn't, control the reader's responses but can shape and influence the sorts of responses that readers have. I don't think it's a one-way relationship. I don't think it's all the writer doing the work and the reader being a blank idiot, and on the other hand I don't think it's the reverse, you know, I don't think it's – as critics would say – that it's all the reader doing the work and the writer is irrelevant. I think that

there are important interactions there between writers and readers, and that's partly what sparks the interest amongst readers to come and look at writers – at writers' festivals – and listen and try and have an interaction because that's what stimulates that desire and I think it's a real mistake for literary theory to start saying that the writer is irrelevant, or conversely, that the reader is irrelevant. Neither are. It's a two-way thing.

Alison: So how do you regard the sort of academic part of the literary world. I mean, obviously it would be nice if there was interaction between them and the writers, do you think...?

Susan: Well there is to some extent. I mean, a lot of writers actually read in academic areas as well and there are numbers of academics who work in writing fields. So I don't think the divisions are anywhere near as stark as they're often made out to be and I guess, I work in a range of different fields. I write academic papers from time to time and I write reviews of books, and I think that that's an important part of the work that I do because it's important to feed that critical work back into the literary community and into the feminist community. It's like those Venn diagrams, that you have at school, where you have a sort of circle and there are various parts of the literary world that are not overlapping with one another. I mean popular literature and readers of popular literature might never read a book of literary criticism but that doesn't matter: there's still a relationship there even if it's an indirect one. And I think that writers of fiction and poetry and the like have also contributed a lot to the development of critical theory because it's the writers who actually do it before the critics realise it's been done. Modernism, for instance, came along before anyone thought of calling it modernism, as did postmodernism for want of a better word. I mean, writers were actually writing postmodernist texts long before the word was in use, and in fact probably writers are stopping writing it now because it's been overdone. It's time to move on and do something different. So I think that there are important

connections there and I think that writers actually contribute a lot more to it than they're given credit for.

Alison: So do you find that your different activities as writer and reviewer and publisher and editor feed into each other or are they sometimes in conflict, at all?

Susan: Oh yes. They're not in conflict for me. I think that they add to one another. I read a lot of international women's writing and I find that really interesting and that was why I offered to do a column for *Australian Women's Book Review*, because I wanted to have some way of talking about these books that other people are not reading and it was also a way of making myself keep up with things. Because it's very easy to let it all go and not do it. The main problem is time, that's the main conflict. I would rather be spending all my time writing fiction and poetry, but that doesn't earn me my keep. And as well as that I think it's important to do other things in addition to that and I enjoy all the different sort of sides of things that I do. I enjoy publishing and reading other people's work and helping people develop their work and seeing the final product, you know, those sorts of things. Or getting an idea for an event and running with it and organising some things. So, I see all of those things as very important and they each feed in to one another in different ways.

Alison: Do you consciously read work in the same sort of area – people doing similar experimental stuff that you do?

Susan: Yes I do. I read poets, I mean people like Dorothy Porter. I find her very interesting, the *Akhenaten* collection that she's just published. And I also like the work of people like Helen Hodgman, and Finola Moorhead and various others. Joanne Burns. Jan McKemmish, and so forth. And I think that Australian writing, Australian feminist writing is really, I mean it's more than world class, it's really good writing. The fellow that publishes at Serpent's Tale in London, I had a talk with

him a couple of years ago and he said, 'I don't know but Australian *avant garde* writing seems to be more *avant garde* than the *avant garde* anywhere else', and I went 'Oh, really'. And I said, you know, 'Why do you say that?' And he said, 'Well, you know, look at Mary Fallon, look at Alan Wearne, look at various others', and I actually started to sit down and think and I thought, Yes, Australian writing – and I think particularly feminist writing – is just so good, and when I compare it to say writers at a comparable stage in their writing career in America it's not as rich. There are certainly very many good American women writers but most of them are well and truly established and recognised and so forth. Whereas I find it difficult to find the same kind of experimentation with ideas and form and style as we get here in Australia and to some extent also in New Zealand. And I think that's part of that whole thing of being part of the dominant culture or not, and that the problem of the American women's movement is that, like it or not, they are part of a dominant culture and they forget, they don't know what the other side sees. And the ones who are writing and doing different things in the States are not from the white population. They're usually Black or Chicano or Native American. Amongst those groups there is some exciting work happening. So I think that Australian writing still has a long way to go in getting adequately recognised for the quality of the work that's coming out.

Alison: I've heard it said also that once literary theories come to Australia they become sort of hybridised, sort of Australian-characterised theories.

Susan: Yes, I think it's the same sort of thing and I think part of that is because it's not so comfortable for us, we can't always easily fit in to the sort of theories that have grown up, say, in the northern hemisphere. I mean, it can even be as basic as that, and I sometimes wonder how that changes us, and I certainly think that it helps to create interesting and imaginative approaches to things.

Alison: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me, as someone writing about your work, you know, to make me aware of, any agendas in your work?

Susan: Well I suppose one of the other things which interests me is a sort of mixing of genres, working in a number of different forms, mixing fiction and non-fiction. I guess the other thing that is important in *The Falling Woman* and in my collection of poems coming out next year with Penguin called *The Language of my Tongue*, is the epilepsy theme that has been very important in generating that. The collection of poems is specifically about the experience of having epileptic fits and trying to explore that whole area. And I guess that that's been an important generating thing for me, that I sometimes think well maybe that's what made me want to be a writer, you know, that I felt that I had something I had to write about. That and I guess the point of a lesbian perspective on things as well. And one of the rather funny things that's happened actually in relation to *The Falling Woman* is, I had a review done of the book for the National Epilepsy Association and they couldn't handle it, and, it was just incredible, and so the review writer came and interviewed me instead – I still don't know whether they're going to publish the interview. I don't know, I think probably what she wrote in the review was much milder than what I said to her. One of the things is that there's been a sort of interesting reactions of people to that. Some people have said, 'Oh, How do you feel coming out?' And I said 'What do you mean, coming out?' And this friend said 'Oh well, coming out as an epileptic?' And I said 'Oh, all right, you know, I feel a bit funny about it every now and again, but basically all right.' And she said 'Well you know, you're such a well known lesbian that that didn't even cross my mind that that was what I might mean'. Whereas for my parents, they have this opposite view, you know, where it would have been a perfectly nice book if it hadn't had any lesbians in it, and that I might as well run up a red flag in the main street. And so there's this interesting sort of 'battle' going on

out there with other people, in other people's minds, about which is the most important coming out story! And, going back to the Epilepsy Association, there's this sense, and I mean also out there, there's this sense that you know, one difference is enough. That for instance if you have epilepsy then obviously you live in a nuclear family in the suburbs and you're a normal person and you make every effort to be as normal as you possibly can. And of course if you're a lesbian, I mean it just doesn't work! And, you know, I mean it's not the same, I mean within the lesbian community, there isn't that problem, because the world view is taken as normal. There's been lots and lots of lesbian novels out now. There's no need for a coming out novel as such, and I wanted my characters just to exist in the world in which they exist and not make any excuses or justifications or whatever for what they are. And yet it was also necessary to deal with the process of coming to that point, and so that variations of voices as well came to play there because it was possible to do a little bit of a coming out story in the middle of it, and yet having it so obvious that, for these characters, it's really not a problem. And these characters, you know, just exist in this world. And they don't see themselves as being as other in any way, and yet that's a process that the characters have been through at some stage to get to that point.

## INTERVIEW WITH SUE WOOLFE

*This interview with Sue Woolfe took place at her home in Balmain, Sydney, on a Monday in January, 1993. We sat on the balcony drinking riesling. There were birds twittering in the background, huge gusts of wind and occasional planes roaring overhead.*

Sue: I want to tell you how I see my writing. I feel very much that I've got to write what is important to me. I often read articles by critics who suggest that we should be writing about such and such, for example, about women who are victorious, and we shouldn't be thinking about the struggle. And I think 'Yes, this is right,' but when I'm alone with myself and my writing, what emerges – what *has* to emerge – is what I feel most deeply about. That probably comes from a pretty painful source but that's what I *must* write. I am speechless when I think about what I should do. There are lots of things I'd love to write about, situations that I think, if only I were somebody else I could really make a story about this. But I'm not, I'm merely me. So, when you ask me do other people influence me, I suppose they do in certain ways, like, I feel braver because of their work, more daring. I find Margaret Coombs's work quite enabling, for example – I think because she's so honest, and so passionate.

Alison: Do you read much literary theory?

Sue: The book I'm doing now is called *Leaning Towards Infinity*. In *Painted Woman* I feel I was light years younger then. I had a baby between the two books and that really ages you, you shift in all sorts of relationships, particularly your relationship to yourself as a woman, and to your mother. Now I've got a daughter, so it means being female has shifted. Before I wrote *Painted Woman* I don't think I read much theory at all. I have a friend who was always passing on articles which I would skim and dip into. And from them I cobbled together some theory. Perhaps I'm not a very good reader of theory.

What happens when I read theory is that just a phrase creates such a whirlpool of images that I want to just go away and think and dwell on that and I don't want any more. And there's so much in that writing that's so full of poignant phrases. A friend gave me an article by Luce Irigaray. It started 'Mother, with your milk I have sucked ice'. Do you know that one? And that kept me writing for the last four months, that phrase. I just found it so, so rich. I'm trying to write about the silence of motherhood. I feel deeply that there are no real mothering stories. A friend of mine, Patti Miller, said that when she holds herself up to the light she sees an interweaving of many stories who tell her what she is. I imagine that my little daughter goes around with gradually more and more complex stories in her head about who she is. If we have stories that discount us, that make us feel that we're not part of the culture, or that don't explore what is really our experience, and I think that's happened with women, then it causes us not to live fully. There are a lot of stories about good and bad mothers and negligent mothers and nurturing mothers but there are not stories about how mothers live in themselves, apart from their children. There are lots of stories about how they feel about their children, but not about their inner lives. That sort of lack I suddenly realised when I became a mother, when I looked about for mothering stories I felt there were none. None that were about anything else than the mother as nurturer.

Alison: When I was re-reading *Painted Woman* I noticed there was a huge division between the mother and daughter, and between the central character and the other women.

Sue: Except Molly. I think Frances had to learn to connect with women didn't she? And Molly was the one who taught her how to be with another woman. And in that learning, she became free, it was part of her freedom. And I suppose I feel we're surrounded by the concept of being nurturers and I wanted to give Frances a different sort of freedom, a freedom which was artistic, rather than about family and romance.



Alison: In rejecting the romance and marriage with Tim, that comes through as well.

Sue: As soon as I had the title, *Painted Woman*, which came to me very early, I came across the idea of women as object and subject. It stunned me as having a whole galaxy of meaning. In one way Frances is an object because her father sees her and paints her like that and she sees herself as an object to be painted and she sees herself as an appendage of her father. Then part of her emergence is having her own mind. It seemed to me such a fragile freedom that she was learning and I was probably learning that with her. It's hard to conceptualise freedom for another person because for me we're essentially individuals, and we're all alone, like her.

Alison: Yes, I noticed there was a lot about her feeling invisible, with her father not acknowledging her body.

Sue: Yes. It comes quite late that she has denied herself so much and just seen herself as part of this order with her father. He is that order and she has abnegated herself to the point where she doesn't realise she possesses her hands. And I kept on thinking about hands because his are very powerful in a horrific way. He strangles her mother with his hands. His use of art is to subjugate whereas she has to learn something very different about art, and herself.

Alison: She seems to take on some of his philosophy of the violence he brought into art, as well. Do you think that's inevitable?

Sue: I suppose I was questioning whether, whether in the very act of constructing something like an artwork you are being violent because you are separating the thing from the world which encloses it. It was a thought that took me through one of the last drafts of *Painted Woman*. I felt she had to take on that violence because it was part of the world that she lived in, and we have to take on violence too. But we can use it in a different

way. She uses it to paint. I suppose I believe that violence is inherent in the world, and that we can use it for destruction or we can change its meaning. Which is what she did. Partly writing for me is having a long debate. Shall I tell you how the whole thing emerged? I was writing a funny book called 'Wigs' and I was at about page one hundred and quite bored. Then somebody said to me, 'Did you read the newspaper article about the man who murdered his wife in bed and got away with it, got acquitted?' And I said 'No'. And this person said, 'Apparently he murdered his wife in bed and the judge said, "Any man could do this in a moment of passion".' And it was one of those moments when the world shifts. I went home shuddering. I couldn't get it out of my head for days and days. I was so obsessed by it, I never saw it in the newspaper, I didn't want to go and look it up, but I started writing a newspaper article on the typewriter, obsessively thinking about who the judge was and his world attitude that made him able to make such a judgement. And I was grieving. I was grieving for the unknown woman. Her fate. Our fate.

Alison: Your current novel is about mathematics and mothering isn't it?

Sue: The thing I like about writing – is that it is really mysterious to me. What I meant to do was write a novel about a woman who was a mathematician and who discovers this wonderful equation but she doesn't want to tell it to anybody, an equation that unifies everything: the theory of everything. And at the same time I was writing a book about mothering, a diary of the first year with my baby which I actually took down notes for but had never written up. And I found myself, I found myself compelled to write the diary when I was supposed to be writing the maths book and I felt very guilty about this. And after a year of struggling with guilt and truanting from my novel, it came to me one day, this wonderful insight that anybody outside could have said with a moment's thought, maybe they're the same book!

Alison: So, it sounds like you have a lot of contact with other writers, do you?

Sue: I suppose I do. I love talking about writing because I find it so mysterious and, so unfathomable. So humbling, because you seem to be doing something and you find that you're actually doing something else. I remember thinking when I was writing *Painted Woman* that the progression of the novel felt like painting, that each stroke not only changed what was ahead but changed what had gone before. I like talking about the process. Part of it is that writing feels like a sort of madness. And it's comforting to talk, particularly to other women writers, to see if they share the madness because then there's a sense that if many of you are mad then that has its own form of normality.

Alison: So, how do you relate to critics and the academy?

Sue: Mm. I read bits of critique in the academy with horror. No – terror is the word. Terror. Because I don't fit in. And it goes back to what I said before – I don't know how to fit in, I don't know how I would create, given other people's conceptions of what needs to be done in literature. And I agree there are things that desperately need to be done, particularly in women's writing. The fact is, I can only do what I can do. And, that's the reason for my terror. I would like to be doing what I should be doing. But I can only do that which appals and fascinates me. It's my own private fantasies I'm dealing with. For me writing, initially, was a process of, a step of great courage, because I grew up in a very chauvinist family, a large family. My father, whom I adored, had a firm concept of the place of women which was behind their man and women mustn't sort of push themselves forward. It was a bit like the father's attitude when he tells the little Frances that women's mouths move in an ugly way when they're being assertive. So I always assumed that books were written by men to the point where when I read Harriet Beecher Stowe I thought Harriet was a man with a funny American variation of Harry. I just

assumed men, because they were gods, did the writing and I was very timorous about writing. But I also felt it was something I had to do, to make meanings for myself, however my mouth moved.

Alison: So do you think women write differently to men?

Sue: Yes, yes. One of the things that propelled me through *Painted Woman* and still propels me is this incredible loneliness that we're not known as females, that we're not known in any way, that there are no stories about us. That, when you think: 'What's it like to be a mother? I'll pop to the library and get a few books about mothers.' I don't mean, how to mother, I mean the imaginative experience of mothering. There aren't stories about this. And it's so easy to think, 'My god, I'm all alone. I'm the only person in the world that's a ramshackle mother who can't won't stop being an artist and everybody else doesn't need stories like this, that's why there are no stories.' Or sexuality. I think, 'how do I *feel* sexuality when all the stories seem to look at sex from the man's point of view? How do I feel sexual, when I haven't got a whole web of stories inside me about how other people who are women feel about sex?' I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there are a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, 'Well the game is really not for me.' And that's what compels me to write, that feeling that I want to tell, tell it like it is. But of course I don't know what it is objectively because I have always been in a culture that doesn't fit. I mean, I know a little of what it's like for some children of migrants because my mother was Spanish, although she was first generation here, and my father was from England. You don't quite fit in the country that you're in, and you're always thinking that over there somewhere might be your real home. And, as a woman, our culture is somehow not our home. I want to try to make it my home by writing.

So I feel, I feel a tremendous compulsion to write about a woman's life as meticulously and as truthfully as I can. So I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic trivia and metaphysical truths, because that's to me how women's minds work. We are talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with a lettuce the next.

Alison: So do you find a difficulty with language?

Sue: Yes yes yes. I fight with words all the time. I mean, a simple phrase can take two pots of tea to think through. But I feel obliged to find it. As if it needs inventing for the first time. If I, if I render anything in the way other people render it I feel untruthful. I'm telling a lie. I feel a compulsion to try to put words on it that really fit my experience, if I can. Of course, I'll fail because I'm making the same mistakes as everybody else. But I still have that compulsion. Yes. So it takes me a long, long time and many, many drafts.

Alison: So what are some of the writers that you admire that seem to capture...

Sue: My all-time favourite writer is Marguerite Duras and *The Lover*. I'm reading her *Summer Rains* at the moment. She was a really enabling force to me. I'd rattled to the end of what I thought was a first draft of *Painted Woman* – I was writing in Greece at the time – and I came back to Australia and I picked up *The Lover* at a bookshop and as soon as I read the first paragraph I thought, I know how to do this novel! If you looked at my novel you'd wonder what the connection was! Well, I suppose I felt that she had that quality of inwardness that seemed to me to be true to a woman's experience. To me the whole convention of telling events as a story seems not to be how we experience life. Life seems to me to be composed of people saying something with a whole depth of silence going on in

between. And I'm fascinated by people's chatter, and the depths of their thinking between the chatter. And I wanted to do that. I can see that Duras plumbs those depths. She doesn't have people chattering. In fact the people speak in a very idealised way but it paradoxically plumbs those depths. Writing to me is actually like talking. I feel like a sleeping dog in front of the fire most of the time, and then I write and then it's as if I'm awake. White paper is wonderful. It's a great friend. Blank paper.

Alison: Is there anything that you want to tell me as someone who is working on your work, someone who's using your work in an academic way?

Sue: I think it's lovely you should bother. No, I mean that. It seems to me that until novels are reviewed and criticised as the works they *have* to be, there will always be a process of evaluation quite spurious to the artist. It may also be spurious to the reader. It may only be relevant to critics! I feel criticism is quite arbitrary. I've found some fellow feminists very impatient with writers who don't do what needs to be done, as if artists should share their political agenda. But art cannot have an agenda. Art must subvert any agenda. It's about the condition of misfitting. With one's self, one's home, one's universe. The zeitgeist may not in the end matter. It may seem awfully important now, but in ten years time when the book is still around it may not. Look at the way feminism's changed since the seventies. I much prefer what I hear and what I read in feminism now, to what was going on in the seventies. The seventies, looking back, look silly, naive. Don't you think? It was a time when we had to insist we were equal with men. We hadn't the sense of ourselves as being a different society. And now that there's much more commonly this sense of a woman's unique cultural environment, I feel much more comfortable. I'm not suggesting we were wrong before. But ideas evolve, and that's what we were talking about, the emergence of ideas. These things can't be known immediately, one apparent truth helps us find another apparent truth. You asked

if I read much literary theory. Do you find that fiction writers actually write from those ideas?

Alison: No, not really. I find that a lot of them are informed by those ideas and most have read bits and pieces of theory but when they come to the writing it comes from a different area.

Sue: Yes, I think that's true of me too. I'm informed by the ideas that really hit home and they change my life, and by changing my life and my attitudes they certainly affect my writing. But in no sense am I doing an illustrated Irigaray. But, for example, when I read 'Mother with your milk I suck ice', Elizabeth Grosz, talking about the mother as a lost territory, we look back through the mother as our lost territory, that's all. That phrase struck home. Like that newspaper article I told you about, that I didn't need to read, hearing about it had enough significance to carry me through for a couple of years.

Alison: Yes, I'm finding that with the theory and the fiction I'm reading too, that it's having, making great effects on my life as well, which means that I read other sorts of theories and information and it's all so integrated. It's difficult to separate.

Sue: Yes. I'm trying to integrate mathematics and mothering. I'm determined to do that, no matter how difficult. Because the disjunction of it is part of what worries me about our culture's attitude towards mothering. That maths in the 'high' culture and the bond with your child is in the low culture, and I want to show that there isn't that distinction there. There isn't that hierarchy. Our ideas come from the same place as our sweat, our matted hair. I think in a way it's wonderful to be a woman writing at this particular moment of this century because we're exotic to ourselves. And any little exploration we can make feels, well feels to the writer, exciting.

Alison: Mm. Have you read much on post-structuralism?

Sue: I keep trying to, and I, I feel it is a duty, like visiting relatives. I find it, the language very difficult but I struggle with that.

Alison: So do you think writing has a purpose, like, a political agenda, or... Why do you want to write?

Sue: My political agenda is to try to tell stories that make us know who we are. I'm not sure who I am, but that's part of the exploration.



## INTERVIEW WITH DAVIDA ALLEN

*Davida Allen lives west of Brisbane and when I contacted her for an interview she suggested we write. As with the other writers, I sent her a page of questions to indicate the areas in which I was interested, and stressed they were guidelines from which she was free to stray. In her reply she kept strictly to the questions: it was the format of her correspondence that 'strayed' and has taken much consideration in how it should be presented.*

*When I 'tidied up' her letter to render it more 'acceptable', it began to take on a very different tone: three consistent fullstops in every ellipsis was not the same as having two, and then six; one exclamation mark signified something quite different to the twenty Davida typed. In her reply, I sense a gentle mocking of academia and criticism which is challenged by her refusal to 'conform' to its writing conventions. Her 'mis-spellings' have even taken on a life of their own for me after frequent proof-reading: 'frogs muscus' seems much more descriptive than mucus; parriarchal seems to take the sounds of paring, pariah, and the witch's pyre to patriarchy. So at the risk of appearing negligent, I decided to let Davida's 'unruly' words speak for themselves. Emphasis and spelling is hers throughout.*

3 December. 1992.

Dear Alison,

Whenever I do these question things, I always manage to answer no. 2. in no.1. and so on and so on....so I will just write little answers and you can decide which question they relate to best.

I find answering questions difficult, because there is never a right answer...and what is seemingly sensible to me today can be stupid tomorrow because of the influences that can play on the vulnerability of creativity.

In my novel, I wanted the relationship between my writing and my reader to be intimate and ADDICTIVE.

Davida Allen the writer hides inside Vicki Myers. Through her, I hoped to set up an immediacy of intimacy with the reader.

Vicki Myers was the paint. The brushstrokes were words.

Davida Allen the writer is not a reader in real life!! I wrote the book to tell a WHOLE story ...My painting has been bits and pieces of the same imagery.

I wanted an assured intimacy of audience that I had more control of than in my paintings...and the medium of telling a story inside a book was a logical answer.

Giving the audience trust through this intimate medium, Vicki Myers then launches into her desire to entertain...at the same time warning her listener..‘you don’t hav to read it!’

I personally hate books where I, as the reader, am aware that someone is the author of what I am reading....by this I mean..a history book is often written by a historian giving a special slant on things that have happened..and the reader is constantly being reminded that what is being read is from the author’s point of view.

Or I have read some books where just the manner of writing is peculiar to This Happened...in the past tense.

IN THE PRESENT TENSE....I PERSONALLY CAN GET INTO IT AS IF IT IS HAPPENING NOW..AND I AM A PARTICIPANT OF IT.

The books that I relate well to ( remembering I am not a big reader..) are when I become involved in the writing forgetting it had a writer to make it happen long before I picked up the object. I don’t think FOR A WRITER I am making myself terribly suscinct here Alison!!!

WRITING FOR ME IS LIKE I PAINT. I WANT THE PAINT TO HOLD IT’S SMELL IN THE VISUAL IMMEDIACY OF THE BRUSH STROKES AND THE AFFRONTATION OF MY SUBJECT MATTER AND THE COMPOSITION OF THIS.

Most of my images in paint are isolated thoughts about a lot of complexity.

For instance...There is a painting called ‘Mother driving children to swimming class.’ It is an image of abstract Mother and children.. a woman behind the shape of a steering wheel and three toged shapes of children behind her, each with a black seat belt shape in front of them. The whole canvas depicts the inside space of the car. The colours are hot mauve and pink and yellow. Emotionally it is the mother’s havoc.

This specific image is a frozen example of the plight of the woman at home with the children.

Each canvas for me is a specific SENTENCE if you like. I found the writing more complete a picture...In a PARAGRAPH..I could write about what happened just before the children got into same seat belt swimming class car.....and what the mother was thinking while she was driving to the swimming class, and what smell the car had, and what the sound of the rain on the car roof was like....

ALL THIS SIMPLY EXPLAINS MY EXCITEMENT AT TELLING A STORY ALISON.!!

GOING BACK to how I personally don't like the idea of being aware of the author of a book...but wanting the story to be coming out of the mind of the characters inside the story....the little face through out the Close to the Bone Novel is a subtle reminder that this is Vicki Myers...she could be the child on page one who had doodled her image throughout the pages of the story...or it could be Vicki's face just there to RE EM-PHASISE her presence//// so that the reader is never ever given a chance to think WHO WROTE THIS BOOK...because the strength is I AM WITH VICKI MYERS HERE ON EVERY PAGE..

'WHAT IS A PORTRAIT. *Images of Vicki Myers*' ART COMPANION BOOK is a little tongue in cheek with what I have just said ...in that I as the artist Davida Allen want people to see my images about Vicki Myers...Of course they are said to be Images of Vicki Myers...and I had to make myself her in excuting the images..but like the chicken and the egg....Davida Allen was an artist before Vicki Myers and so I think maybe the art companion book is a complex message....for art historians it is a playing with a fictious character as an excuse for Davida Allen to continue in her output of what she has always been up to.....expressing her own life.

For the audience who has never heard of Davida Allen the artist, and who picks up the art companion book *Images of Vicki Myers What is a Portrait*....HOPEFULLY it will entice them into being inside visually with this character and they will want to read her story...

Alison...may I say at this point....the underlying need to write and draw both books was my insatiable greed for audience !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

‘You don’t have to read it.’

Being a mother has allowed me to see the child’s intrinsic qualities that as an adult I have forgotten my own! ( make sense? quite a bad sentence, but I like it!!)

I am always hearing my children’s vulnerability in their thinking I am not interested to read their English essay...their vulnerability is because they think I will get irritable with them because I look too busy to fit it in..or they already know it is riddled with mistakes...or that maybe it is not going to excite me....and in the end..their ego rises up above all these nerve endings...and they really don’t care in the end if I like it or not..they’ve finished it and they are quite pleased with it....but if I do read it..they are desperate that I will like it!!!!!!

and so, with the same intrinsic child vulnerability.. ‘you don’t hav to read it.’

In 1986 at my Survey Exhibition at M.O.C.A. [Museum Of Contemporary Art] in Brisbane...one critic wrote about my art ..‘she paints about life, death, sex without shame...’ this was aimed at being a derogatory review...it is probably the most apt thing that has ever been written about my work!!

Over the 20 years I’ve been painting, it has become as plain as day, that my audience either LOVES or HATES my work...there has never been MAYBE. I am happy enough with this...I find it interesting that what I paint and now write about can actually make people so upset!!

You write.. ‘By naming the book an autobiography, however, you already draw attention to the false divisions made between fiction and autobiography.’

NAMING THE BOOK AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS TO TRAP THE READER INTO THE IDEA..THE LOGICAL IDEA..THAT VICKI MYERS WROTE THE BOOK ABOUT HERSELF..THIS IS THE TRUE MEANING OF THE WORD.’AUTOBIOGRAPHY’.

So, having read the correct meaning..this is the story of Vicki Myers. written by Vicki Myers. the reader then sees it is written by Davida Allen.

Why is Davida Allen calling herself Vicki Myers?

Is Davida Allen Vicki Myers?

Who is Vicki Myers..could she in fact be anyone?

At the end of the book...at the end of the story...HOPEFULLY..THE READER has identified with Vicki Myers intimately enough and shared and empathised with her psyche..that it is totally and utterly irrelevant if it is Davida Allen..

I leaned on the experience of once, a long time ago, having read Gertrude Stein's book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Tolkas*....so, dear dear Alison...It's not an original idea by any means...but the critics and the readers all wallowed in my game...and so smiling like a cheshire cat, I read their articles and comments and don't care anymore about the heat of is it or isn't it me...‘just read the bloody story..and if it really matters to you if it is or isn't Davida Allen...I think it sad..You have not got enough out of Vicki Myers....’ I tell them..

THE OOZES ETC...ARE NOT THESE THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS PERTAINING TO LIFE.

I can't imagine writing a story and not mentioning them.

But ..you must understand..this is a painter writing....the thing I love most about when I am painting ..is the smell of the oil.!!!!

Re your question..what sort of a construction of a female artist did you want to create?

=I didn't.

The topic is Creativity.

If I had been a man artist...my story would have told of the masculine point of view.

I just happen to be female, mother, wife, artist...and I wanted creativity to be exposed in all these roles..NOT JUST IN THE BEING AN ART-IST!!!!

THE BOOK.....I HOPE....SUGGESTS...THE ARTIST FEEDS OFF VICKI MYERS BEING FEMALE, MOTHER, WIFE, LOVER.

I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants!!!!!!

Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written when my fourth child was at school.

I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!!!!!!!  
SUBVERSIVE??? FEMINIST??? I tend to shy away from these words,  
as firstly I do not understand their current meaning...and also, I simply  
had a story to tell, and still have stories I want to tell..and images I want  
to paint..and they arrive out of my own angst...my art output is initially  
simply carthartic in a true selfish sense....and when it does get born and  
is viewed by critics and discussed in university theseses ... I only hope to  
God the simplicity of the work is not anayised into complexity beyound  
it's reason to be born.

Obviously, you and any one else INTERESTED IN THE FEMINIST  
DEBATES, HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO HAVE YOUR OWN SPE-  
CIALIZED OPINION...BECAUSE THE WORK IS IN THE  
AUDIENCE DOMAIN..I have no control once I let it be born...But I  
struggle with the fear of how to say something without it's carrying a  
moral judgement!!!!

..the artist in a parriarchal world.?????

I have no answers.

I only thank god that I have been blessed personally with a most re-  
markable man as a husband who is addicted to my artistic output.

I feel like a fat pig in it's pen, knowing there are a lot of starving pigs and  
unwanted and unloved and unsuccessful pigs.

What can I do?

Paint about what I know more vehemently.

There is a truth in the old saying about behind every great man is a  
great woman....The story of Vicki Myers is quite bluntly exposing the  
truth behind this artist is the husband.

I am riddled knowing there are so many potential Vicki Myers who do  
not have a Greg....I feel wretched at their lives..but what can I do.?..paint  
my life more preciously!!!

There has indeed been articles about my work, describing the images or  
ME being obsessed with motherhood.

THE TRUTH IS = I AM.

HAVING 4 DAUGHTERS ...IF I WASN'T OBSESSED BY THE  
DUTIES IMPLICIT IN THIS ...IT WOULD BE A VERY SAD  
STORY I FEEL.

I AM GLAD I AM OBSESSED WITH THE ROLE.

WHAT FRIGHTENS ME THE MOST IN MY LIFE IS NOT BEING OBSESSED ABOUT ANYTHING. IT IS MY WORST FEAR.

Vicki often mentions madness as another role available to women?

...Does she???? I did not think she did.

The word fantasy is what I think you may intend in this question.

Madness is awful..Vicki does not want it..She is perhaps AS AN ARTIST, able to direct her madness...but if she could she'd give it away free to anyone who was stupid enough to want it!!!!

Alison,,,it is Fantasy..Imagination...that Vicki Myers is subconsciously suggesting can save the day....but this is my next book!!! Vicki did not really spell it out clearly enough in '*Close to the Bone*.' She was too young to understand it fully....

Give me a couple of years!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The fragmented narrative style.....THIS IS JUST THE WAY I WRITE ALISON. I DIDN'T THINK IT UP...I PAINT THICK ..IT'S JUST THE WAY I PAINT.I CAN'T DO IT ANY OTHER WAY!!

I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy..because it's as much a part of life as anything else. ( probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche.)

It was easy to write about it...as easy as the imagery of the poohy nappies that are also Vicki Myers life as also Death of her father etc etc etc... I have never in my life found it hard to talk about anything THAT I KNOW AND UNDERSTAND.

FEMINIST THEORIES....I am perhaps a true feminist in the specific sense of the word..to believe the woman is as good as any man..to be truly liberated in the house hold and work place and not be inferior... But I am not painting or writing these issues Alison. Rather I am more interested in shining a congratulatory light on the women in the house doing the nappies.....on the woman struggling to maintain some sense of sexual self in her tired marital bed...some sense of worth at her demeaning day's housewifery...

and that is why I am slightly irritated by the obsession of the critic or

reader who harps on the issue is this the story of Davida Allen ...I believe it could be any woman's story if she had the chance to have a loving husband!!

and for those women who do not have this luxury, this life support, maybe they can concentrate on their own potential through living Vicki Myers hopes and aspirations and do something to make this come about in their own life.

I did not write the story to give out answers, or philosophies Alison,,,I just had a story I wanted to share.!!

I am not aware of Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray ....

I am sorry if I am frustrating you with my retardedness!!!

Funny really....I have Peta, my 19 year old daughter, who is doing all this stuff at the A.N.U.!!!! OF COURSE SHE WON'T EVER MENTION HER DUMB MOTHER in any of her essays on Feminism..!!!!!!! But she knows all these names you know. I feel old and stupid. But there's too much I can do that you and Peta can't and so for my own sanity I just can't allow myself to get upset about what I don't know!!

I am reading a book at the moment which I am enjoying. The reason I am reading it is that it was given to me by the author, whose sister is an artist and likes my work. Like answering your questions, Alison, I feel obliged to read this novel.

It is called *The Mint Lawn* by Gillian Mears. It got the Australian Vogel Literary Award in 1990.

I live a fairly secluded life, Alison. Secluded from people other than my family.

I have spoken at the occasional Women's Writers' Morning teas !!! and here I am spending my morning writing to you...I sometimes feel a terrible loneliness.. without any other artists as companions to meet and talk with as I suspect would be the norm in a city life style...

This loneliness is acute with my writing aspirations also....

But I think it is just the way it has to be...I am concerned with the ordinary truth of living....family, sex, a vase of flowers on the table, frogs muscus on the windows, children reaching puberty, ...(I give you all the clues for my most recent work!!)...



PERHAPS IT IS JUST MEANT TO BE...THAT I AM LIVING IN ISOLATION, IN ORDER TO NOT BE DISTRACTED FROM THE SIMPLICITY OF DAY TO DAY LIFE...the DAVIDA ALLEN images of which both excite or offend the audience that views them.

Good luck with your Thesis, Alison.

I believe it is very important on a one to one level....that I reply to your questions.

In my own life, so often have I not been replied to when I was in your shoes, and I think it is sad when that happens.

I wish you every success.

Yours Sincerely.

David Allen.

## Endnotes

### Introduction

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