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Voice and origin in Margaret Atwood’s fiction

Burnham, Julie E., M.A.
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VOICE AND ORIGIN IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S FICTION

by

JULIE E. BURNHAM

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Wesley Morris, Professor of English, Director

Helena Michie, Associate Professor of English

Deborah Harter, Assistant Professor of French Studies

Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

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Julie E. Burnham

In contradiction to Lyotard, who posits an equal relationship between listener and speaker in Just Gaming and The Postmodern Condition, Atwood examines the ways in which women's voices are stifled by men's terroristic control of the speaking position. Her novels reveal a significant flaw in Lyotard's work: he ignores the effects which a political or hierarchical system has on his ideal language grid. Within contemporary patriarchal societies, Atwood's heroines must struggle against male dominance in order to fulfill what Lyotard calls "the obligation to retell."

Irigaray argues that women's exclusion from discourse can be traced back to Plato's myth of the cave, in which both men and women are encouraged to forget their maternal origins. In Atwood's novels, women must return to and revalue their maternal origins in order to find a voice, and the stories they must retell are altered versions of those of the mother.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In Just Gaming and The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard describes a communication grid in which the typically subordinate role of listener is empowered through a prescription to retell. Rather than being completely at the mercy of the speaker, the listener is someone who will be come a speaker in his or her own right because s/he is the subject of a command to retell that which s/he has been told. Lyotard's model is flawed, however, because it is apolitical. Lyotard attempts to make speaker and listener equal, via the prescription to retell, but neglects to address the ways in which power relationships affect this relationship between speaker and listener. He ignores the differences among listeners (and therefore among speakers, who have all been listeners before receiving the prescription to retell), differences which create imbalances in his ideal language game. If one listener is more powerful than another, due to his or her position within some hierarchical system, then when s/he becomes a speaker, s/he may not choose to relinquish that position. If the more powerful player of the language game refuses to listen, s/he may deny another the possibility of fulfilling the obligation to retell.

Margaret Atwood's novels provide striking examples of the ways in which the social and political hierarchies which Lyotard ignores can have all too powerful effects on the dynamics of the language game. While many factors may warp Lyotard's ideal language grid--including race, gender, age and class--Atwood's novels provide an exceptionally clear look at the ways in which gender shapes the relationship between speaker and listener in a patriarchal society.
In novels as diverse as *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood examines the ways in which women must fight to use their voices. In these novels the politics of gender undermine the equality of speaker and listener that Lyotard so carefully delineates. In Atwood's work we see the impossibility of such absolute equality within any political or social system.

Atwood's novels also reveal another problem with Lyotard's theories. Lyotard figures communication and the relationships within it as a kind of game, one involving positions on a grid, good moves and bad. Again, this is a scenario which is completely divorced from politics, even reality. Where the criteria judging a move in the language game are efficiency and novelty, all sense of accountability is done away with. Within Atwood's novels, that idealism is shattered; for Atwood's heroines, this is no game.

Atwood does more than present a bleak view of the inequalities present within a patriarchal system, however. After showing some of the ways in which women's voices are stifled--and thereby indicating some of the shortcomings of Lyotard's idealistic work--she goes a step further, indicating a possible solution for, or at least measure against, these imbalances. For her heroines in the above-mentioned novels all do find a voice eventually, and manage to make that transition from listener to speaker that Lyotard says is an obligation. And, importantly, they all do it in a similar manner. For these female protagonists, the path toward a voice is not one which further embeds them within a patriarchal system; instead, they must return to their maternal origins in order to achieve the right and power to use their own voices.
In "Plato's Hystera," Luce Irigaray shows the way in which women have been denied the power of discourse through a turning away from the mother. In the Hystera, not only male but also female children must forget the mother and try to be like the father in order to have any power. While similarity to the father is supposed to be empowering, it is not for Atwood's heroines. In order for them to find a voice they must not emulate the men in control, but instead must re-explore their maternal origins. It is through a return to the mother, a re-acquaintance with and revaluing of the maternal origins, that these women find the power to fight the restrictions under which they function within a patriarchal society. It is through an exploration of both their similarities to and differences from the mother that they find their voices and fulfill the obligation to retell. It is a celebration of, rather than a rejection of gender differences that these women must come to terms with; they must repeat the mother's story--but with a difference--in order to find a voice.
CHAPTER 2

In Lyotard's attempts to make the speaking and listening positions equal, he focuses on the way in which these positions are interconnected, rather than autonomous. To Lyotard, listening is not a totally separate, deprivileged position, one in which all power and authority are given to the speaker. Instead, it is a position from which the power to speak can be received. By listening, one becomes the object of a prescription which will give one not only the authority to speak, but also the obligation to do so. As a listener, an addressee, one is a future speaker. The listener is "one destined....he is someone who, before he is the utterer of a prescription, has been the recipient of a prescription ..." 1. In the passive position of being spoken to, the listener is transformed by the prescription passed on by the speaker into a (potentially) active role. 2 For this prescription of which the listener is made the object, is "the obligation to retell" (JG, 35). The addressee is first obliged to listen; but then, s/he must accede to the authority not of the speaker but of the prescription itself, and become a speaker him- or herself.

This prescription is, I believe, reversible. Although Lyotard only directly discusses the prescription to retell, there is embedded in this a prescription to listen. If you want a chance to speak, you must listen first. Lyotard sets up an ideal, ethical situation in which listening and speaking are a sort of cycle, with each of the

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1 Jean-François Lyotard, Just Gaming (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31. Further references will be in parentheses in the text, using the abbreviation JG.

2 I say potentially because one of the things I wish to explore is what happens when the prescription is resisted. What happens when one (passively) doesn't hear or (actively) does not listen to the speaker?
positions dependent upon the other. This is like a polite conversation where speaker and listener alternate, but it is one regulated not by etiquette but by ethics.

Because the obligation under which the listener falls is one to retell, as opposed to one simply to tell or speak, a sense of repetition is implied in Lyotard’s model. But it is not a simple circuit in which the same speaker and the same listener simply alternate, switching back and forth between the two positions, repeating the same stories over and over. The listener is obliged to retell, “But not necessarily to my teller. I am not obligated to give it back to him, no, that is not it; but I am obligated in the way of a relay that may not keep its charge but must pass it on” (JG, 35). Instead, Lyotard describes what I envision as a kind of spiral or coil, in which new participants are brought into the language game. New listeners, through the prescription to retell, become new speakers.

This obligation also is not one to retell exactly the same narrative. Each new speaker changes or embellishes the story. “The narratives get repeated, but are never identical” (JG, 33). Lyotard considers this variation a form of experimentation, which is very important and necessary to the language game. Lyotard frames his explanation of the obligation to retell around the example of the Cashinahua Indians reported by André Marcel d’Ans. The obligation to retell, and the power to alter that which is retold are due both to the need for experimentation and the importance of repetition in forming tradition. “Nothing accumulates, that is, narratives must be repeated all the time because they are forgotten all the time.” What remains is a kind of “temporal beat,” and the successive retellings
of the narrative, as listeners follow the obligation to become speakers (JG, 34). This is where the actual power in the speaking position lies: in the opportunity to alter the story. Although retelling is the fulfilling of an obligation, this obligation does leave room for variation, for the individual to mark the narrative s/he is retelling.

This freedom to alter what is retold and to choose the addressee of one’s message allows for some exercise of individual will beneath the prescription. For although the will is very definitely subordinate to this obligation, Lyotard writes that “no one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (PC, 15). No one is ever reduced to inhabiting a single position in the language game; quite the opposite, a certain flexibility or adaptability is required within Lyotard’s language grid. As we examine Margaret Atwood’s novels, however, we will see some of the ways in which this power to position oneself is hampered and constrained by social and gender conventions, by what Lyotard graphically calls terrorism.

The ideal use of this power to reshape what is retold (while still working within the confines of the prescription) is what Lyotard terms “the pagan.” Any move within a language game which meets the rules of that game (and the rules are the result of a pact between/among the players, not inherent in the game itself) is legitimate. (JG, 60-62) But the moves most favored are original ones which challenge or extend the boundaries of the game. “I think that pagans are artists, that is, they can move from one game to
another, and in each of these games (in the optimal situation) they try to figure out new moves. And even better, they try to invent new games" (JG, 61). This use of power over language--not only what is expressed, but how it is expressed--is the ideal for Lyotard. The player has a kind of freedom to stretch the boundaries or bend the rules of the game, and the more s/he takes advantage of this opportunity the better. But, this power within the game must not become a power over the game itself, or over the other players. Otherwise, the move is terroristic (JG, 99-100). This is one of the things which must be avoided in a just language game.

Interestingly, Just Gaming opens with a discussion of just such terrorism. Jean-Loup Thébaud attacks Lyotard's book, L'Economie libidinale, calling it a "take-it-or-leave-it proposition" which "did not allow for any negotiating" (JG, 3). Lyotard defends his book with the statement, "This is a book that aims to produce effects upon the reader, and its author does not ask that these effects be sent back to him in the forms of questions" (JG, 4). While this statement is not only arrogant, it also seems to contradict or subvert the prescription to retell. Thébaud accuses Lyotard of "great violence," of "a constraint of opinion"--terrorism, in the Lyotardian sense of the word. Lyotard counters with the argument that his book does indeed allow for discussion, "presuppos[ing] that the reader does not allow himself of herself to be intimidated" (JG, 5). Although Lyotard tries to make the positions of speaker and listener equal in the ideal language game, he explicitly acknowledges here that the speaker is in a position of power, one which the listener/reader must resist in order to becomes a speaker/ writer himself.
Lyotard's theories are, admittedly, pictures of an ideal. So it is natural that Atwood's worlds would not work perfectly: these are worlds that simply are not ethical. But does Lyotard give an indication of how this perfect language game--perfect information system--can be attained? In *The Postmodern Condition* his answer is efficiency, use-value. Knowledge becomes a commodity which has an exchange value, and language games are played on a field of agonistics, in which to speak is to fight (*PC*, 10). But this can be dangerous, as we will see in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In a society where people are divided into categories based on their value, power, and physical capabilities, we see the dangers of applying these criteria to social relationships. This does not, in the end, produce an ideal communication grid. This is why in *Just Gaming*, Lyotard curiously returns again and again to Lévinas; he must bring ethics into this political/communications philosophy to prevent complete and dangerous dehumanization.

Is not listening (therefore not listening to the prescription in either direction, for in an ethical situation it does go both ways) a problem particular to postmodern society? As discussed above, Thébaud accuses Lyotard of great violence upon the reader. Lyotard defends himself by referring to his writing as “casting a bottle to the sea” throughout the opening chapter of the book. He denies writing *for* a reader; in fact he maintains that “one writes only in the reader's absence....The reader's solicitation, or what one imagines it to be, must be suspended, and in a way, one must have no interest in it....I believe that it is important that there be no addressee” (*JG*, 8-9). Lyotard says that he has been “experimenting
with a pragmatics that, for some Sophists, is a decisive aspect of the poetic: it is true that the poet is not concerned, after his statements are made, to enter into a dialogue with his readers in order to establish whether or not they understand him” (*JG*, 5). Is this not a denial of the responsibility to listen in turn, to allow someone else to speak? Is Lyotard “ethical?”

Having a reader in mind (and by this I assume he means a specific reader, an intended addressee) curtails experimentation according to Lyotard. “If the contour of an addressee is imposed upon it [an artistic work]...this contour filters out the experiments in sound, form, literature, and even theory, that the vanguard is allowed to make, then it will not be able to do anything” (*JG*, 10). Experimenting, “doing something,” becomes more important than speaking to or reaching the addressee, and undermines the idea of a “universal subject.” Instead, Lyotard believes that the experimental work itself will “produce people to whom it is destined. It will elicit its own addressee” (*JG*, 10).

Although speaking to no specific listener does not mean there will be no listener, it does change the likelihood of prescription being realized. What if no reader ever materializes? Or, what if others refuse to listen, to read?

Within this opening discussion in *Just Gaming* there is, then, a covert contradiction of Lyotard’s idea of the equality of speaker and listener. The prescription to retell cannot be fulfilled if the listener is being intimidated by the speaker. When the speaker terrorizes the listener, a hierarchy develops in which the speaker has taken control. If the speaker refuses the obligation to listen
that is the flip side of the obligation to retell, then s/he prevents the listener from fulfilling that obligation to retell. This is what Thébaud accuses Lyotard of doing to his readers in *L'Economie libidinale*, and is precisely what Atwood accuses men of doing to women in her novels. Her female characters are silenced by men who refuse to give up the speaking position. They are terrorized by a patriarchy which will not allow speaker and listener to be equal or at least reversible roles, which will not allow women to fulfill their obligation as participants in the language game to retell.

Not only are Atwood's heroines silenced by patriarchal terrorism, they even seem to embrace the listening position, either as one of safety or subversive power. In *Lady Oracle* and *The Handmaid's Tale* especially, Atwood's protagonists resist the prescription to retell, either in self-defense or as a way of making some kind of new "pagan" move within the language game. And although these characters all move into the speaking position eventually, where they can finally find a voice, it is only after resisting the prescription to retell that they do this.

In *Lady Oracle*, it is difficult to speak clearly about Joan Foster because she has so many different identities. I am not speaking here of a character who has alternative internal realities, but one who lives several exterior realities. These identities are characterized by the binary categories into which Joan divides her life. She is alternately fat and thin, hack writer and artist, wife and mistress. Although Joan goes by three different names--Joan Delacourt, Louise K. Delacourt, Joan Foster--none of these personas can ever be called the *real* Joan. And, they do not exist in sequence, but all at the same
time. The name Joan Delacourt represents youth, obesity, the hidden past. Louise K. Delacourt is thin, free from her mother's control (she thinks), mistress of an exotic foreigner, and writer of trashy Gothic novels. Joan Foster is wife, feminist poet, unwilling celebrity. Even as Joan changes names she cannot completely shed her other identities. She attempts to keep these identities completely separate, but this is impossible. She sees the outline of her obese body in the mirror even when she is thin, and her mother's presence haunts her wherever she is.

With these multiple identities, which do not mark consecutive stages in Joan's life or career but different aspects of her personality, it becomes impossible to speak of Joan as a single character, to use single examples in an analysis of her participation in the language game. Instead, we must look at her in each of her roles. In some of her roles, Joan seems to live up to the prescription to retell. As a writer, she certainly plays her role in the narrative game. However, her moves are limited, restrained. She does not, in her own eyes, play the language game well. She is not pagan, not an artist creating new moves or new games.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster seemingly achieves a position of speaking in her writing, both as Gothic novelist and feminist poet. Within these frameworks she fulfils the obligation to retell. However, these writings are ones which Joan completely devalues because she sees herself as merely repeating that which has been told to her, without making alterations. She feels that mere repetition, without artistic input, is worthless. In Lyotard's terms, this is not a "pagan" or artistic move in the language game.
In Joan's Gothic novels, she is merely repeating gothic tropes, plots and characters which could be found in any number of other novels. She does not consider these Costume Goths to be art; they are merely repetition with a (negligible) difference of a framework that has been given to her. Within these novels she is repeating stories, plots, settings, and character types handed down from one generation of writers to another, passed from one gothic subgenre to another (Paul writes "nurse novels," and teaches her the basics). She is retelling an age-old story of men's subjugation of women--both in love and hatred--within the structure of a gothic novel. Her stories are not new or different; they are recycled over and over again.

Joan's feeling that her Costume Goths are worthless as repetitions of stories already told is partially due to her own insecurities. But this devaluing of the novels is not all on Joan's part. Her publisher calls the books "material...as if it came by the yard"\(^3\). She must stick to the formula in order to be published, and her pay is dependent not upon quality but length. As a writer she is fulfilling her obligation to retell, but in a way that does not leave any room for experimentation. The restrictions placed upon her by the genre and the publisher prevent her from making "pagan" moves in the language game.

In Joan's feminist poetry, her position as speaker is also undermined because she is reporting what has been "dictated" to her

\(^3\)Margaret Atwood, \textit{Lady Oracle} (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 75. Further references to the novel will be made parenthetically in the text, using the abbreviation \textit{LO}. 
by spirits. She does not understand that she has actually created that which she has written. She does not recognize the ways in which the poetry is a creative "retelling" of her life and her relationships, especially those with her mother and Arthur. Instead, she feels removed, divorced from the project; she thinks she has merely listened and repeated without altering. Joan feels she is merely a relay point; but in opposition to Lyotard, one without a will, lacking power over the messages that "traverse and position" her in the language grid.

Joan's poems are more original and artistic than she thinks. They are subconscious revisions of her memories, rather than messages from spirits. Within the poems Joan weaves together events and symbols from the past, revealing the way in which past events contribute to or are a part of present concerns. The man with the daffodils and icicle teeth represents the "bad man" her mother warned her about throughout childhood. Joan had imagined this bogeyman as "a tall man, very tall, in a black suit, heaving up out of the snow like an avalanche in reverse, blue-faced and covered with ice, red-eyed, hairy-headed, with long sharp teeth like icicles" (LO, 62). The actual "bad man" by whom Joan and her schoolmates are confronted turns out to be much less frightening; in fact Joan does not even realize what he is. "He was standing at the far side of the bridge, a little off the path, holding a bunch of daffodils in front of him. He was a nice-looking man, neither old nor young, wearing a good tweed coat, not at all shabby or disreputable" (LO, 63). When the man lifts the daffodils and exposes himself to the girls, Joan is
more startled by the other girls' fear and flight than she is by the exhibitionism.

This man with the daffodils and icicle teeth combines elements from both the imagined and the real "bad man" and becomes a symbol for what Joan sees as an uncomfortable dichotomy in all men. Through this encounter with the flasher Joan is exposed to the fact that men are not easily reduced to a single category of good or bad. She has difficulty reconciling seemingly contradictory characteristics in people, especially men. She wants to be able to fit them into the roles of hero and villain, as in her Gothic novels, but she is never able to clearly determine which is which. She is greatly disturbed by the fact that her father, a physician, killed people in the war. Fathers are supposed to be good men. Doctors are supposed to save lives. And, in the case of the exhibitionist, she does not want to admit that a man who looks nice and safe could mean her any harm. And, more importantly, she does not want to admit to the fact that every one is in fact a mixture of such traits; no one can be completely one or the other. This is not an either/or proposition, but a both/and.

Joan is frightened by what she sees as the apparent Jekyll and Hyde nature of men. "Every man I'd ever been involved with, I realized, had had two selves: my father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate" (LO, 326). Joan must finally come to terms with the doubleness (or better yet, multiplicity) of human nature, to accept apparent contradictions in
others and herself, before she can finally reunite the many strands of her self and pick up the pieces of her fragmented life, before she can consciously fulfill the obligation to retell.

Joan has split herself up into (at least) three different identities in the novel. As Gothic novelist, she is connected to her past in London and Paul. As feminist poet, she is connected to the literary world, Royal Porcupine, and adultery. As Joan Foster she is the wife of Arthur, a political radical. Although Joan follows the prescription to retell in her two writing personas (but in ways which she considers of little value, because she does not feel she has exercised any will), in her position as wife she tries to resist the obligation. She creates an imaginary past to tell Arthur, rather than discuss her real family or reveal her former obesity. And she hides her writing from him, knowing that he will not respect her Gothic novels. Even the feminist poetry—much more respectable work—remains a secret until just before its publication.

Joan's withholding of information serves several purposes, and has several explanations. Most obviously, it serves a self-preservative, defensive function. Part Two of the novel opens with Aunt Lou's maxim, "If you let one worm out of a can of worms, all the other worms will follow" (LO, 41). This aphorism echoes Joan's most deep-seated fear, that of revealing herself. Throughout her life, Joan avoids the speaking position. Although Lyotard's concept of the obligation to retell implies a certain kind of power in the speaking position, Joan sees speaking as a kind of threat to her self. If she were to speak up, to admit to the obligation to retell, she fears that she would tell too much about herself.
Lyotard probably would not like this idea of speaking as revelation of self. Speaking is supposed to be simply a move in a language game, which can be evaluated according to its "originality" within the game. But, the seeds of this idea of speaking as self-revelation can be found in Lyotard's own theories. If the will does come into play, beneath the archaic obligation to retell, then there is a sense of the self being involved in speaking. The speaker does not just pass on a story, he changes or embellishes it. And in the very act of speaking, he is embedding himself in the narrative.

In his discussion of the Cashinahua, Lyotard examines the way in which a formalized storytelling format serves to place speaker, addressee and referent in their respective places. Interestingly, when the storyteller gives his name at the end of the narrative, "the teller designates himself as someone who has been narrated by the social body, in a narrative that includes proper names and in which he has a place of his own. Among the stories he tells, there is also this story" (JG, 32). Thus, Lyotard points out how in the process of retelling, the speaker is telling/writing himself into the story. Although the referent is the privileged pole of this narrative relation, "the one doing the speaking speaks in the place of the referent. As narrator, she is narrated as well" (JG, 41). To take this a step further and call writing oneself into the story an act of revealing and positioning oneself is not unwarranted or mistaken, I believe, given the opening which Lyotard provides here.

Joan turns Aunt Lou's warning for discretion into an obsession, which leads her to tell lies. Upon meeting Arthur, she lies about her living arrangements, so that he won't know she has a lover. She does
not tell him she writes Costume Gothics, because she wants him to respect her. Although these seem like understandable, "forgivable" lies, ones with tactical purposes, many of her lies are more outrageous, and less understandable. She tells Arthur lies about her family, especially her mother, in order to keep herself covered. "That was one reason I never told Arthur much about my mother. If I'd started on her, he would've found out about me soon enough. I invented a mother for his benefit, a kind, placid woman who dies of a rare disease--lupus, I think it was--shortly after I met him" (LO, 41). Her lies become more creative, and go much further than necessary at times.

Ultimately the lies which Joan tells attempting not to reveal herself end up doing just that. And it is here that Joan makes her most pagan move in the language game. Her lies are an attempt to avoid retelling her life, but what they actually are is a retelling with a difference. Her lies are not completely devoid of reality; she merely twists the truth, alters what she retells. Ironically, Joan thinks that her writing and speaking, especially the lies, are safe because they do not tell the "truth"--her writing is mere repetition and her speaking is mostly falsehood. But these lies certainly can be considered one form of fulfilling the obligation to retell.

Joan's fear of revealing herself extends to all facets of her life. The caution instilled in her by her mother's abusive and restrictive behavior and bolstered by Aunt Lou's maxims is a legacy which Joan has difficulty escaping. As a teenager, she shies away from Automatic Writing because she fears not only failure, but also public exposure. The leader of the Spiritualist chapel tells Joan "You could
be better than any of us," but Joan is frightened of this potential power and does not explore it.

Leda Sprott's opinion of my great powers was even more terrifying, especially since I had to admit I found the thought appealing. Nobody had ever told me I had great powers before....But I wasn't quite sure I really wanted great powers. What if something went wrong? What if I failed enormously and publicly....It was easier not to try. (LO, 122)

Joan's fear of failure and the exposure it would entail prevent her from giving Automatic Writing a try.

As she grows older, and leaves home--escaping the direct control of her mother--the fear of revealing herself does not diminish. As a writer of Gothic novels, she hesitates to claim the work as her own. She uses a pseudonym, Louise K. Delacourt, which protects her identity. It is not just the reading public or her own disapproving family she is hiding from, however. She uses the pseudonym not only on the covers of her books, but also in all her dealings with the publisher. "They'd never seen me, they knew me only by my other name. They thought I was a middle-aged ex-librarian, overweight and shy. Practically a recluse, in fact, and allergic to dust, wool, fish, cigarette smoke and alcohol, as I'd explained to them when declining lunches" (LO, 33). She seems to exult in their misperception of her.

With Arthur, her husband, she hides not just her past and her work, but even the things she believes in. While she finds some merit in her novels and others like them as a vision of hope or a method of escape for women all over the world, she cannot explain this to Arthur, does not even attempt it. Instead, she betrays her
own beliefs, buries them in favor of Arthur's. In trying to belong to the ineffectual political circle of which Arthur is a member, she must create an entirely different identity, that of the patient, long-suffering, good-hearted but slightly inept wife. Within this group she feels totally inferior. Arthur wants a woman whose mind he can respect, and Joan knows he wouldn't respect a Gothic novelist. "Arthur's friends and the books he read, which had footnotes, and the causes he took up made me feel deficient and somehow absurd, a sort of intellectual village idiot, and revealing my profession would certainly have made it worse" (LO, 33).

This withholding of information is both self-preservation for Joan (she wants to keep his respect, and not reveal her "sordid" past), as well as a kind of ingrained upholding of conventional social values. She has been trained to feel that she is unworthy of a legitimate speaking position. As a child, she must abdicate all right to speak to her parents, especially to her mother who lives by the maxim that children should be seen and not heard. But gender constrictions also play a role here. Paul and Arthur dominate the speaking position as much as Joan's mother had, and Joan plays the passive, reticent female, allowing herself to function as the mirror to the male ego.

Interestingly, Joan's only way of speaking as a child--gaining weight as a protest against her mother's desire to control her appearance--becomes yet another reason for her to remain silent. In a society obsessed with appearances, obesity denies one credibility, visibility, audibility. "[F]at women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable, because people find them
distressing and look away...If I'd ever robbed a bank no witnesses would have been able to describe me accurately" (LO, 87-88). Joan becomes a mirror for the teenage girls around her, a measure of their comparatively greater worth. They look better, thinner, more attractive next to Joan. "These girls liked to walk home with me...for two reasons: if a boy who was not wanted approached them, there I was, a fat duenna, the perfect excuse, it was like having your own private tank; and if a more desirable boy turned up, how could my friends help but look good beside me?" (LO, 101-2). Obesity removes her from the marriage plot, the dating game. "Though immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires" (LO, 102). She is also removed permanently from the speaking position, and becomes a full-time listener. The other girls are not "ethical" - -they do not recognize any obligation to listen to someone like Joan. Using obesity as a form of expression backfires for Joan, and merely situates her in the listening position more firmly, with no opportunity to become a speaker and fulfill the obligation to retell. Rather than liberating her, the extra weight entraps her. Now she must fight against age, gender and appearance issues in order to be heard.

Joan seems to think that there is power in the silence she has been forced to adopt. Rather than feeling herself to be restricted by her friends, she feels superior to them because she does not tell them anything. She keeps herself hidden behind those mountains of flesh. As the perpetual listener, she feels that the information she learns is of value somehow; maybe she is just revelling in the power she would have over these girls if she chose to speak. "I knew what
they thought about each other and what they said behind each other's backs. But they guessed nothing about me; I was a sponge. I drank it all in but gave nothing out, despite the temptation to tell everything..." (LO, 102).

Joan does not try to fight the social conventions which restrict and limit her, which prevent her from fulfilling the obligation to retell. Instead she makes an attempt to subvert the prescription, the ethics of the communication grid and language game. But, is this an active subversion, is this her form of speaking? Or is this just a lack of confidence and a sort of stasis in the listening position ingrained by her mother's (and then Arthur's) silencing of her? For the temptation to tell everything is not a temptation to tell the other girls' secrets but her own--she is tempted to reveal "all my hatred and jealousy, to reveal myself as the duplicitous monster I knew myself to be" (LO, 102). Rather than being enraged at the other girls' treatment of her, she feels herself to be the monster for feeling these things.

Rather than being an active subversion this seems to be more a passive "going with the flow." Joan feels that this knowledge of others is not actually empowering. Instead of considering the ways in which she might use the gossip she hears in her position as confidante, she sees it at best as worthless information and at worst as a kind of burden. Her habit of listening continues in her adult life, and she lets Arthur tell her all about his parents. "I ended up knowing a lot more about his mother than he did about mine, not that it did me much good. Knowledge isn't necessarily power" (LO, 42). Instead of fighting the restrictions placed upon her
by her mother, her classmates, or Arthur, she gives in and listens. She does not fight those who are unethically "breaking the rules," dominating the speaking position and refusing to listen in turn.

Lyotard's conception of this language grid, as an ideal one, does not allow room for hierarchies of power to come into play. In real life, concerns such as age, gender, race, and class all serve to warp this grid. The possibility of having control over one's own post of sender, addressee, or referent becomes questionable. In a patriarchal society like ours women's voices are muffled, not necessarily because women can not or do not choose to speak, but because the ruling class (men) do not choose to listen. They do not choose to acknowledge the connection between speaking and listening, do not see that by speaking, they are placing someone else under the prescription to retell.

Lyotard's model does not leave room for this kind of inequality because it is a model based on justice and ethics. In his language games, in which speaking is not an autonomous position, there is a sense of fairness, equality. Ethically, one must listen to those who speak, must listen to someone after you speak. One must be willing to alternate roles. But Atwood's novels are definitely set in the "real world"—one in which power relationship are reality, and where Lyotard's ideal language game is impossible. Atwood focuses sharply on the relationships between people—between different generations, and genders—and how power affects these relations. So many of her heroines are mired in complicated and limiting relationships, with parents (dead or alive) and men. Joan Foster is completely dominated by her mother and the men in her life
(especially Arthur); Marion (in *The Edible Woman*), similarly, is completely subordinate to her fiancé until she breaks off her engagement; the unnamed heroine of *Surfacing* is caught in a confusing relationship with her lover and is still deeply under the influence of her parents, one of whom is missing and the other dead; and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* rethinks and reconsiders her relationships with her lost family and friends. Concern with familial relationships, especially those which have been lost through death or separation, becomes almost an obsession for Atwood.

In Atwood's most extreme vision of society, women have been silenced completely and violently. The theocracy of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* returns things to their "natural" state, with women in the home, men the sole legal holders of property and power, and resources--including women--rationed according to socio-economic status. In Gilead "normal" is that which is supported by literal readings of the Bible, which supports in turn the reification of patriarchy. Gilead an society is intolerant of all difference. Atwood's allegory envisions a world in which all of the prejudices and injustices of contemporary society are exaggerated. Racism results in the relocation/resegregation of the "Children of Ham"; religious intolerance reminiscent of the Moral Majority causes the expulsion or conversion of Jews and Catholics; and homophobia results in the use of gay men in penal colony work crews.

Sexual discrimination becomes the law, and the government attempts to legitimize this move through arguments invoking nature and the protection of women. The Gilead an regime tries to explain
the necessity for this violent revolution and creation of a new political state as the only way to prevent the human race from dying out, and to protect women from male aggression. Women are told that the new way of life was created for their benefit, to allow them to carry out their natural function, bearing children, with dignity and respect. The problem with the old world, the Commander tells Offred, was that "Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement."4

The new society represents itself not only as protecting the human race by re-valuing motherhood, but also as protecting women from repressive and degrading practices like dating, cosmetic surgery, and the excessive importance of appearances. The Commander counters Offred's silent disapproval of the new regime with the argument

We've given [women] more than we've taken away....Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (HT, 284)

This attempt to render women equal in the game of courtship and reproduction only instates a new hierarchy, however. Instead of the

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4 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 284. Further references will be in parentheses in the text, using the abbreviation HT.
beautiful and successful women getting the men (as the Commander suggests was the case in the pre-Gilead war), now the fertile ones do. The focus has not left the body, it has just become internalized. Use-value replaces appearance as the dominant factor in determining a woman's worth. And, importantly, this is an attempt to make women equal to each other, not equal to men.

Most frightening of all is the "blame the victim" approach that is taken in the attempt to protect women from male aggression. Rather than holding men responsible for their actions, Gilead blames the promiscuity of women. At the Rachel and Leah Center, where the women are "reprogrammed" before taking on their roles as Handmaids, they are encouraged to "Testify" their past sins and accept blame for them. Janine reveals that she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion, and the Aunt in charge asks "But whose fault was it?" The trained response is chilling:

Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.
Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.
She did. She did. She did.
Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?
Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. (HT, 93).

In this society women lose everything—money, power, voice, even control of their own bodies. They are assigned places based on economic status, physical health, and age. Being fertile becomes the most significant mark of a woman's body. The only power the women are given is the one of policing each other. The Aunts train and supervise the Handmaids, and the wives are allowed to punish them, provided they use nothing more than their hand. The
Handmaids are even set to spy upon each other. Although they are supposed to walk to the shops together for their own safety, it is really an elaborate buddy system of culpability. "This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable." (HT, 26).
This system attempts to prevent not only escape or illicit activities, but also the formation of female friendships, which are suspect. Trust is a difficult thing to form when your partner and potential friend may turn you in to the state.

It would be laughable if it were not so frightening that those in power in Gilead try to pass off this degrading and restrictive state of affairs as a utopian one. Not only are women free from the terrors of rape, and impossible expectations of beauty, they are also free to return to their natural occupation—the bearing and rearing of children. But most importantly, the government points to the creation of a "women's society," women working together in support of a household, with the goal of producing something—a child. "The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them....Women united for a common end!" (HT, 209).
All of the traditional household responsibilities are broken down: Handmaids handle physical reproduction; Wives are responsible for raising the children; and Marthas act as support staff, maintaining the home and preparing food. This division of labor is extolled as liberating. "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable
or humane. Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you..." (HT, 209-10).

The establishment tries to convince the women that they are carrying out some sort of feminist vision in the creation of this "women's world," where women work together for their common good. Although they co-opt feminist terminology, they certainly have not created the type of women's society envisioned by early separatist feminists. Instead, the patriarchal system is more firmly entrenched, and women are legally restricted to their "proper" sphere, the home. And within this home, hierarchies based on ability to reproduce and economic status replace the kind of egalitarian female society envisioned by some feminists. The problem, as Offred points out to Moira before the war, is that even if the women separate themselves, and create such an ideal world, "Men were not just going to go away...You couldn't just ignore them." (HT, 223).

The fact that the society that Atwood creates here is an exaggeration of current social conditions makes it all the more frightening. If women are reduced to being vessels, and are valued only for the ways in which their bodies can be put to use, then they are rendered completely iterable. This iterability is especially true of the Handmaids, who are not even allowed to keep their own names. Instead, they are given patronymics, created by attaching "of" before the man's first name, indicating possession. When Offred's usual shopping partner is replaced by a new one, she asks the new woman, "Has Ofglen been transferred, so soon?" The response is
"I am Ofglen..." (HT, 363), which is perfectly true. This exchange shows the frightening extent to which the government has taken even identity from these women.

These iterable women are completely silenced. They are removed from positions of power in the government and society, and even their power within the home is severely limited. Women are forbidden to read and write, and speaking is regulated by hierarchies of power. The Handmaids are treated like children, allowed to speak only when spoken to. Conversations between the Handmaids and the lower classes (Marthas, Econowives) are frowned upon, and even exchanges with fellow Handmaids must follow certain ritualistic forms, in which proper salutations and responses are prescribed by the state.

Offred obviously has not chosen silence in this post-apocalyptic world. Unlike Atwood's other heroines who are not legally prohibited from speaking or writing, she is restricted by laws and regulations, the breaking of which could mean severe punishment or death. Offred's refusal to speak, her denial of the obligation to retell had actually come earlier, before the religious forces took over the government. In the prewar world, she had refused to follow in the activist tradition of her mother. While her mother had marched and picketed as a staunch feminist, fighting for abortion rights and against pornography, Offred had chosen to stay out of the social/political arena. She followed a more conventional path of having a family and home, unlike her mother who had chosen to raise a child without a father and live a nomadic kind of life.
There is a sense that Offred is complicit in the formation of Gilead, because of her earlier silence. In the new theocracy she loses the right to speak in any way, especially in protest. The voice which she had refused to use, and the power which it represents, are taken from her violently and shockingly. One can read this as punishment for not being feminist, for not being an activist in the earlier world. A kind of warning to speak before it is too late can be heard in Atwood's novel, reflecting the bitterness of first-generation feminists toward their daughters who refused to take up their banners and join the fight for women's rights. Before Gilead is formed, Offred's mother tells her, "You young people don't appreciate things....You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?" (HT, 156). But Offred refuses to become involved with the causes her mother and her friend Moira are interested in.

Atwood's novel is, however, more complex than this; it is not just a simplistic harangue against people (especially women) who do not speak out, who are not involved with trying to right the injustices of contemporary society. Atwood's allegory also seems to contain a warning to those who do speak in protest, to think clearly and carefully about their methods and goals. We must be careful what we wish for, and how we make ourselves heard, because the possibility of mis-interpretation or co-optation exists. For the Gileadan government takes up the feminist vision of a utopian female society. But in "retelling the story" they make
changes. The leaders of the religious patriarchy not only fulfill the obligation to retell, they make extensive changes to that which they have been told by the feminists. They take such liberties with feminist ideas that they may be called terrorists. The story is no longer a liberatory one for women, but one which reifies patriarchy.

After Offred loses the right to speak (surely this is terrorism in the Lyotardian sense), she learns to value that which she is now denied. She yearns for someone to speak to, especially Moira. She longs to play her role in the language game, to fulfill the obligation to retell. But although the illicit meetings with the Commander provide her with an outlet for expression, it is a dangerous one. These meetings are interesting, even enjoyable, for Offred because they represent a change from the normal daily routine. But while the diversion is exciting, she must be careful not to accept all the liberties (limited as they may be) which the Commander grants her. He lets her, even encourages her to speak frankly, but she must not submit to the temptation to do so. "And if I talk to him I'll say something wrong, give something away. I can feel it coming, a betrayal of myself, I don't want him to know too much" (HT, 239). Offred fears that speaking means self-revelation, just as Joan does in Lady Oracle. But the stakes are much higher for Offred; revealing her dissenting views and the illegal activities she has become involved in jeopardize her life. By letting her speak, the Commander is not admitting to the obligation to listen; he is not trying to play the language game ethically, but flaunting his power in an attempt to make himself more attractive to her. The liberties he allows her
only place her in greater danger, because her freedom is completely dependent on him.

While Offred cannot afford to speak freely to the Commander, the act of retelling the story verbally to herself and the audio cassettes is a doubly-constitutive act, she hopes. She creates herself, embedding herself in the narrative by the very act of telling it. But she also gives life to Luke, she hopes, through her belief in him and her story. In a revision of Descartes she says, "I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."(HT, 344). Retelling her story ensures her existence and sanity, and allows her to hope that Luke may still be alive.

Ironically, Offred's escape from the Commander's house is engineered by the one man to whom she does tell too much. She reveals far more than is prudent to her lover Nick, including her real name. It is very lucky for her that he is not a government spy--an Eye--which she knows is a distinct possibility. Instead, Nick is a member of the resistance movement which helps women escape Gilead through a "female railroad." Is this a reward for bucking the system, for speaking frankly? Has fulfilling the obligation to retell been the key to her escape?

With the cases of Lady Oracle and the more extreme The Handmaid's Tale before us, it becomes more apparent that the attempt to remain in the position of listener is a defensive or habitually ingrained one, rather than a subversive act for Atwood's heroines. In societies which indirectly or subtly restrict women's power, or those which legally deny power to women, it is easier and safer to remain a listener. Social and political hierarchies skew the
ideally egalitarian language grid which Lyotard proposes as the ruling class refuses to admit to the ethical obligation to listen. If the obligation to listen which is embedded in the obligation to retell is ignored or denied, then the language game breaks down, and terrorism emerges. Thus, women constrained by traditional social conventions have a difficult time upholding the prescription to retell. Treated as children who should be seen and not heard (as Joan is by her mother, and women as a group are by Gilead an society), and as the inferior sex, women become the objects of prejudices along gender and generational lines. This renders them powerless, unequal, unable to fulfill the obligation to retell because there is no one to listen.

Within these inferior positions, constrained by gender and social conventions, it becomes a major task to try to fulfill the obligation to speak, as we have seen in Lady Oracle and The Handmaid's Tale. But even once these women finally become determined to fight those restrictions, to take on the hierarchies which relegate them to the inferior-listening-position, the change cannot come instantly. Along with the determination to fight for one's rightful place within the language game, one must find a voice with which to fulfill the obligation to retell. For women who have been trained by existing conventions to stay in the listening position, this is no small feat.
CHAPTER 3

Atwood suggests in her novels that some kind of journey or transformation is required in order for her heroines to enter the language game successfully, to find their voices and fulfill the obligation to retell. With the cards stacked against them as women in a patriarchal society, speaking out is difficult but not impossible. Atwood's women must find their voices through a reclaiming of the origin. Each must explore her own beginnings, and try to renegotiate her place within society and the family.

This return is, specifically, a return to maternal origins. Raised in patriarchies which value everything male over everything female, these female characters must try to recuperate the maternal, both for themselves and those who follow. But this return to maternal origins is a complicated process. For, while these heroines must not reject the mother in favor of the father, neither can they act as simple mirrors or repetitions of their mothers. In order to find a voice with which to take up the speaking position and fulfill the obligation to retell, Atwood's heroines must explore their likenesses to and differences from their mothers. They must repeat the mother but with a difference.

The first step for these protagonists is to acknowledge the ways in which patriarchal society encourages them to turn away from their mothers. If men have power, then women are led to believe that they should try to be like men. These power structures are present not just on a socio-political level, but also on a linguistic one. Within a patriarchal system, women are at a disadvantage when playing in Lyotard's language game.
This is, of course, nothing new; these hierarchies are not peculiar to a postmodern world. Instead, they reach back to the very origins of language itself. In her essay "Plato's Hystera" in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray rereads Plato's myth of the cave and finds the origin of masculine ideology there. Women are completely shut out of discourse because their role in reproduction and their site as origin are forgotten. The Father's desire to see himself replicated and the resulting importance of sameness require a turning away from all that is "other," including the mother. The mother must be forgotten; the boy must even forget that he has forgotten, and thus the maternal is doubly buried.

In Plato's myth, it is imperative that man not try to return to the cave, or even remember what is there. He must be completely cut off—so blinded by the Father/sun that he cannot see what is around him. Atwood's heroines are virtually as cut off from their mothers/origins as the men in Plato's myth. They must turn their backs on the sun, return to the cave and the mother, before they can return to the surface without being dazzled by the power of male ideology. This reclaiming of the mother takes place in many of Atwood's novels, including *Lady Oracle* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, but I think it is most apparent and most significant in one of Atwood's earlier novels, *Surfacing*. The novel begins as a search for the father, as the heroine returns to her childhood home to try to locate her missing father. But by the end of the novel, the heroine's

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5She undertakes a similar project in the first essay of the book, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," in which she examines the ways in which masculine ideology is imbedded in Freud's writing on women.
attention has been drawn away from her father and the restricting patriarchy which he represents and is focused instead on her mother. The protagonist rejects phallocentric language and identification with the father, finding a new voice and power through the reclaimed mother.

Irigaray argues that sameness is responsible for the enslavement of the men in the cave and the exclusion of women from discourse. She considers metaphor a way of erasing or reducing difference, a way of pointing toward sameness.

For metaphor—that transport, displacement of the fact that passage, neck, transition have been obliterated—is reinscribed in a matrix of resemblance, family likeness. Inevitably so. Likeness of the cave, likeness(es) within the cave, likeness(es) of the transfer of the cave. Likeness(es) of copies and reflections that have a part to play in the cave. ⁶

As the men are released from their bonds, shown that the shadows they have watched are merely poor copies—fakes—and as they are dragged through the passage and toward the Father, the Idea, the sun, they become enmeshed in this economy of sameness as the cave/mother are forgotten. They see themselves as replicas of the Father; as men, they are "good copies."

But Irigaray points out that although they have been freed from their chains in the cave, they are still imprisoned.

The prison that holds them is the illusion that the evocation and the repetition (of origin) are

equivalent....The end, the unrepresentable Idea, guarantees that replicas and copies are engendered and conform, and the fiction of the being-present masks the ancestry of its reproduction-production with repetition left over and to spare (PH, 256)

For, although the falsity of the shadows in the cave is revealed to the man as he is released from his chains and spun around before being led to the outside, the teacher does not reveal everything. "...In making his demonstration, the teacher only lifts the veil in order that he may subsequently better conceal the motives of desire, the different kinds of tropisms, even the effects of giddiness you get from swinging from the chandelier-Idea" (PH, 271). The teacher does not show the cinematographic apparatus which produces the shadows.

The mother's role in reproduction becomes a silent, memoryless, reflecting one. The back of the womb is the back wall of the cave, which reflects the shadows produced by the magicians with idols/items held in front of a fire. The wall must be blank in order to reflect; and there must be silence in order for the echoes of magicians' voices--which lend truth to the shadows--to be heard (PH, 264). The mother is reduced to a merely reflective role. Rather than having direct influence on the child, she serves as a mirror for the powerful father. Like Joan Foster's Automatic Writing, what the mother presents is pure repetition without alteration.

An ideal of truth is in fact necessary to under-lie and legitimate the metaphor, the figures used to represent the role of women, without voice, without presence. The feminine, the maternal are instantly frozen by the 'like,' the 'as if' of that masculine representation dominated by truth, light, resemblance, identity. By
some dream of symmetry that itself is never ever unveiled. The maternal, the feminine serve (only) to keep up the reproduction-production of doubles, copies, fakes, while any hint of their materialistic elements, of the the womb, is turned into scenery to make the show more realistic (PH, 265).

The mother is not permitted the opportunity to fulfill the obligation to retell because she is not given an actual opportunity to speak. She may not alter what is reflected on and through her, but must be an accurate mirror of the father. She must be pure mimicry, serving as a clean slate for the father’s impressions but also forgetting them as they are made. She is nothing, in and of herself; “her function requires that she herself have no definition” (PH, 307).

This system is continually repeated as men are removed from the cave and drawn toward the Father and sameness. Forced to give up the shadow images and forget not ḥaʃā what is in the cave but also its very existence, their own histories are re-written. “…Man will be taken out of the cave and referred to an other origin—the origin of sameness—an other life, which both predate everything and are still to come, to come back, still to be recollected” (PH, 293).

This, then, is where Atwood’s heroines must be different not only from the father, or men in general, but also from their mothers. They must refuse to serve only as mirrors, with no will, memory, or voice. They must refuse to accept the patriarchal terrorism which traps them in a powerless listening position and speak in their own right. But the stories they must retell are not those projected onto them by the Father, nor even those of the mother. What they must retell is their own version of the mother’s story, using the freedom that they have within the language game to alter what they retell.
This is the way in which they can finally achieve their own personal voices and fulfill the obligation to retell in a strong and effective manner.

Plato's myth is chiefly concerned with men and boys. Women evolve only as an inferior sex, a lesser copy of the Father. In fact, women and animals are supposedly born “from men who by ignorance and lack of virtue have deserved such a disgrace” (PH, 324). But even women are encouraged to turn their backs on maternal origins. “The only way for them to rise in the hierarchy of ‘beings’ will be to transform, as far as it lies in their power, their stupidity and the disordered impetuosity of their sensations into intelligence and reason, hoping in this way to become again what they had once been in their first state: men” (PH, 324). Women must strive for sameness, to be like men; they must reject the mother and difference.

Psychoanalytic models describe a similar breaking away of the girl from the mother. Freud’s early formation of the female oedipus complex is completely symmetrical to that for boys. The little girl rejects the mother, who has no penis and must be to blame for the little girl’s own castration, and turns to the powerful father who might provide her with one. But later formulations allow for some difference between the oedipal complexes of boys and girls.

According to Nancy Chodorow, in The Reproduction of Mothering, this breaking away from the mother takes place later and is less extreme for girls than for boys. The girl remains in a pre-oedipal state longer, during which the bond with the mother is very strong. Then, instead of rejecting the mother completely in favor of
the father as object of choice, the oedipal girl "oscillates between attachment to her mother and father." 7 "Her relationship of dependence, attachment, and symbiosis to her mother continues, and her oedipal (triangular, sexualized) attachments to her mother and then her father are simply added" (RM, 129). The boy's resolution of the oedipus complex is much more final; his repression of his oedipal maternal attachment is more complete than the girl's. He throws off the mother completely in favor of some future heterosexual attachment, fearing castration by the father. But girls do not completely separate themselves from their mothers. "Girls cannot and do not 'reject' their mother and women in favor of their father and men, but remain in a bisexual triangle throughout childhood and puberty. They usually make a sexual resolution in favor of men and their father, but retain an internal emotional triangle" (RM, 140). Instead, they remain in a more complex relationship involving the both parents, both genders.

In Surfacing, the unnamed heroine's turning away from the mother is seen in her attempts to follow her father's rational, logical discourse, both as a child and as an adult searching for her missing father. Upon returning to the island on which she spent childhood summers, she tries on positions other than that which she had normally filled, that of the daughter. She tries looking at the island, and her memories of life on it, through new eyes. She is no longer a child, no longer just someone's daughter or sister. She

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briefly assumes the role of her mother, but she does not know what she is supposed to do, how to fill that role, and she rejects it in favor of her father's. On their first full afternoon on the island, the heroine looks at her lover and the other couple, down on the lake, and feels herself forced into her mother's skin.

Except for the bikini and the color of her hair [Anna] could be me at sixteen, sulking on the dock, resentful at being away from the city . . . . Joe and David, when distance has disguised their faces and their awkwardness, might be my brother and my father. The only place left for me is that of my mother, a problem, what she did in the afternoons between the routines of lunch and supper.8

The mother's position is a mystery to the protagonist; it is a position that is separated, distanced from the others, and it is one which is in some ways mysterious, mysticized. "Impossible to be like my mother, it would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them." (S, 56). The protagonist does not know how to be like her mother because she does not really know her.

The heroine slips into her father's role more easily. She is filled with the survival lore that was so important to him, and finds herself coldly appraising Joe and David's ability to survive in the wilderness, as her father would have. (S, 93) She is critical of their ability to paddle a canoe, chop wood, use a machete to clear a path—all masculine skills valued by her father. She also finds herself performing tasks that in the past would have been her father's,

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8Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972), p. 56. Further references will be made in parentheses in the text, using the abbreviation S.
tasks that within the patriarchal and somewhat oldfashioned world of the island and village were considered unnecessary or unseemly for girls. She baits David's hook, first with worms, then with a frog. "Other people always did that for me," she thinks, as Anna calls her coldblooded (S, 71). The protagonist must also kill the fish which David catches, then clean and fillet it. These traditionally male duties--part of the masculine initiation to the hunt--have now become ones which she performs.

But she is not completely comfortable with taking on her father's role. She kills the flopping fish, then she "feel[s] a little sick, it's because I've killed something, made it dead; but I know that's irrational, killing certain things is all right, food and enemies..." (S, 72). She cannot exist completley in her father's rational, intelligible world. Instead, she slips into the "feminine," sensible one. She takes on these tasks which are traditionally male because she is the only one in the group who knows how, and it is therefore expected of her, but she constantly repeats to herself that she is doing something that someone else usually did. It is as though she is reminding herself that if things were the way they were supposed to be, the way she would prefer they be, she would not have to perform these tasks now.

In her search for her father, the protagonist must even try to think like him. Finding her father is an "archeological problem"; success will require rational and methodical thinking, and a careful and detailed search through the evidence in the cabin (S, 49). After believing initially that her father's drawings are evidence of insanity, she realizes that they are part of a project mapping and
recording Indian rock paintings. She searches the cabin for clues, and explores the paths of the island, and rationally (like her father) realizes the impossibility of four people combing the island thoroughly. She is not carried away with the kind of irrational or emotional behavior that her father would have hated, and realizes that his body could be anywhere—even in the lake—or that he may still be alive.

This uneasy identification with the father becomes, in turn, a kind of entrapment within the confines of a male-dominated language system. In “Plato's Hystera,” Irigaray notes that within the domain of sameness, what is “more” or better is that which is “true, right, clear, reasonable, intelligible, paternal, masculine” and that which is “less” or worse is “fantastic, harmful, obscure, ‘mad,’ sensible, maternal, feminine” (PH, 275). Within this kind of system male discourse is privileged over female; the rational over the irrational. Man, the better copy of the Father, must turn away from the inferior sex, must aim for higher things. “...It is indispensable to his happiness that, as far as the soul is concerned, he strive to keep within his highest part: the immortal part whose seat is the head, separated from the irascible and passionate part by the isthmus-border of the neck” (PH, 326). The head becomes the location of all of those “better” things, while the abdomen—the womb—becomes that of the lesser things.

This head/body division exists in language, and is a major problem, according to the protagonist of Surfacing. “The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck which creates the illusion that they
are separate. The language is all wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them" (S, 87). She wants to deny the power of this dichotomy, which divides not only head/body, rational/irrational, but also masculine/feminine. This is not an attempt to erase all difference, but rather one to deconstruct the rigid boundaries between these traditional categories. But because these binaries are built into the language they are unavoidable, she decides. She is stuck using a language that is as foreign to her as a woman, as the French of the villagers is to her as an English-speaking Canadian. She realizes that "I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own" (S, 88) and this not after her poor attempts to speak French but after she realizes the futility of trying to speak a male-centered language. As vast as the gulf between Canadian French and English is, that between feminine and masculine language is even wider.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist realizes just how enmeshed she is in this phallocentric language. Her brother divides everything into good and bad, even the leeches in the lake (S, 39), and her lovers replace real emotion with words. The word "love" becomes a kind of bluff, a way of saying without necessarily expressing; in her memories, her husband's words "I love you" become a mantra which signifies lying, the emptiness of words.

The protagonist realizes after a few days on the island that she does not feel things, that she has not for a long time. "Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch; but if that was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence. At some point my neck must have closed over,
pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head..." (S, 124). Cut in two by a language dominated by the masculine, she has had to make a choice between head and body, masculine and feminine. The masculine side has taken over; she has turned her back on the maternal, the feminine, in her quest to be like her father. But living only in her head, she is no longer fully alive. "The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or, no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb" (S, 127).

Although she feels that she must be alone in this alienation because it is within her own body, it is really a reaction to a greater kind of dehumanization. David and Anna's marriage, which she initially thinks is so solid, turns out to be a charade: their bond is one of mutual anger and hatred, not love. And Joe expresses dissatisfaction with her and the rest of the world through sullen silence and through his pottery, which is useless because of the gaping holes he slashes into their sides. The protagonist begins to hate the mechanization and sameness embodied in the "American," but which applies to her Canadian friends as well. She sees them as changing into something different from her, not a higher life form but a less human one. "They are evolving, they are halfway to machine, the leftover flesh atrophied and diseased..." (S, 220).

This transformation she sees in others, in society and language as a whole, is toward those very things Plato called masculine: the rational, the intelligible, the head. The rational is taken to an extreme; the earth, body, feeling are left behind in favor of machinery which can be easily duplicated, replicated. It is an
evolution (or regression?) to a more purely masculine state, one in which sameness is privileged, and it is one which she sees taking place in both men and women.

The heroine also undergoes a transformation, a dehumanization, but one in the opposite direction. She is not becoming more modern, more "head," but rather more primal, more body. She becomes a beast of sorts, and therefore on a level which Plato would place even beneath women. (*PH*, 324) This transformation is one toward all the things the others have rejected: feeling, the body, the earth, the sensible, the maternal. Her search for her father has subtly shifted. After calling on her dead parents to return and help her, she realizes that her father's presence is of little help and it is her mother she must seek. "More than ever I needed to find it, the thing she [her mother] had hidden; the power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain" (*S*, 180). She must return to her mother to find the power that she seemed to have had; and in order to do this, she must divest herself of all of the trappings of civilization, including social bonds and male-dominated language.

Significantly, the beginning of the transformation happens when she dives, looking for submerged rock paintings. The search for the painting her father has catalogued leads not to evidence of its existence, but to a direct encounter with death. Throughout the novel, the lake has been her father's territory. It is her father who paddles, fishes, brings the family to the lake in the first place. Irigaray points out that in Plato's *Hystera*, after man is led out of
the cave, he looks first at shadows, then images reflected in water, before looking directly at objects and the stars and moon. This progression, starting with shadows as in the cave, moves from things reflected on the mother toward the sun. The back of the cave and the surface of the earth, on which shadows are cast, and the surface of the water which reflects mirror images all represent the forgotten and forgetting mother. Her presence is hidden behind the images produced on her by the father/sun. "Water serves as a reflecting screen and not as a reminder of the depths of the mother; it sends back the image of the sun, of men, of things, even of the prisoner-child" (PH, 289). The reflectivity of the water's surface prevents the man from looking into its depths. Thus, it is not until the heroine dives, breaking the surface and the mirror effect, that she can begin her journey back to the mother. Like a return to the womb, she moves away from the father and back toward her maternal origins. Diving keeps her from being dazzled by the sun.

The dive ends up a confrontation with death. "It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (S, 167). This vision becomes the key to unravelling the past; it destroys the web of false memories she has spun for herself. The memory of her wedding day which appears earlier in the novel turns out to be fictitious: it is actually a memory of having an abortion, a memory she has repressed. The fictions break down slowly. Lying in the canoe she tries to identify the picture in her head.
...At first I thought it was my drowned brother...but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all....Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise. I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills. . . (S, 167)

But even this ghastly memory of a fetus in a jar turns out to be false. She has created the image to enclose death, encapsulate it and keep it away from her. It is at this point that the "true story" (or as close to one as we will ever get from this unreliable narrator) comes out, and she relives the memory of the abortion.

This abortion is an overwhelming source of guilt and grief in the protagonist's life. She feels it is yet another way in which she has been complicit in her own dehumanization. "He said I should do it....He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said No but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer" (S, 169-70). She has sided with "them"--the men, and all those who are half-way evolved to machine--against life. It is as though the dive has released the death which she had carried with her ever since the abortion, "layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl..." (S, 170).

This release of death becomes her way back to her mother. This trip back in time and evolution necessarily involves a rejection of language, for the problems she faces are inherent in the very language itself. She realizes that "Language divides us into fragments," (S, 172) and in her desire to be whole, she must reject words. Speaking with the others becomes more and more difficult.
"I had to concentrate in order to talk to him, the English words seemed imported, foreign; it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other" (S, 177).

Convinced that she is ovulating, she has sex with Joe in an attempt to fill the void left by the aborted child. "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it had been prisoned for so long" (S, 193). But she vows to herself that she will raise this baby differently, in an attempt to prevent it from ending up a machine like the others, trapped in a language and world dominated by male ideology. She will not let the obstetricians strap her down and claim the power of birthing for their own; she will bear the child alone, like an animal. Most importantly, she "will never teach it any words" (S, 193), because within them is found the male hierarchy she is trying to reject.

It is at this point that the protagonist's actual transformation begins. Refusing to leave the island with the others, she invokes the spirits of her dead parents. The spirits lead her to reject all of the trappings of civilization. Clothes, the cabin and garden all become forbidden to her, as the spirits gradually wean her away from man-made objects. Language becomes completely incomprehensible to her, as she returns to a kind of pre-Oedipal state. Symbolic language, which is connected to the Father, is rejected in favor of the semiotic and communion with the mother.9 This transformation becomes a kind of ritual purification, during which she turns from a

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modern woman, like Anna, "an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere....locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit, or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing goes out" (S, 198) into a "natural woman" (S, 228). The protagonist feels the fetus growing inside her, feeding on her. It is this recuperation and repetition of her own motherhood that finally allows her to get back to her mother. She sees her mother's spirit feeding the blue jays as she had when alive, and realizes her mother has been near all the time. "At first I feel nothing except a lack of surprise: that is where she would be, she has been standing there all along" (S, 217). The spirit vanishes, but the protagonist feels her presence there still, and believes that her mother is one of the jays.

Thus, the protagonist's return to nature, to a more natural state without social bonds, manufactured articles or language, is necessary in order for her to return to her own origins. Without language she can achieve a closer bond with the mother. This reclaiming of the maternal gives her the power to be a mother again in her own right. But, in order to break the cycle which privileges rational, male discourse, she will try to raise her child differently, using a power she can only get through her mother. This will be her way of speaking, of fulfilling the obligation to retell. Through her child she will retell a story that is altered by an infusion of maternal energy, and hopefully bypass or at least stretch the limitations imposed upon her by male ideology.

This goal of raising a child in a different way cannot be achieved, or will have no effect, if done on the island. Although rejecting society was a necessary step before she could
successfully return to her maternal origins, the protagonist realizes that she must now return. In order to be successful in her attempts to alter the language, or the games that people play with it, she must work within the system—her moves must be made within the language game. As a “natural woman,” dirty, naked and without language, she will not be understood. She knows that those who are half-way evolved to machine will not see her as a new kind of being, but as an insane one. “To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity” would exclude her and such exclusion would prevent her from achieving her goal (S, 228). She cannot remain in this state. Her hope lies in her baby, “the time-traveler, the primeval one who will have to learn” (S, 229), and that hope is that “it might be the first one, the first true human” (S, 230). She will return with Joe, but only so she can raise her child in some new manner in an attempt to resist the patriarchal confines of society and language.

A similar reclaiming of the maternal takes place in Lady Oracle. As Joan comes to terms with the necessity of speaking, of fulfilling the obligation to retell regardless of fear of self-revelation, she must come to terms with her own mother. Although throughout her later life it is men that she strives to please and who stifle her by refusing to listen, in her early life it is her mother who is the greatest offender. Before Joan can return to any kind of normal life, before she can rejoin the life she has escaped or create a new one, she must reclaim the maternal bond that she has been denying all these years.
Throughout her life, Joan allows her mother to play only one role—that of the villain. Like the characters in her Gothic novels, her mother is allowed no complexities of character, no complicated emotions or motivations. When Joan realizes that people are more complex than this, through her relationships with men, she is confused and frightened. But even when she has begun to accept this, she will not let it apply to her mother. She has difficulty thinking of her mother as a mixture of good and bad.

Joan’s mother’s spirit haunts her throughout the novel, both while her mother is alive and after she has died. When Joan moves to London as a teenager, she cuts off all communication with her mother, sending only brief postcards to her father at work. But the spirit which had first appeared at the Spiritualist Chapel—her mother in a Forties suit and her ever-present white gloves—follows her to London. When it appears in Arthur’s flat, she quickly rearranges the furniture, a trick which Leda Sprott had assured her confuses the spirits. She sees her mother’s spirit as invasive, prying, judgmental; she never considers that her mother may miss her, or be worried about her. Joan must learn to see her mother’s spirit not as a haunting, vindictive one, but as one which may also express love and concern which has been repressed.

When the spirit appears again after Joan has faked her own death, Joan is less apprehensive. “She stretched out her arms to me, she wanted me to come with her; she wanted us to be together....She was smiling at me now, with her smudged face, could she see I loved her? I loved her but the glass was between us...I longed to console her” (LO, 362). Joan finally realizes that the spirit has haunted her
not because her mother would not let go of her, but because she would not let go of her mother. She even recognizes her mother in her own poetry. "She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower" (LO, 363). Joan assumes a share of the blame for her own unhappiness, and even feels a sort of responsibility for her mother's unhappiness. "How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. What was the charm, what would set her free?" (LO, 363).

This return to the origin for Joan is different from that of the heroine in *Surfacing* because it involves not just a return to the mother, but also a final breaking of the maternal bond. In this rethinking of her relationship with her mother, Joan must become reacquainted with her. She must wade through her own memories to see not only how her mother hurt and stifled her, but how her mother was hurt and stifled by a life which seemed to have no place for her. Trapped by an unplanned pregnancy and a society which severely limited the roles she can play, her mother had become a bored and bitter woman. Rather than fighting tradition and male hierarchies, she bought into the privileging of sameness and worked to make herself and her daughter fit in with middle class norms. Her carefully decorated living room--not better than the neighbor's, but equally as nice--and the Brownies and dance classes she enrolled Joan in all reveal the importance she placed on appearances, in being the same as those around her. Joan's mother's destructive alcoholism is the outward sign of her frustration and feelings of being useless, having no place in the world. Joan must come to see
her mother as a person with fears, desires, and complexities before she can understand her as a complicated, and fallible, human being.

This newfound understanding of her mother allows Joan to feel love for her, for the first time since early childhood. But it also makes clear to her that in order for her to go on with life, to feel her own self to be worth something, she must cut the too-strong tie between mother and daughter. She must resist the impulse toward sameness which ruled her mother, and allow herself to be different. She realizes that she has obsessed over pleasing her mother, and must stop in order to be healthy. "My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying" (LO, 363). Joan realizes that it is her own expectations that are the problem, not those of others, and that the only one she need please is herself. This is not, ultimately, a selfish move, but one which allows her to find freer expression, bring her fear of exposure under control, and give her the confidence to take her place in the language game. Her return to the origin and reclaiming of the maternal lend her the strength she needs to cut the umbilical cord still joining her to her mother. This act--simultaneously a recuperating of and a breaking away from the mother--enables her to accept and fulfill the demand that she enter the language game and participate more fully, both as listener and speaker.
Works Cited


