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ATWOOD'S BODY POLITIC:
A TAXONOMY OF GENDER REPRESENTATION

In the 1980s and 90s a gap appeared in the rank of feminist literary theorists. On one side were the essentialists, and on the other the constructivists, and between them lay a woman's body. Some French theorists maintained that woman's writing was a bodily experience, not divorced from the body as the post-enlightenment tradition would have it. "Write yourself. Your body must be heard," said Hélène Cixous (Cixous 2001: 2043). In contrast, there was Monique Wittig's non-essentialist stance, while Judith Butler gave the literary world gender as construction, even as performance.

Long before Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and *Gender Trouble* (1990), Margaret Atwood had been deconstructing gender forms in her work. Starting with *The Edible Woman* in 1969, *Surfacing* (1972), *Cat's Eye* (1982), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and including the more recent works, *Moral Disorder* (2006) and *The Tent* (2006), Atwood's writing demonstrated that gender is, as Butler affirms, a cumulative performance communicated to society at large through a system of socially-constituted signs in behaviour, dress, and language, including the silent languages of the body. This paper will propose a taxonomy of gender performance as evident in a range of Atwood's fiction, particularly in the early fiction, where the social and political tussle over women's bodies is powerfully enacted.

Atwood's first-person narratives construct the world as a text read from the perspective of the body with a frankness that was refreshing for its time. Her narrators name unnameable body parts, while registering a 20th-century dissatisfaction with the body gaps of earlier literature. The protagonist of *Surfacing*, for example, challenges the flat constitution of the heroine's body in fairy tales:

> The [fairy tales] never revealed the essential things about them [i.e. princesses], such as what they ate or whether their towers and dungeons had bathrooms. It was as though their bodies were pure air. It wasn't Peter Pan's ability to fly that made him incredible for me, it was the lack of an outhouse near his underground burrow. (Atwood 1994: 53-54)

Here the surprising redefinitions of what is "essential" establish a naïve, retrospective point of view. This is perceptual sophistication presented as obtuseness, or even social and literary retardation. Atwood's narrators have had

childhoods of perpetual puzzlement, unable to take anything for granted about language, literature or the body.

One might expect this to translate into biologically frank prose. In the vogue for confessional writing at the time (e.g. Mailer, Roth, Miller, Jong), the body played a starring role; as one critic says, "contemporary women protagonists are positively garrulous about their intimate personal histories. Everything must and can be told" (Coward 1997: 29). Women writers such as Erika Jong and Maxine Hong Kingston insisted on their access to a complete--if "unladylike"--language of the body (Showalter 1990: 572). The Jong type of body language is occasionally uttered by characters such as Anna in *Surfacing*. The heavily made-up friend of the protagonist is coy about four-letter words, and her usage is not condoned, but presented as part of her insecurity with her image and role. In Atwood, however, one sees an alien frankness when Marian from *The Edible Woman* visits her pregnant friend, Clara:

> Clara's body is so thin that her pregnancies are always bulgingly obvious, and now in her seventh month she looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon. ... She lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower. (Atwood 1978: 31)

This grotesque image of a pregnant woman left women readers suspecting that this might be misogynistic critique. Certainly, the mothering body recedes through these organic metaphors into the realms of irrationality and non-being that Cixous identifies among the categories to which the feminine is relegated by patriarchal discourse. However, placing Clara in the context of other maternal bodies in Atwood's oeuvre (the pregnant older mother in "The Art of Cooking and Serving," for example) adds nuance to the black humour of this picture.

This kind of metaphorical extravagance can be seen as a form of irreverence that counters the presentation of motherhood as sacred ritual in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the fundamentalist state of Gilead has made containers out of women's bodies: "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (Atwood 1985: 107). Here Atwood criticises the fundamentalist rationalisation of biological destiny, which makes female bodies into sacral vessels which can be manipulated through taboos and sacrifices in the name of divine power. Atwood is careful, however, to balance this critique with an analysis of western culture's objectivization of the female body. As Offred leafs through the women's magazines in the Commander's office, a link emerges between commodification through the discourses of fashion and the reproductive commodification of Gilead. 1980s North America interpellated women's bodies in the name of health as well as fashion: breast feeding, for instance, became mandatory—failure to breast feed, a social crime. The Handmaids, as the plot clarifies, are merely the daughters of baby-boomers, their bodies co-opted for a different struggle.

Subject to an essentialist reading of the female body, Offred becomes repulsed by her own body: "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at

something that determines me so completely" (Ibid. 72-73). Boa-constrictor Clara is also determined by her body and its pregnant state, but she represents a parodic inversion of the maternal vessel. With these tropes, Atwood challenges a meta-narrative about the madonna role for women; wrapped in Marian's metaphors, Clara may be Medusa or mangel-wurzel, but never madonna.

Further grotesque bodies appear through the naive perceptions of Elaine in *Cat's Eye*. To her child's eyes, women's bodies are both foreign and repulsive: "I haven't thought much about grown-up women's bodies before. But now these bodies are revealed in their true, upsetting light: alien, and bizarre, hairy, squashy, monstrous" (Atwood 1990: 97). Atwood's female body is not the synthetic product peddled by the media, but a complex, warty construct and is viewed by the girl characters of *Cat's Eye* with double fear because it represents a metamorphosis that they will be expected to embrace. Joan, in *Lady Oracle*, hoards her similar knowledge of the body as "the secret that I alone know: my mother was a monster" (Atwood 1998: 67).

These early extravagant, seemingly misogynistic tropes signal a return to an almost child-like way of perceiving the adult body, from a position of difference, but not of complete otherness, since the child perceives the threat of mutation in its own future. At the same time, this grotesque body hovers close to the caegory of the abject—the physically and politically unspeakable realm for which Atwood begins to provide a discourse enabling projection as a body politic. That such monstrous construction begins in girlhood signals the near-impossibility of retrieving any essential, pre-cultural body for women, despite the trends of "naturalness" in fashion, diet and lifestyle that marked these decades.

An important part of Atwood's body politic is linguistic. Twentieth century linguistics progressively revealed the sexist nature of language (e.g. Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* 1980), and Atwood's early prose challenges several key terms to expose the arbitrary nature of their signification. The word *lady* provides a useful example. Here is the protagonist from *Surfacing* seeking her self and her past in the family scrapbooks:

> The next scrapbook was mine . . . but there were no drawings at all, just illustrations cut from magazines and pasted in. They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modelling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils. A lady was what you . . . said at school when they asked you what you were going to be when you grew up, you said "A lady" or "A mother," either one was safe; and it wasn't a lie, I did want to be those things. On some of the pages were women's dresses clipped from mail order catalogues, no bodies in them. (Atwood 1994: 90-91)

Having established a socially constituted image of the lady, Atwood demonstrates how a linguistic construct can signal derogation, as David accosts the protagonist irreverently: "Hey lady . . . what're you doing in my bed? You a customer or something?" (Ibid. 91). The era in which *lady* meant what is represented in the clippings lies in the past. The word has become almost a term of abuse, which David uses sarcastically. His question suggests that the protagonist

may be looking for sex—that the lady is a tramp—and even connotes, in the phrase "or something," that she might be selling it. Sixties slang has subverted the distinction between prostitute and lady, revealing that the distinction was based on a surface with little underneath, like a constumed body with no undergarments, or, more troublingly, no body at all. The bodiless garments from the sales catalogue assert the intrinsic emptiness of the 'lady' category—the body is irrelevant to such categorisation. "Lady" is a socally convenient construct, one that does not depend radically on the body. Ladyhood becomes a form of drag. Atwood thus presents a schema revealing the constructed nature of a defining gender word of the day.

Surfacing, then, is an early Atwood novel in which an extreme negation of the female body, almost an *ab*negation, marks the author's reaction to previous cultural and political events in North America—for example, the advent of the contraceptive pill or Roe vs. Wade. Culture in the late twentieth century was reshaping the female body, moving it away from biological determinism but towards a precarious existence as a layered construct, almost a "chemical slot machine" (Atwood 1994:80). This constitutes one meaning behind the act of "surfacing" in Atwood's title.

In performing a socially acceptable gender masquerade, Atwood's female characters—particularly those from the pre-1985 novels—often exhibit split perceptions of the body and its relation to the self. These characters all experience a form of divorce from either their names, or their bodies, or the discourse of media femininity. The split in perception produces the contradictions we have established—that women's bodies can be both fleshy and insubstantial, present and absent, named and unnameable.

In order to negotiate these contradictions constructively, I propose a taxonomy of textual strategies for representing the body in Atwood's fiction. Starting from Cixous's list of categories of relegation for the feminine—lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness and non-being—I have isolated six roughly corresponding narrative techniques for represention, under-representation or non-representation of the female body.

The constructed nature of gender in these texts necessitates a range of techniques: metaphorical, metonymic, iconic and synecdoche-based. The first technique, camouflage**,** is a metonymical form of construction, where the body is represented by items linked to it by cultural convention. These are often clothes, as in the case of the protagonist of "Hurricane Hazel"**:**

> The year . . . I . . . entered high school, . . . I took to sewing my own clothes, out of patterns I bought at Eaton's. The clothes never came out looking like the pictures on the pattern envelopes; also they were too big. I must have been making them the size I wanted to be. (Atwood 1984: 38-39)

The technique is given its name by Ainsley, the anti-heroine of *The Edible Woman*: "Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration" (Atwood 1978: 6). The female body represents itself as female by donning a culturally-approved costume. Atwood also clarifies that bodily masquerade can be permanent, as in the case of Lesje in *Life Before Man*, who goes

clothes shopping: "She flips through the racks, looking for something that might become her, something she might become" (Atwood 1980: 18). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan acknowledges the camouflage value of hair: "[H]air in the female was regarded as more important than either talent or the lack of it. . .. They could trace my hair much more easily than they could trace me" (Atwood 1998: 11). At least this protagonist still asserts a "me" behind the camouflage of red hair.

Such typical protagonists reflect a prevailing sense that women are cultural constructions, continually engaged in impersonating themselves with the help of western commodities. Cross-dressing theorists such as Garber support this position, maintaining that "womanliness *is* mimicry, *is* masquerade" (Garber 1997: 166).

In contrast, the masquerade solidifies in the case of Anna in *Surfacing*, who gets up early to put on makeup before the others at the cottage are awake (Atwood 1994: 43-44). This incident points to another meaning of the word "surfacing": not so much coming up from beneath, but putting a surface on the top. Being a "lady" meant a smooth, gendered act of surfacing. This is the performance of gender that most early Atwood heroines are not good at and eventually look beneath, seeking an essential body that becomes progressively less available. For those characters whose sense of self stretches cultural categories, the surface remains camouflage and being female a risky act performed in enemy territory.

There are various narrative techniques for lifting these carefully-crafted gender surfaces, usually achieved with Atwood's metamorphic language. Elizabeth in *Life Before Man* provides clear examples of both surface camouflage and female interior: "I want a shell like a sequined dress, made of silver nickels and dimes and dollars overlapping like the scales of an armadillo. Impermeable;" and "Most people do imitations; she herself has been doing imitations for years" (Atwood 1980: 3; 199).

A second metonymic technique can be called erasure. Here is Atwood's narrator describing the character Marylynn in "Bluebeard's Egg":

> Marylynn is tall and elegant, and makes anything she is wearing seem fashionable. Her hair is prematurely grey and she leaves it that way. She goes in for loose blouses in cream-coloured silk, and eccentric scarves gathered from interesting shops and odd corners of the world, thrown carelessly around her neck and over one shoulder. (Atwood 1983:136)

Following a rapid glance at the physical body (two adjectives: *tall* and *grey,* two nouns, a bit of *neck* and one *shoulder*) the description detours through clothing, and manner. Marylynn is all constructed. Her body almost does not exist inside the cultural trappings. Thus the plot surprise when Ed is seen fondling Marylynn's ass—the metonymically-constructed woman of that class and age shouldn't have an ass, but a body missing in action, as in the paper cut-outs from the child's scrapbook of *Surfacing.*

With the strategy of distortion, we move to a set of techniques based on metaphor. Atwood often has her heroines experience literal bodily change in shape or size. In a tone of calm absurdity reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, the female body shrinks and grows in uncontrollable ways. The best example is the fat-to-thin

story in *Lady Oracle*: "There, staring me in the face, was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives; it spread on forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish-white, with veins meandering across it like rivers. It was the size of three ordinary thighs" (Atwood 1998: 126). Joan is caught in one of the abject, unlovable bodies that Butler theorizes at the level of the unarticulable. However, Atwood's plot awards Joan an escape from the body, one that mirrors the kind of escape granted by the romance fiction that Joan reads and writes: "I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it" (Atwood 1998: 33). Only by embracing narrative techniques from both pre- and post-realist writing can the narrative successfully transcend the body, countering a gendered construct by the post-modern deconstruction of a parallel literary construct.

The grotesque, uncontrollable body intrudes, however, into the perceptions of even Atwood's more realistic heroines, as with Marian from *The Edible Woman*:

> Marian gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoon: herself upside down, with a huge torso narrowing to a pinhead at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled, then receded. She felt serene. (Atwood 1978: 148)

Similar distortions occupy the field in children's drawings— *Life before Man*, *Surfacing*— where naive graphic representations stand for perceptual distortion. A more sophisticated symbolic visual distortion occurs in *Cat's Eye*, where the artist Elaine Risley paints Mrs. Smeath in a variety of monstrous guises that stand for visionary truths.[1]

A special form of distortion can be called dissolution, which occurs with sufficient frequency to merit a category of its own. Atwood links the motif to the world of current science, from which she draws many of her tropes:

> All the molecular materials now present in the earth and its atmosphere were present at the creation of the earth itself. . .. These molecular materials have merely combined, disintegrated, recombined. Although a few molecules and atoms have escaped into space, nothing has been added.
> Lesje contemplates this fact, which she finds soothing. She is only a pattern. She is not an immutable object. There are no immutable objects. Some day she will dissolve. (Atwood 1980: 153)

Significantly, Lesje's meditation is triggered by a child's drawing of a girl. The visual blobbiness and blurring of the child's construct belong in the category of distortion, but morph into dissolution through the lens of adulthood.

Dissolution sometimes has a more domestic face: "Marian dreams that her feet are beginning to dissolve like melting jelly and that she has to put on rubber boots, only to find that the ends of her fingers are becoming transparent" (Atwood 1978: 39). Dissolution terminates in the unspooling of a life in the recent "Life Stories," where a flippant narrative voice deliberately destroys the constructed album of life memories (Atwood 2006: 3-5). "Adolescence can be discarded too,

with its salty tanned skin, its fecklessness and bad romance and leakages of seasonal blood... . I'm getting somewhere now, I'm feeling lighter, I'm coming unstuck from scrapbooks, from albums, from diaries and journals, from space, from time" (Ibid. 4-5).

The technique based on synecdoche is dismemberment. Atwood's female bodies tend to appear in pieces. Sometimes this is presented as a distortion of perception, as when Ainsley appears as a pair of naked legs in *The Edible Woman* (Atwood 1978: 117). The dismemberment motif reappears in the recent story "The Art of Cooking and Serving," where the baby's layette is knitted with significant parts and limbs missing (Atwood 2006: 15-16). The technique both captures psychological fears and mirrors cultural commodification of female body parts.

The sixth narrative technique is displacement, a trope that uses iconicity, where the body remains unrepresented while its image is displaced onto something else. Such iconic representation is most identifiable in items such as the Barbara Ann Scott doll from the protagonist's past in *Surfacing* "[W]hen I was ten I believed in glamour, it was a kind of religion and these were my icons" (Atwood 1994: 42). More grotesquely, there is the sponge-cake woman in *The Edible Woman,* which functions for the protagonist as a means of clarifying her reading of the consumer transaction of marriage.

These conceits proliferate in Atwood's early fiction, where, like other writers, she replicates familiar antithetical categories, what Terry Eagleton calls the "binary habit of thought" at which post-structuralism takes aim: flesh/mind; solid/mutable; proper/improper; norm/deviation; sane/mad, and authority/obedience (Eagleton 1983: 133). These narrative methods can be seen as symptoms of the ruling conventions of representation of the feminine. Woman is chaos, darkness and non-being—the figure that marks the margin and recedes into it (Moi 1997: 112). As such, Atwood's body politic appears conservative, merely the recognition of conventional ways of representing bodies and selves.

However, one can also see Atwood's body politic as a marker of changing cultural representation. Like the pathologies (hysteria, anorexia, agoraphobia) that Susan Bordo reads as women's strategies for inserting their bodies permissibly into public discourse (Bordo 1993: 2365), Atwood's six rhetorical techniques permit voice to the unspeakable—not in medical discourse, but in the space of literary play. In appropriating the language and concepts of science (molecules, boa-constrictors, protective coloration), Atwood re-examines the performance of femininity in response to the shifting cultural focus on bodies of all kinds.

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1 For a discussion of meaning in Risley's artwork, see Gadpaille, M. 1993. Odalisques in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 8, 221-226.

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SUMMARY

ATWOOD'S BODY POLITIC: A TAXONOMY OF GENDER REPRESENTATION

This article applies Butler's concepts of gender as construction and performance to a selection of fiction by Margaret Atwood. By using binary categories inspired by the theory of Eagleton and Cixous, the author proposes a taxonomy of narrative techniques employed by Atwood to embed the female body into cultural and political discourse.

KEYWORDS: Margaret Atwood, gender, female body in fiction.

BRIEF CV

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