# Signature

A JOURNAL OF THEORY &
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Theory, *Therapy*, and the Text

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"That Is to Say a Vision:"
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Nichole Brossard's *These Our Mothers*

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**EDITORIAL** 1

**DIANNE CHISHOLM** 3
The High Stakes of Feminism *in* Psychoanalysis:
Theory, *Therapy*, and the Text

**J.M. KERTZER** 26
A Poetics of Intimacy: Michael Ondaatje's
*Coming Through Slaughter*

**EDWARD PARKINSON** 45
Coming Through the Spider's Web:
Ondaatje's Murderous Metaphors

**ANNE RAINE** 62
"That Is to Say a Vision:" Distance and the Differing Eye
in Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers*

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# Editorial

It is with great regret that we have to announce that this will be the last issue of *Signature*. The major factor contributing to the closing of the journal is, as might be expected, money. During the last three years, *Signature* has existed on the strength of grants from the University of Victoria — and we would like to take this final opportunity to acknowledge our gratitide for the generosity and helpfulness of the University, especially Vice-President Academic Sam Scully. But the long-term continuance of the journal was always dependent on support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In December of 1991, our application for SSHRCC funding was again turned down. We believe that our readers will be interested in the rationale given for this decision:

> The journal [*Signature*] seems to have a unique niche in the spectrum of Canadian learned journals: it publishes articles on Canadian literature informed by contemporary theoretical perspectives. It is produced at a reasonably low cost through the use of text-top [sic] publishing. The editorial management also seems efficient.
>
> The journal includes a balance between established scholars and junior scholars. The proportion of contibutions by women scholars is also very good. The potential service to Canadian scholars therefore appears to be good. However, the outreach of the magazine is not commensurate with this service as yet, although advertising campaigns have been carried out. The number of subscriptions remains relatively small.
>
> On the basis of the reservations expressed above, the committee regretted being unable to recommend a grant.

In a somewhat perverse way, we feel gratified by this assessment. It acknowledges that *Signature* achieved, in the course of its short run, many of its major objectives: to provide a "unique niche" among Canadian journals; to afford a plat-

form for "articles on Canadian literature informed by contemporary theoretical perspectives"; and to open this discussion to a "good ... balance" between established and junior scholars, and between men and women. In all these ways, we are grateful for the Council's acknowledgement of our success.

At the same time, of course, we find the conclusions of the committee deeply ironic and disappointing. We realize the very severe funding restrictions under which SSHRCC operates, but we do feel that they are rather grasping at straws in trying to find a reason to turn us down. Of course our subscription rate is low: that is to be expected for any new journal trying to establish itself in the present economic climate. Any of our readers who has tried to order a new periodical at her own university library will be familiar with the problem. But how is this problem overcome?—by persistence, and by advertising. Both of which need money. So *Signature*, like many other journals, is caught in the classic Catch-22 situation: we need more money to attract more subscribers, but since we can't attract subscribers we can't get more money. This dilemma is sad, but scarcely unusual. We have struggled with it for the past three years; we cannot struggle with it any longer.

We would like to thank all those who have been associated with *Signature* over its brief career: the members of our editorial board; all those who have submitted manuscripts, whether published or not; all those who have read and commented on manuscripts for us; and above all you, our readers and subscribers, "relatively small" though you are. We hope and trust that someone else, somewhere else, will succeed where we have failed, and that the enterprise of *Signature* will find another "unique niche."

Evelyn Cobley    Smaro Kamboureli    Stephen Scobie

# The High Stakes of Feminism *in* Psychoanalysis: Theory, *Therapy*, and the Text

Dianne Chisholm

> Psychoanalysis is the theory of a therapy. The therapy, in its purest and most "original" form, consists of a "talking cure." What, we may start by asking, could comprise a therapy in the interchange of words? ... In order to understand the relation between therapeutic and theoretical discourse, we must find out how it became clear to Freud that the therapeutic situation created the conditions for a cure of a major disease, and hence how Freud located all the necessary conditions for this cure in the necessary conditions of language (Forrester 1).

> ...the psychoanalytic theoretical and clinical intervention into hysteria suffers, in its own turn, from the very disgust with the body that it is attempting to cure. Furthermore, this disgust within a hystericized discourse develops a range of symptoms, from a theoretical avoidance of the dimension of bodily movement to a highly problematic aversion to feminine desire. The jouissance of psychoanalytic theories of hysteria is nowhere more clearly marked than in Freud's notion of penis envy and in Lacan's notion of the exclusivity of "phallic jouissance" (Lukacher xx).

To introduce the subject of my paper, I should like to consider two slightly defamiliarizing words in the title: the preposition "in" stands out against the more popular conjunction "and" of the titles of such well-known works as Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism;* Jane Gallop's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction; Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (eds. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof) and *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (ed. Teresa M. Brennan). "Therapy" inserts an additional and somewhat awkward term into a critical inquiry that usually confines its discussion to theory and the text. I include these words to signify feminism's entry and intervention into psychoanalytic theorizing and text analysis/production. I strongly encourage anyone interested in the late history of the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis to read the

prefaces to the above listed works and to note (as the authors and editors do) that the "and" of the titles is not merely a fortuitous grammatical conjunction but a politic choice of trope to figure an interaction—or *inter-implication*. Yet, even when qualified by the addition of "between," this "and" signifies a certain exclusivity maintained by feminism for the sake of preserving a critical distance. What I would like to indicate by replacing *"in"* for "and" in my title is that when the stakes are high enough, when they involve *healing transformations*, the entry of feminism into psychoanalysis is no longer constrained by academic issues of territoriality. The feminist who would treat the social and cultural repression of women enters into psychoanalysis as therapeutically-motivated as any analyst, indeed she might become an analyst. But for the feminist in psychoanalysis, therapy is not a mere matter of curing; in her case, "curing" entails changing a patriarchally-instituted structural unconscious. I would go so far as to argue that feminism's entry into psychoanalysis could mobilize its return to clinical and ontological inquiry, deconstructing en route a reactionary opposition between politics and discipline.

*Healing-changing:* why should this emphasis be understood as an intervention into a theory and practice that grew out of a concern to understand and treat hopelessly misunderstood cases of psychical dysfunction? My thinking has been influenced by Catherine Clément whose boldly sustained criticism in *Les fils de Freud sont fatigués [The Weary Sons of Freud]* (1978) protests the turn she sees psychoanalysis taking away from cultural politics and therapeutic responsibility in favor of promoting, after the style of Lacan's followers, a new genre of *belles lettres:*

> If I didn't truthfully think psychoanalysis was a fundamental social activity whose history and evolution have an impact on our culture, on its developments and the politics that reflect them and that sometimes influence them, what would I care about making these criticisms? I wouldn't care at all.
>
> But strange enough, I have a feeling I'm not writing alone. Still more strangely, the people who advocate this kind of criticism are female psychoanalysts rather than male psychoanalysts.... [I]nstead of serving us up an elitist and literary image of [psychoanalysis], [these women] live up to what it *does*. That is, healing; that is, changing life; that is, giving the individual and thus the collective means to live better (Clément 30).

To live up to what it does: "healing; changing life." This reputed concern of women psychoanalysts reflects that of feminist psychoanalytic theorists and critics who, while their primary medium of intervention may be textual, resist cultivating an aesthetic cut off from politics and pain. There are and have been women engaged in *writing* psychoanalysis who, I contend, introduce a political therapy into textual strategies that are designed to dispel and subvert the disabling power which patriarchal seduction, misogynist identification, and hysterical phantasy may exercise on women readers. By the end of this article, I hope to show how feminism's stakes in the therapeutic potential of a text-mediated analysis urgently calls for a different critical activity than that of the belle-lettristic tradition, an activity we might call "feminist critical theor(ap)y."

### *the idealization of psychoanalytic literary criticism*

As a practising analyst, Clément criticizes her discipline for lowering its stakes beyond the admissible by going literary. Where then do critics in the field of literary studies set the stakes of psychoanalysis? Do they, conversely, psychoanalyse the practice of reading literature? With therapeutic and political, as well as aesthetic, impact? For an answer, we might first turn to Peter Brooks since he is perhaps the most outspoken advocate of critical engagement between literature and psychoanalysis. In his instructive essay, "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism," Brooks pointedly asks: "What is *at stake* in the current uses of psychoanalysis?" (147). Concerned about the "status," "legitimacy," and "force" that psychoanalysis may claim when imported into literary studies, about the "bad name" psychoanalytic literary criticism has made for itself as a dogmatic hermeneutics, and about the "sterility" of its explanatory themes, Brooks defends his belief in a critical activity that promises to discover the ontological structure common to both aesthetics and epistemology: "we continue to dream of a convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism because we sense that there ought to be, that there must be, some correspondence between literary and psychic process, that aesthetic structure and form... must somehow coincide with the psychic structures and operations they both

evoke and appeal to.... [P]sychoanalysis can lead us to models for literary study that generate new insight..." (148, 152).

Brooks' stakes in human self-knowledge are admittedly high, but how psychoanalytic are they? How politic? Even when so passionately argued for, the stakes of a psychoanalytic literature are not necessarily those of feminism, of healing-change. Readers in search of a model for feminist psychoanalytic literary criticism might reconsider Brooks in light of what Clément has remarked about male practitioners of a belle-lettristic analysis, reflecting on the therapeutic and political limitations of his "idea." His belief that (the reading of) literary form mimes/constitutes the structuring of the human mind and that a formalist or structuralist aesthetics is warranted by the new phenomenological insight it generates is perhaps more particularly Kantian than Freudian. Yet, Brooks grounds this belief in his reading of "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in Freud's claim that the creation of fantasy is "akin to creative writing," and, more particularly, in the claim that aesthetic pleasure is structurally equivalent to "forepleasure" (150).[1] From these claims, he extrapolates an *apologia* for psychoanalytic literary criticism based on the "need" to uncover the "erotics of form":

> When we begin to unpack the components of forepleasure, we may find a whole erotics of form, which is perhaps what we most need if we are to make formalism serve an understanding of the human functions of literature. Forepleasure would include the notion of both delay and advance in the textual dynamic, the creation of [a] "dilatory space".... We seek to advance through this space toward the discharge of the end, yet all the while we are perversely delaying... put[ting] off the promised end... perhaps to assure its greater significance.... A neo-formalist psychoanalytic criticism could do worse than undertake the study of the various forms of the "fore" in forepleasure, developing a tropology of the perversities... (150-51).

Brooks proceeds with the assertion that, "given the basic temporal structure of fantasy and of the literary text," and *apropos* of "the way we create the illusion of creating a space of meaning within the process of ongoing temporality," we might best describe this "erotics of form" as "clock-teasing" (152).

Now, while Brook's playful phenomenology evades charges of "phallomorphism,"[2] providing a model for reading female as well as male textual bodies, its sexual indifference actually promises no more than a "disinterested" study of forms of mind. What really seems to be at stake here is the extension of "Freud's Master Plot" which Brooks outlines in an earlier essay, and which is seminal to his idea of a psychoanalytic literary criticism. In a close reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* a text that, as he understands it, "is not merely metapsychology [but] also mythopoesis" (294), Brooks attempts to demonstrate how Freud's notion of *détour,* the binding of desire that leads to a delay in the pleasurable discharge of drive energy, may be used as a structural model to reframe the purely formalistic, Aristotelian beginning, middle, end in an "erotic" poetics (295). The notion of "forepleasure" serves Brooks' later essay just as the notion of "the pleasure principle" serves the earlier one, namely, as a conceptual tool for making sense of otherwise unplottable literature (the writing of Beckett, Sollers, Henry James) (Brooks, "The Idea" 151), for mastering the delays, deferrals, dilatory routes of a phallic jouissance in the sublimated form of aesthetic satisfaction.

Clearly Brooks overlooks the *clinical* and (potentially) *political* stakes of psychoanalysis in favour of the epistemological: but does he advocate the use of psychoanalysis to generate insight into the specifically psychoanalytic domain of the unknown, the *repressed unconscious,* or does he merely find certain conceptual models to intensify and valorize—*to prick up*—a flagging formalism? That he should punningly describe the pleasure of the text as "clock-teasing" belies a certain neo-Kantian anxiety to locate the sensual on the plane of the transcendental aesthetic where it might be mapped onto the phenomenological coordinates of space and time with a certain idealistic satisfaction. Kant was well known for taking his pleasure with clock-like punctuality; but we might recall that throughout his writings Freud persistently observes "that there is something about the sexual that is beyond the capacity of the mind to assign" (Forrester 35).

By drawing Freudian insight from only the most abstract texts, the formalist selectively overlooks psychoanalysis' theoretical and technical investment in psychopathology, as well as a feminist investment in a political psychoanalysis.

history of the reading subject need not be involved. There is only the "risk" of doubling the reader's unconscious desire to master the text with "his"[3] unconscious desire to be mastered by the text, a risk that can be identified and controlled by the critic-analyst: "When we are what we call literary critics," Brooks cautions, "our interventions—our efforts to rewrite and retransmit—may closely resemble the psychoanalyst's, with all the attendant perils of transference and countertransference" (154-55). To minimize the risks and maximize the gains (of knowledge, of critical satisfaction), the critic must work the transference so that the reading is neither foreclosed by an unmastered desire to find and impose meaning nor abandoned by an equally unmastered desire to submit to the interpretive intentions of narrative discourse (155). The critic is urged to conceive of the text-reader relation as an "agonistic dialogue" (155); to make this struggle *productive,* "he" must intervene in the narrative telling itself and, with the detached wisdom of a therapist, add "his" story to the "construction" (157).[4] The transference model proves its worth in literary analysis when the critic can use it to master the tendency to rush to the end of a reading and instead defer, delay, make space for generating more meaning, more significance, and hence more satisfaction—in this case, through the dilatory space of the transference dialogue. Thus, in Brooks' hands, the clinical technique of "transference" works like an extension of "forepleasure."

It is perhaps not surprising that concern for healing change does not figure in Brooks' "idea" of a psychoanalytic criticism given that his "erotics of form" is perfectly at home with the humanist order—so at home, in fact, that it outlines "dilatory" pleasures en route to a jouissance that can be enjoyed at too soon a moment to be "interesting." Brooks is no more concerned with the political and therapeutic dimensions of psychoanalytic literature than his French counterparts practising, as Clément observed, a literary psychoanalysis. But clearly, the stakes for such an "aesthetic-erotic" criticism necessarily differ from an "aesthetic-hysteric" criticism whose analysis of women's sexual self-constitution in language and discourse attempts to articulate a jouissance that is not pleasurably deferred and delayed but painfully denied and suppressed and whose phantasies are unable to mediate a satisfying resolution between the real object of desire and symbolic proscription.

But why does Brooks choose to ground his "idea" in a text which, he admits, does not address art explicitly, nor offer more than "an excessively simplistic view of [it]," and which has not served as a basis for "the most impressive essays in psychoanalytic criticism" ("Idea" 149)? Why does he overlook Freud's far more original insight that "[t]he mechanism of poetical creation [*Dichtung*] is the same as that of hysterical phantasies" (Freud 251)? Brooks neglects to mention that much impressive psychoanalytic criticism draws insight from Freud's studies on neurosis and psychosis beyond the narrow field of fetishistic perversion. I refer to Shoshana Felman's work on madness and the uncanny, to Julia Kristeva's on melancholia and abjection, to Hélène Cixous's on hysterical-delusion, to name a few. Perhaps "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" is the closest Freud comes to presenting an "idealization" of psychoanalytic application, free of the messy theoretico-technical complications that a trajectory through the erotogenic, and especially the hysterogenic, body involves. But that *eroto-hysterogenic* body is the specific domain of psychoanalysis whose discovery could not have been made without, as Monique David-Ménard points out, an epistemic break from traditional philosophical inquiry into mind (including mind-body dualism). "The philosophic stakes in a theory of hysteria," she writes, "amount to showing how the *body* thinks and that what forces us to think our identity is an *experience* of jouissance" (David-Ménard 46)

To be fair, Brooks does not make "forepleasure" the entire subject of his article; he proceeds to investigate "transference" as a dynamic model of the structure of intratextual events that constitute the reading process. Once again, the stakes are aesthetic and epistemological and not clinical and political; it is a limited *textual* unconscious, not the transpersonal unconscious of the body politic/political body, whose aesthetic structures and processes are the subject of analysis and it is the interpretive *mind* of the critic-analyst, "'the subject supposed to know,'" which "sets the transference going" ("Idea" 156) and which takes delight in the knowledge generated.

Though Brooks recognizes that the textual scene of analysis involves the same play of transference and countertransference as the therapeutic scene, he assures us that there is no risk of evoking repressed memory or fantasy beyond the bounds of textual temporality—the personal

*beyond the idea of feminist psychoanalytic criticism*

I believe that feminism's most crucial contribution to psychoanalytic criticism, to date, is its *politico-therapeutic* engagement with theory and text, and particularly its reading and/or production of aesthetic-hysteric texts. This contribution is overlooked or discredited by Brooks, whose formalism/humanism permits him to say that feminist psychoanalytic criticism "is work often full of interest, but nonetheless methodologically disquieting in its use of Freudian analytic tools in a wholly thematic way..." ("Idea" 146). To whom, then, does Brooks refer and what exactly does he mean by "methodologically disquieting"? Does he assume that feminism should have the same interest in psychoanalysis as formalism?[5] What methods, strategies, stakes does he dismiss under the disparaging category of "thematics"?

According to Brooks, feminist psychoanalytic criticism concerns "studies of Oedipal triangles in fictions, their permutations and evolution, of the roles of mothers and daughters, of situations of nurture and bonding, and so forth" (146). While this summary fairly describes the Oedipal focus of *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation,* and while it foresees a similar preoccupation with Oedipus in work such as Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema,* Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative/Psychoanalysis/Feminism,* Elizabeth Abel's *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis,* and Deborah Kelly Kloepfer's *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.*, it fails to imagine how their "situational-thematics" provides contexts for more *formal* analyses of how women's different positioning in the Oedipal family structure constitutes a different narrative subject of enunciation. Most of these enterprises undertake subversive reformulations of Freudian and/or Lacanian developmental schemae in order to valorize feminine speaking positions which derive from variant, negative and pre-Oedipal formulations. Determining other speaking positions affords an explanatory logic and a generative form for producing a differential representation of desire. Above all, it affords the liberating realization that while specifically female desire may be *underrepresented* it is not *unrepresentable.*

In dismissing these thematics Brooks also dismisses a feminist contribution to formalist criticism. Moreover, he implies that his humanism does not extend to feminism, even if both projects are concerned to (re)discover and apply Freud's "plots." Finally, he overlooks feminism's political stakes in so-called "thematic" criticism, namely, the urgent recovery of a specifically female plot and the healing transformation of a cultural imaginary that affords women far too few representations of mother-daughter and woman-woman relations,[6] as well as the critical delivery of women's writing from the problematic sub-genre of "madwoman in the attic" into literary history of its own (including a history of negotiations with psychoanalysis).

But what of that feminist psychoanalytic criticism which is emphatically "textual" and yet cannot be accommodated by "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Criticism" because of its categorical assumptions of feminist literary engagement? I refer to the work of Shoshana Felman and Barbara Johnson, work that applies Freud's lessons in symptomatic analysis to a reading of the feminine in fiction as a sign of a disturbing, even deadly, discursive repression of woman's difference. Critical classics such as Felman's "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy" and "Rereading Femininity," and Johnson's more recent "Is Figure to Ground as Male is to Female?" point to the place in narrative discourse where sexual identity is represented in terms of the one, master signifier (the phallus) marking, in turn, the place where the other sex, the unsignifiable woman, fails pathologically to make herself seen or heard or even to remark upon her censure and erasure. This analysis is primarily deconstructive and could thus be charged with "stay[ing] within the linguistic realm" and "bracketing the human realm from which psychoanalysis derives" (Brooks, "Idea" 148). But Felman and Johnson show precisely how "the human" itself is structured by discursive and rhetorical conventions that repress and efface women's self-representation, in psychoanalytic no less than other discourse.

In her essay, Johnson explicitly pursues a "conjunction of the aesthetic... and the therapeutic" (258) by juxtaposing Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis in a Case of Hysteria." Each of these narratives inscribes a therapeutic intention behind which Johnson detects an aesthetic investment in symmetry. Each story narrates the

case of a woman who subjects herself or is subjected to a man's doctoring of what he takes to be a sign of abnormality but which proves to be a sign of woman's sexual difference or perhaps a signal of her resistance to normative femininity. Defined as the negative or opposite of masculinity in the phallogocentric discourses of aesthetics and medicine, normal femininity is assumed to have no bodily signifier, no desiring subject, in short, no self-signifying desire of its own. As Johnson's reading points out, this assumption possesses a logic so overwhelmingly seductive to the male fantasy of phallic sovereignty that, in cases where sexual identity is at stake, it will function authoritatively to blank out women's differential representability and systematically destroy her autonomous linguistic capacity for marking herself as a social being.

Even Freud, whose technique in treating female hysterics afforded medicine its first opportunity to listen to "the other woman" and to read her "symptoms" as effects of a symbolically blocked and displaced jouissance and whose dream was to represent sexual difference as a recursive figure—"a figure in which both figure and ground, male and female, are recognizable, complementary forms" (257)—forecloses his speculations when the figure threatens to become truly recursive, and the female figure appears to be more than just the blank space onto which the phallic figure is drawn. "Freud's story of female sexuality," Johnson concludes, "is a story of renunciation required by the needs of symmetry" (265) and she calls for feminist intervention precisely at this conjunction of the aesthetic and the therapeutic. "What is at stake in the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism can indeed," she asserts, "be summed up in the relationship between renunciation *for* and renunciation *of* symmetry" (265).

### *dispelling the blind dream of symmetry*

Johnson locates precisely the critical intervention of linguist, philosopher, practising analyst, and writer, Luce Irigaray, known best in the English-speaking world for her rereading of Freud in her book *Speculum de l'autre femme* [*Speculum of the Other Woman*] (1974). Though Irigaray uses a form of rhetorical analysis and deconstruction, she not only refers to a "realm" (what she designates as woman's "elsewhere") beyond the realm of linguistics, but she also

attempts to place the reader there, *where the hysteria comes from,* through a textually-mediated transference between Freudian discourse and the woman reader.[7] My purpose in the subsequent pages of this paper is to examine the work of one feminist in psychoanalysis that, while it could not be adequately summed up as an appropriation of Freudian theory or thematics, could be interpreted as "methodologically disquieting" in its attempt to bring about therapeutic change as an effect of a critical textual strategy.

Throughout *Ce Sex qui n'en est pas un* [*This Sex Which Is Not One*] (1977), Luce Irigaray engages in a dialogue with Freud on hysteria, thus returning to the original subject of psychoanalysis. What does it mean, she asks

> "to speak (as) hysteric." Does the hysteric speak? Isn't hysteria a privileged place for preserving—but in "latency," "in sufferance"—that which does not speak? And, in particular (even according to Freud...), that which is not expressed in woman's relation to her mother, to herself, to other women? Those aspects of women's earliest desires that find themselves reduced to silence in terms of a culture that does not allow them to be expressed. A powerlessness to "say".... (136)

The insight she presses out of Freud is that "hysteria" is the pathological *norm* established for women who are overly Oedipalized by rigidly administered patriarchal institutions, including the psychoanalytic establishment, and who consequently display symptoms of lacking (or being barred from) a signifying system adequate to her desire for self-representation, including her primary (self-constituting) desire for the mother.[8] What must then be questioned, she concludes, is the capacity of psychoanalysis to "offer any 'cure' to hysterics beyond a surfeit of suggestions intended to adapt them" to Oedipal norms, even as it shows an ability to hear their suffering and to recognize their (impossible) desire (137).

To *demonstrate* rather than to merely conceptualize what she means, Irigaray textually reconstructs the scene of analysis in her critical rereading of Freud, entitled "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry." Acting at once as theoretical critic *and* therapist, she stages/mediates a "transference" between Freud's (the "analyst's") desire to interpret the "problem" of sexual difference and the woman reader's (the "analysand's") desire to articulate her own femininity. In re-

citing lengthy passages from Freud's discourses on female sexuality, she strategically *overstates* or *overhears* his injunctions to the woman reader (analysand and aspiring analyst) to resign herself to her essential or necessary lack of symbolic (phallic) means with which to constitute her difference and autonomy. Such *hyperbole* is, I believe, intended to facilitate a negative transference between text and reader. In being "told" so forcefully that she lacks the means to signify the loss of her mother, that she is "castrated" without symbolic compensation that is reserved for men (the valorized representation of maleness, of his desire for a mother-substitute, for a genealogy and place in history), without even the possibility of mourning (since this "lack" is not the loss of any "thing" and therefore not representable for mourning), the reader-analysand hears in mute pain that what she and her sex amount to in the symbolic/cultural order is no more than a black "hole" or blank space for man to fill with his narrative phantasies, his theoretical fetishes, his master signifier or phallic sovereignty (Irigaray, *Speculum* 71).

Irigaray does not return to Freud to find a "model" for reading texts; her strategy of overstating and overhearing intervenes in Freud's theoretical and discursive treatment of women by performing what she calls a "subversive mimesis" (*This Sex* 76-7). Her mimicry of Freud uncovers the patriarchal interest invested in the rhetoric and logic of discursive speculation on the "symmetry" of sexual difference. Moreover, it allows the woman reader to see and to *reflect* that the "hole" which her sex is taken to be is not a lack in her so much as a "gap" in theory where her otherness might have been truly represented. In short, the text acts as a feminist speculum inserted into the body of Freud's writings on woman.

But Irigaray's simulated transference also risks an *hysterical mimesis*. It risks reproducing the hysteric's mocking mimicry of discourse and prompting "hysteria"—a frustrated and displaced verbal response—in the reader, who, at every stage of this lengthy analysis, is prohibited from intervening and interpreting for herself the critical moments of her sexual development as she remembers them. Freud's discourse is felt to censor every stage it opens to inquiry and to foreclose every theoretical *aporia* in the formulation of sexual difference. The *effect* of this scenography is to provoke a mediated form of hysterical resistance, to prompt the reader to

know what "Dora" felt in direct confrontation with Freud and to identify with Dora's refusal to be "the feminine" of psychoanalysis and of patriarchy (and to thus comprehend her feelings of sexual ambivalence, of not knowing whether she was a man or a woman or how to name her desire). Irigaray's *purpose,* it seems to me, is to press the reader to her limits of disinterested acceptance of Freudian theory. By subjecting her to the symbolic violence of discursive mastery while showing her the "blind spots" in theoretical speculation, by prompting a negative transference to the "father of psychoanalysis," the text puts the woman reader/analysand "in touch" with her own, unrepresented, unacknowledged sense of difference so that she is in the best possible position to resist that violence and to speak out for herself.[9]

Irigaray does not stop at the negative transference: she prompts the reader's/analysand's hysterical resistance with the subversive desire to mobilize a "reserve of power" which could potentially generate "another mode of [cultural] production":

> there is always, in hysteria, both a reserve of power and a paralyzed power. A power that is always repressed, by virtue of the *subordination* of feminine desire to phallocratism; a power constrained to silence and mimicry.... Which occasions 'pathological' effects. And in hysteria there is at the same time the possibility of another mode of "production," notably gestural and lingual; but this is maintained in latency. Perhaps as a cultural reserve yet to come...? (*This Sex* 137)

Channelled into cultural production of symbolic systems that articulate woman's difference and represent her autonomous desire, this "reserve of power" could, Irigaray prognosticates, effect healing transformation in society as well as in the individual (137).[10]

What is at stake then is the transition from speaking (as) hysteric to speaking (as) woman, facilitated by the production of a different imaginary and a different syntax and discursive practice to support it. We might consider Irigaray's theoretic-therapeutic method as a radical form of consciousness-raising, or more precisely, of unconsciousness-raising, that, while it relies on the mediating skills of the author-analyst and risks provoking hysteria in the reader-analysand, effectively constitutes a dialogical process, a speaking-between-women. Irigaray's practice is socially subversive in that it affects the

reader's capacity to listen for the other woman (the other author) whose text is marked (autobiographically) in hyperboles, parodies, ellipses, repetitions, metonymies, divergencies (*Speculum* 142) to show where (her) female desire exceeds theoretical and clinical discourses of femininity. Moreover, such a practice may clear the way for a *"parler-entre-femmes"* which Irigaray foresees happening on a communal plane beyond the text (*This Sex* 135).

To clarify, then: Irigaray's text-mediated transference potentially engages both negative and positive therapeutic moments. It risks hysteria only to forge productive breaks with repressive structures and liberating flows of imaginable, speakable desire—a double-edged "talking-cure" that works in dialogue between the (patriarchally-seduced) reader and the other woman (the *other* Dora) in her text. The positive moment does not amount to a "cure" nor designate arrival at some linguistic utopia, women's language, but rather, is an active component in an ongoing process of healing transformation: a mobility, not an entity.

Irigaray eludes the teleology of the cure inherent in the usual, conservative, treatment; hers is not intended to rehabilitate an ego unable to cope with the hysterical tensions of wishing at once to enjoy the phallic prowess of man yet retain the seductive and nurturing femininity of woman. Her treatment provocatively over-exposes the sexism inherent in a system that encourages this hysteria as well as the sexism in its "cure" which entails choosing to identify with one sex or the other and adapting to that choice. In place of a cure, Irigaray prescribes a dis-ease; in place of rehabilitation, nihilism and reconstruction. Her production of text-mediated hysteria, her infection of the reader, is an essential part of the process of healing transformation, a non-disjunctive, break-flow process of differential articulations of desire in language.[11] Engaging with Irigaray offers the reader a chance to bring forward and work through unconscious investments in the masculinist imaginary which dominates Western discourses, so that she recognizes the symbolic debt owing women for whom representations of her sex, while perhaps propping up the pornography industry, do not afford her the power of social self-signification which representations of masculinity afford men. Rather than endorse the curative procedures of clinical orthodoxy, Irigaray proposes a heterodoxical reapplication of Freud:

sexual in-difference and the blindness of his dream of symmetry, rejecting teleology outright in favour of ongoing struggle for the differential articulation of female desire. Second, her feminism reroutes the tendency in Lacanian practice, as described by Catherine Clément, to appropriate therapeutics for a *belle-lettristic* enterprise. While neo-Lacanians display a popular, post-clinical concern for the displaced signifier of phallic jouissance, Irigaray employs textual strategies to affect women's reading capacity, to prompt unconscious desire and resistance, and to make possible epistemic breaks with repressive structures of self-knowledge.

Put into context of feminist psychoanalytic criticism as represented not only by those practitioners of "situational-thematics" and of deconstructive rhetorical analyses, but also by Irigaray's critical "theor(ap)y," Brooks' proposal for an "idea of psychoanalytic criticism" looks modest indeed. Feminist critics might take Irigaray's interventionist psychoanalysis further by using her work as a model for reading women's writing, particularly those twentieth-century texts which have won a certain canonical notoriety for being "hysterical" or "mad." I have in mind not only those white, middle-class, "European" classics such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*, Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, Marguerite Duras' *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *L'Amant*, Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and *Ida*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Marie-Claire Blais' *La Belle Bête*, Hélène Cixous's *Angst*,[14] but also post-colonial writing and writing by women of color, such as Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*—texts like *The Yellow Wallpaper* which do not merely *represent* but, in some insufficiently explored ways, *provoke* madness in the reader.[15]

Reading these texts through Irigaray's hystero-analysis might afford feminist critics transformative experiences as well as valuable insights into textual strategy and reader reception. In fact, reading with such engagement as Irigaray demands could make the critic more alert, more receptive to symptomatic and therapeutic aspects of the text. Hystero-analysis should translate such mystifying questions as, "why

Without the Other," supplement her critical adaptation of the "aesthetic-hysteric" with ventures into the "aesthetic-erotic." While both sorts of texts or textual components demonstrate considerable formal innovation, they defy categorization into formalism. The aesthetic-erotic texts continue the healing transformation from "speaking (as) hysteric" to "speaking (as) woman."

For instance, "When Our Lips Speak Together" dramatically transforms a critical inquiry into the standard, masculinist syntax of lovers' discourse into a speaking (of) desire between women, producing what might be called a "feminist intercourse." Such rhetorical feminizing or lesbianizing of speculative/amorous discourse is therapeutically politic for women readers who find themselves identifying hysterically with the masculine speaking subject, the self-referring "I" of "I love you," whose symbolic prerogative it is, in a patriarchal linguistic community, to name and possess *his* object of desire (with whatever pleasure-accumulating delays and digressions). Hysterical resistance in this case takes the form of a haughty refusal to mime the ritual, monological utterance "I love you" in favour of the subversive, dialogical "I/you touch you/me." In this enunciation desire circulates between partial subjects (who are also partial objects) without defining "the one" or colonizing "the other." The word "touch" signifies neither the transcendence nor the sublimation of carnality but rather the circulation of auto- and homo-eroticism in a body-language spoken between lips which are undecidably oral and/or vulvular: a labile configuration of non-disjunctive heterogeneous female desire unmediated, unrepressed by the logic of phallic representation (*This Sex* 214-15).

### *feminist critical theor(ap)y*

Irigaray's critical practice offers the reader more than a theory of therapy by potentially mediating an engagement with the text which is at once theoretical, political, and therapeutic.[13] Her feminism makes a double intervention in psychoanalysis. First, it explodes the Freudian theory of interminable analysis, the mythic cause of which is the woman patient's neurotic resistance to the recognition and dissolution (or acceptance) of her "penis-envy." While Freud gave up hope of a cure for his female patients, abandoning a theoretical teleology out of therapeutic pessimism, Irigaray exposes his

sources. In my opinion, all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure of this kind'" (150).

2 I borrow the term from Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*. "[Woman's] pleasure," she writes, "is denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism. The value granted to the only definable form excludes the one that is in play in female autoerotism" (26).

3 Brooks adopts the conventional practice of using the masculine, third person pronoun to refer to a universal reader/critic. I use quotation marks to indicate this *particular* gender practice.

4 "Freud indeed... concede[s]," Brooks notes, "that there are moments when the analyst's construction does not lead to the analysand's recollection of repressed elements of his story but nonetheless produces in him 'an assured conviction of the truth of the construction which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory'" (157).

5 See Jerry Aline Flieger, "Entertaining the Ménage à Trois: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Literature," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 185-208, for a critical, historical account of the interplay between psychoanalysis, feminism, and literature and its complicated institutional stakes.

6 In any case, "thematic" criticism is not always as "applied" as Brooks would seem to indicate. A feminist return to Freudian themes may entail a radical rereading, identifying and elaborating critical turns of inquiry that fail to be developed in subsequent, orthodox theorization. A case in point is Kaja Silverman's discussion of "the negative Oedipus complex" in *The Acoustic Mirror*. Silverman elaborates the distinction between symbolic castration and the castration complex, a distinction already found in early, psychoanalytic formulations of the Oedipus Complex but overlooked in favour of the notion that they amount to the same thing—which they may do in the developmental scheme of masculine sexuality. It is thought that while the castration complex brings the boy's Oedipus Complex to an end, it is what supposedly establishes the onset of the girl's. According to Silverman, however, it is not the normative recognition of sexual difference but the acquisition of language that severs the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter union. The implication: that the girl's split from the mother does not entail the renunciation of either the desire for or the identification with the mother but rather, just the reverse: the effect of symbolic castration is to mobilize this desire and/or identification and to prompt the girl to seek to replace (re-present) the original object in verbal or acoustic images. Silverman's reformulation of castration has

is this text driving me mad?" and "who is this madwoman?" into "what is this text doing?" "how is it doing it?" and "for whom?" Criteria for a feminist evaluation of "maddening" texts might include, in addition to formal innovativeness, the effectiveness with which the text dramatizes the enculturation of female hysteria and the counter-production of hysterical resistance. As with writerly texts of bliss, a feminist aesthetic-hysteric production might be considered successful if the degree of text-read engagement is high. Only here, engagement would be double-edged: no bliss without pain, pain being a probable component of therapeutic efficacy, not a flaw in the formal fabric.

Conducting hystero-analysis means to risk becoming hysterical, to risk being involved in the transference neuroses of a woman's symptomatic-therapeutic writing. Is critical distance not then threatened? How could the distance with which we read "straight-theory" be employed in our reading of hysterical productions? It might be necessary to rethink or relocate our academic sense of distance: instead of approaching these texts with a critical reserve of judgement safeguarded by belief in detached, "higher," intellection, feminist hystero-analysts might draw their distance from the knowledge that they share a commitment to change with other feminist readers and that, however intense her leap into textual engagement, the individual reader has a forum for working it through further. In this case, critical distance derives from rational *political* alignment, not transcendent disinterestedness. The stakes being this high, feminism in psychoanalysis can be nothing less than a collective intervention.

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## NOTES

My thanks to Toril Moi, Liz Grosz, and Margaret Whitford for their helpful suggestions.

[1] Brooks quotes the following passage from "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming": "'The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name of an *incentive bonus*, or *forepleasure*, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical

enormous explanatory and creative implication for feminist representation of female desire.

[7] I am not alone in reading Irigaray's text as an enactment of transference, although my understanding of the specific dynamics, the stakes, effects, and risks, may be peculiarly my own. See Margaret Whitford, "Luce Irigaray: The problem of feminist theory"; see also her article, "Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as Woman."

[8] This is not to say that Irigaray implies that all women are hysterics or that all cultures make women crazy; rather, she focuses her concern on women who suffer strictly within the culture of Oedipus or who unwillingly subscribe to the cult of (Church, state, family, psychoanalytic...) fathers.

[9] My reading finds support in Margaret Whitford's observation that it is precisely the reader's openness to this textual transference that is *at stake* in Irigaray's theory/text. "It seems to me... that we should treat Irigaray's work as literature," Whitford asserts, "to the extent that its effect on us is *directly relevant* to its more apparently theoretical content. The 'transference' of the reader is not a more or less accidental, 'emotional' or subjective response which can be set aside to get at the 'theory,' but in fact gives a clue to what is at stake. If, as a reader, you 'resist,' then this resistance itself is worth analysing and exploring further. It is not in itself a guarantee of the theoretical 'correctness' of Irigaray's work... [b]ut it does indicate that you are not left indifferent, that your 'resistance' is produced by something. If, in the interaction which takes place between you and Irigaray's work, you do not withdraw, to that extent she has succeeded and the scene is set for a possible exchange" (Whitford, "Female Imaginary" 8).

[10] Some of Irigaray's readers take exception to what they perceive to be her authoritarian procedures of strategy, to her offering little space for the readers' resistance to this interventionist therapy by textual transference (see Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*, for instance). In defence of Irigaray, I would argue that she, at once, offers space for hysterical resistance, with its reserve of power that affords a liberating break from Oedipal strictures, *and* for a more detached resistance to her strategy of provoking resistance. The reader is no less free to respond negatively to the negative transference Irigaray mediates, and to disengage herself from the textual proceedings, a response which, as Margaret Whitford points out, is also "worth analyzing and exploring further." That the reader may feel repelled from rather than persuaded to play the part of Dora suggests she has no need of Irigaray's mediation in reserving a critical distance from the culture of Oedipus and orthodox psychoanalysis. It is the women who theoretically and clinically over-

invest in psychoanalytic conservatism, especially those women training to be analysts themselves, and hence, well-read in its seductive discourse, in whose treatment by textual transference Irigaray would intervene.

[11] In presenting hysteria as a curative process, Irigaray displays a certain sympathy with the Nietzschean sentiment that only irremediable sickness can bring about a cultural transvaluation of values. *Dis-ease with* not *recovery through* the oedipalization of desire is a most potent antidote for a revolutionary psychoanalysis.

[12] Like Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari present sickness as curative, though they differ in their choice of sickness. Against psychoanalysis' normative therapeutics, Deleuze and Guattari present the liberating break-flows of schizophrenia, with they see, like Irigaray sees hysteria, as a process not an entity. However, these authors go further than Irigaray in valorizing their dis(-)ease and are prepared to credit it with a desiring-production that exceeds the structuring powers of Oedipus and castration and that derives from a body of unconscious drives which is much more fluid, more primary, than psychoanalysis can conceive. "And above all, what brings about our sickness? Schizophrenia itself, as a process? Or is it brought about by the frantic neuroticization to which we have been delivered, and for which psychoanalysis has invented new means—.... But in any case the harm has been done, the treatment has chosen the path of oedipalization, all cluttered with refuse, instead of the schizophrenization that must cure us of the cure" (68).

[13] In reading Irigaray as a therapeutic/politic strategist, I offer yet another defence against charges of essentialism that have been laid on her over the last decade. Monique Plaza initiated the debate in 1978 with her article "'Phallomorphic Power' and the Psychology of 'Woman.'" More recently, feminists have taken up Gayatri Spivak's suggestion that we should exchange theoretical anti-essentialist puritanism for cultural practices which employ *strategic* essentialism where a patriarchal metaphysics of Difference is uncritically invoked and administered. At present, Irigarayan criticism seems to have come full circle with demonstrations of how essentialism has been (mis)read into her theory. In her article, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," Naomi Schor argues convincingly that "Irigaray's production of a positive theory of femininity is... the logical extension of her deconstruction of the specular logic of saming."

[14] For a hystero-analysis of H.D.'s *Nights, Her,* and *The Gift,* see "Mourning, Mystery, and Melancholia: Life-writing Therapy," chapter three of my book, *H.D.'s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [forthcoming]).

[15] See Gilman's postscript, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in the October 1913 issue of *The Forerunner*, reprinted in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*. Gilman recalls the protest of one outraged physician who stated that "such a story ought not to be written; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it." She defends her writing by explaining that "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked." She notes that the story was especially valued by "alienists" as "a good specimen of one kind of literature" and that its therapeutic efficacy could be vouched for by at least one woman who had been "saved from [the fate of the protagonist]." Clearly this text maddens readers in different ways: while it drives a physician to near-distraction it liberates the repressed alienist. Though it is difficult to predict its political efficacy: Gilman also notes that the book had an enlightening and transforming affect on the physician who "nearly drove [*her*] mad."

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# A Poetics of Intimacy: Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*

J.M. Kertzer

My topic is intimacy as it appears in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), a novel/biography/history/poem that also serves as the *journal intime* of jazz musician, Buddy Bolden. The subject is complex, because it combines a literary form, theme and value in what I will treat as a transgressive, modernist poetic—three terms that I intend to justify. For all its complexity, however, intimacy takes as its goal a special kind of simplicity. I begin by defining this goal and putting it in historical perspective.

Intimacy is simple (or simplifying) in the sense that it involves reducing the intricacy of conscious life to direct, present, urgent awareness. Intimacy focuses and distills experience. Immediate experience of this sort is a major value in modernist poetry, especially for writers like D.H. Lawrence, who claims that the unique virtue of poetry is the way it touches the quick of things.[1] Poetry shares in the vitality of nature, of mind and of language:

> But there is another kind of poetry: the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, intermingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon. ... We look at the very white quick of nascent creation. A water-lily heaves herself from the flood, looks around, gleams, and is gone. We have seen the incarnation, the quick of the ever-swirling flood. We have seen the invisible. We have seen, we have touched, we have partaken of the very substance of creative change, creative mutation. ... Give me the still, white seething, the incandescence and the coldness of the incarnate moment: the moment, the quick of all change and haste and opposition: the moment, the immediate present, the Now. (85-6)

As theme, intimacy is the immediacy of immediate experience known intuitively only at the instant of sensation. Lawrence's poem-as-creative-process corresponds to

Ondaatje's celebration of jazz as "coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour .... showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (*Slaughter* 43). According to Lawrence, intimacy requires a mating of opposites, an "incarnation" that fuses flesh with spirit, substance with invisibility. Since this union occurs between people, it must also be understood as communication and, if not as consummation (which Lawrence renounces because it seems finished or perfected), then as a continual consuming. At one extreme, intimacy implies the utter solitude of the self—the "mystic privacy" (64 ) represented by Bellocq—which must be affirmed in order to be overcome. At the other extreme, it permits the ultimate sharing of experience as expressed in music and love. Buddy combines and suffers from both extremes.[1]

As form, that is, as a pattern of response and articulation, intimacy involves drawing ever closer to things and to people until the pure contact of unmediated experience becomes possible or at least imaginable. The "touch" of poetry makes it intimate. This contact, signalled by Lawrence's phrase, "at hand," appears in the hand imagery of *Coming Through Slaughter*. The temporal and spatial pattern of drawing closer is represented by the detective, Webb, who stealthily approaches and invades his prey: "Webb circled, trying to understand not where Buddy was but what he was doing, quite capable of finding him but taking his time, taking almost two years, entering the character of Buddy through every voice he spoke to" (63). The way Webb delicately postpones his "entry" into Buddy's character shows that intimacy is more than physical proximity or familiar knowledge. It is an ideal closeness that must be imagined through appropriate rituals of drawing near, touching and intruding. Lawrence's description of poetry is one such ritual; Webb's hunt is another; *Coming Through Slaughter* is a third. All are ways of evoking the point of entry and transgression. Ondaatje cultivates these moments of breaking down and breaking through, for example when Buddy shatters a window but remains unhurt: his hand "had acted exactly like a whip violating the target and still free" (16). This graceful combination of violence, violation and poise produces "the outline of a star."

In modernist theories, intimacy is pre-eminently a matter of style. The Imagist ideal was to engage as directly as possible with the world by replacing outmoded poetic diction with a

concrete language of sensation and sight, of *res* rather than *verba*. For T.E. Hulme, poetry is "a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily" (10). Language is the agent of intimacy provided that it operates—or appears to operate—"bodily," as "a thing in itself" with all the physicality of things: "With perfect style, the solid leather for reading, each sentence should be a lump, a piece of clay, a vision seen; rather, a wall touched with soft fingers" (79). A paradox emerges here that preoccupies Ondaatje and reappears in the ceaseless play of contraries in *Coming Through Slaughter*. If intimacy is immediate experience, then it should require no agent, since any intermediary would hinder the direct contact so highly prized. But Hulme admits that language is always abstract, and therefore is at best a "compromise" for an intuition, not the intuition itself. Since poets are doomed to "replace meaning (i.e. *vision*) by words" (77), they can only choose their words wisely so as to give a compelling illusion of immediacy. They continually seek fresh analogies in order to maintain the impression that they can hand over sensations directly. Poetic intimacy is more than just one literary illusion among others: it is the illusion of illusions, the pretence by which poetry claims to replace illusions with realities.[2]

The passage from Lawrence illustrates the ambition of modernist poetry to engage as directly as possible with the world by exploiting the intimacies of language. In *Poets of Reality*, J. Hillis Miller treats this engagement as the typical modernist gesture. It is a "leap into the world" by which the poet's mind effaces itself in order to "plunge into the density of an exterior world ... In this new space the mind is dispersed everywhere in things and forms one with them" (7-8). At this early stage in his career, Miller was content to sound like Lawrence and to treat "the presence of things present" as a visible/invisible "being," forever "present in its evanescence" (10). Wallace Stevens becomes the central poet for Miller and for other critics who define modernism through its desire to fuse mind, word and world. For Stevens, this intimacy has two moments. It can occur as a florid romance with the earth ("Fat girl, terrestrial"—Stevens 406), or as an ascetic renunciation that brushes against mere being ("The eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience"—465). Either through delight in objects or through denial of the self and its powers, human thought draws closer and closer to

things as they are. Ondaatje also depicts these two moments, when Buddy engages boisterously with his world of love, gossip and squalor; and when he submerges, usually in water, until only the barest contact with reality remains.

As I have noted, Imagism trusts the indirection of analogy to achieve direct contact with reality. Many critics have seized on this contradiction,[3] but even as (or especially as) a contradiction it expresses the modernist resolve to grant poetry a heroic philosophical mission; while as a paradox, it finds a suitably ironic form to articulate that mission. The mission of poetic imagery is to purify language so as to permit a concurrence of words and things. Ideally, words will almost become the things that they represent: the image will go beyond analogy and approach identity. The image lies on the far side of analogy but on the near side of identity, in a territory that I call "intimacy." As such, it aims to overcome the philosophical dilemma whereby human thought dissociates itself from reality through the very effort of comprehending it. According to this epistemological tradition, alienation is the condition of understanding. Consciousness and language separate us from the world to which they give expression, because the forms of thought and expression, which make reality intelligible, function by interposing a screen of ideas between mind and world. They replace being with meaning, essence with discourse. This romantic fate is the beginning of Hegel's account of spirit; he claims that we obliterate reality through the process of knowing it. Knowledge is always flawed, a necessary deception that substitutes the "true" for the "real."[4] Similarly language, the medium of thought, obscures the world by speaking about it. Language has "the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant *get into words* at all. . ." (Hegel 66).

According to the Hegelian tradition, intimacy means the reappropriation of reality by thought and language, two agents which have already cast the mind adrift. This tradition has a direct impact on modernist theory through philosophers like F.H. Bradley (the subject of T.S. Eliot's doctoral dissertation) and, later, Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, poetry is intimate thinking that calls the world into being. It employs a purified language that pierces the screen of "thought-contrived fabrications" (129) to reveal "the thing-being (thingness) of the thing" (20). Poetry has a double mission with respect to

object and to subject. Objectively, poetry rescues the world by disclosing "beings in their Being: Nature" (118). Subjectively, it redeems human consciousness by opening up a resonant depth within us where we can touch reality: "The conversion of consciousness, therefore, is an inner recalling of the immanence of the objects of representation into presence within the heart's space" (129). Of special interest for this study of Ondaatje are two points: first, Heidegger's dual account of inwardness as both the "interiority of the world's inner space" (130) and "the heart's inner space" (128); and second, his dramatic description of intimacy as a venture into "nearness." Poetry "calls into a nearness" (198) through a structure of approach-contact-entry-and-participation, the final term indicating a strange mode of being that preserves difference even as it unifies. Just as Buddy must fathom his "mystic privacy" if he is to achieve intimacy, so according to Heidegger, true "nearness" both isolates and unites. When he evokes this wonderful state beyond analogy but on the near side of identity, his own writing grows joyfully opaque:

> For world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate. ... The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*. (202)[5]

I will work my way back to the paradox of intimacy and of the intimate text. At present, I offer this flourish of philosophers to situate my own discussion within a tenacious romantic and post-romantic tradition.[6] Ondaatje acknowledges this tradition, expresses nostalgia for its glorious presumption and heroic defeats, and relishes its irony whereby poetic language fights paradox with paradox. *Coming Through Slaughter* proposes the intimacy of immediate experience as the goal of art and love. Jazz is the most soulful of music, its volatile form pouring from deep within the spirit of an oppressed people, and expressing itself through the currents of Buddy's breath. Appropriately, Ondaatje adopts the improvisatory style of jazz, seeking contact with his elusive hero and inviting a corresponding intimacy from his readers, who are welcomed into the game. As biography and history

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Here again is our formative paradox. "To intimate" means to imply subtly: intimacy requires a structure of implication. Even though it is the immediacy of shared experience, to express itself intimacy demands a form that, in practice, separates people from the subjects with which they are familiar. Another literary form will clarify this problem. In the epistolary novel, characters are never more intimate than when they write to each other, that is, when they are apart. Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* presents scenes where lovers, who are in the very same room, withdraw to their separate chambers in order to write of their passion. Even more intimate than sexual contact (which is itself reported in letters) is the setting of pen to paper. In a comparable way, Ondaatje draws on interviews with people who actually knew Buddy, trusting that their proximity to him will bring author and readers a step nearer to their goal. The documents, tapes, pictures and interviews are all agents that intervene between us and Buddy, but that draw us closer to him. There is an added twist to this mediating process, as Ondaatje also takes a step backward from his subject in what Linda Hutcheon regards as a postmodern gesture (65-7, 70-2).[8] Ondaatje mocks his dependence on unreliable records by showing how meagre they really are:

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Interviewer: He lost his mind, I heard.

John Joseph: He lost his mind, yeah, he died in the bug house.
Interviewer: Yes, that's what I heard.
John Joseph: That's right, he died out there. (105)

We learn nothing new from the conversation, yet an illusion of familiarity still is gained. The laconic style succeeds in making us feel that we are closer to the speech patterns of Buddy's world, where suffering was so routine.

Intimacy requires an idiom and a structure. One of Ondaatje's talents is to render the grain of his characters' experience so sensuously that his readers feel intimate with the text. His idiom involves images such as hand, air, breath, ear, kiss, razor, water, window, room, photos and horn. Various critics, notably Constance Rooke, have analyzed these images in detail. I need only stress how they focus attention on points of contact, and on moments of expression (forcing outward) and impression (pressing inward). The "magic of air" (14) is that the invisible element of life is drawn into the body and then expelled into a horn, where it becomes music that enters the ear of a listener. Air provides avenues of intimacy, and Buddy is a creature of air. He can "see" qualities of the atmosphere (14); he loves gossip (43); he fears drowning (83); through his music he gives breath to his community. His hand provides the most sensitive contact with the world, touching in love or hate or suicide. The scene where his hand shatters a window but remains uncut (16) fixes the point of entry at an explosive instant when inwardness and outwardness meet.

The structure of intimacy follows Heidegger's pattern of approach-contact-entry-and-participation. This procedure requires a rhetorical opposition between an outside and an inside to things, as well as a passage between the two. The point of entry, represented by the window, lips, ears, mouthpiece, photographic film and sexual intercourse, is obviously the place where intimacy is registered most acutely. But the ritual of approaching and passing into "inwardness" is just as important. *Coming Through Slaughter* is full of *rites de passage*, such as Ondaatje's trip to New Orleans, Webb's search for Buddy, Bellocq's practice of photographing prostitutes, Buddy's parades and his final trip to the asylum. Author, characters and readers all draw closer to what they perceive as sources: to be intimate is to reach the point of origin. Ondaatje seeks the sources of historical truth and cultural character (the "soul" of America, the "roots" of jazz).

Webb tracks down the springs of human emotion and inspiration. Bellocq tries to "enter the photographs" (55) in order to deface the prostitutes' secrets. Buddy withdraws into the heart of privacy, which he transforms into music.

Each rite of passage also describes entry into another person, whether physically or figuratively or both. In the opening pages when we first enter "Storyville," Buddy's section of New Orleans, we learn of its bizarre rituals of intimacy: Olivia's Oyster Dance, the pocketpicking raccoon, French Emma's 60 Second Plan: "Whoever could restrain his orgasm with her for a whole minute after penetration was excused the $2 payment" (10). Throughout the book, people seek a double intimacy with things and with spirit—with the inner space of the world and of the heart. The relation between these two inner spaces is intricate. Like Lawrence, Ondaatje treats matter as both substance and symbol, each of equal importance. Matter is both the stimulus of physical sensation and evidence of the mind's wild vitality. Ondaatje is superb at evoking the sting of sensation: the rasp of razor blade over necks in the barber shop, the strain of blowing Buddy's horn, the squalor of Storyville, the love making. He has learned the lesson of the Imagists, and makes his language as tactile as possible. The description of the fight between Buddy and Pickett (74-5) is excruciating. But sensation is also the threshold to an inner world, where other sources lie. Ondaatje insists, however, that spiritual sources do not supersede the physical ones: they are not truer or deeper. Again like Lawrence, he refuses to treat the flesh merely as avenue to spirit. The flesh is of the first importance, especially for Buddy, who is intensely an animal in a world of instinct, pain and delight. Intimacy is always physical, its idiom always tactile. Buddy has a love affair with the world: "He collected and was filled by every noise as if luscious poison entering the ear like a lady's tongue thickening it and blocking it until he couldn't be entered anymore. A fat full king" (40-1).

A loving/poisonous embrace of the world is characteristic of all Ondaatje's poetry. For example, in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* Billy feels a visceral connection between two images: one, the sensation of dragging a bullet from a friend's stomach; the other, the sensation of reaching into a wet, warm teapot (27). This evocation of remembering-reaching-entering-and-touching an inner organ is an excellent

expression of physical and poetic intimacy. A comparable moment appears in *In the Skin of a Lion* when Caravaggio's reunion with his wife is marked by the image of milk entering his body as he swallows (204). Ondaatje's fascination with physicality is all the more powerful because it leads to a spiritual intimacy, which is not an impalpable marriage of true minds, but a lusty mingling of mind and matter. When thought and substance combine in love or in music, then in the Imagist manner, symbols seem tangible rather than abstract: they become the things that they signify. Here are three examples of spiritual intimacy in *Coming Through Slaughter*:

> Webb discovered the minds of certain people through their bodies. Or through the perceptions that distinguished them. (57)

> What you see in ... [Bellocq's] pictures is her mind jumping that far back to when she would dare to imagine the future, parading with love or money on a beautiful anonymous arm. Remembering all that as she is photographed by the cripple who is hardly taller than his camera stand. (54)

> Her body a system of emotions and triggers he got lost in. Every hair she lost in the bath, every dead cell she rubbed off on a towel. The way she went crazy sniffing steam from a cup of coffee. He was lost in the details, he could find no exact focus towards her. And so he drew her power over himself. (15)

The three events are not the same. In the first two, intimacy is the prize of an intruder who remains unexposed himself. Webb gains an intellectual mastery that comes from knowing another secretly while remaining unknown himself. Bellocq's intimacy is more intrusive and cruel. It reinforces his solitude by ensuring that he, personally, cannot be touched when he touches the prostitutes so closely yet anonymously. He is indistinguishable from his photographic equipment. The third passage, describing Buddy's fascination with Nora, presents a reciprocal intimacy that both mingles and distinguishes them. *His* obsession elicits *her* power over him, yet the energy of his infatuation traps her as well. There are two sources that seem to merge but function together only because they remain distinct. If one source were to absorb the other, then there could be no reciprocity. Together they populate an inner world: "When they were alone together it

was still a crowded room" (110). This intimate balance, like all such moments in *Coming Through Slaughter*, is precarious.

Intimacy is precarious because its very constitution is violently unstable. The paradox of intimacy is that, on the one hand, it is necessary and creative: it is the overcoming of singularity through love and communion with others. It is the ultimate sharing. On the other hand, it requires a loss of integrity through a yielding to others that also violates their integrity. Breaking into another person, whether physically or figuratively, is always presented as an intrusion, transgression or penetration. Jazz, for example, fires "[b]ullets of music" (92) in the ferocity of its expression. The love making is usually violent: "This last night we tear into each other, as if to wound, as if to find the key to everything before morning" (86). Surely one feature that drew Ondaatje to Buddy (and to Billy the Kid) is the way his life is suffused with violence, which is his personal fate, the history of his people, and the key to the most terrible intimacy:

> He tried to take in the smell of her. The taste of her mouth in the next hotel room they passed along the road. He knew the shape of her body. As she would stand in front of him, the small breasts cold in the room, the heart of her. He went with her for months into the relationship, awkward first fights, the slow true intimacy, disintegration after they exchanged personalities and mannerisms, the growing tired of each other's speed. All this before they went one more mile—as she wrote on and he thought on into the heart and mind of her... (88)

The idiom and structure of intimacy are clear in this passage: the ritual of approach and entry, the imagery of sight and touch, the vulnerability of being observed, the sensory richness that leads into the mind and heart, the disintegration of orderly differences, the fusing of personalities that preserves their opposition. All culminate in "cruel, pure relationship," and for Buddy they also produce madness.

*Coming Through Slaughter* examines what intimacy is, how it is achieved and what it costs. The greater the intimacy, the greater the cost, but different interpretations of the book will calculate the cost in different ways. According to one view, Buddy is a doomed romantic hero, a beautiful loser who suffers, fashions the music of America out of his suffering, and pays the price of his sanity. He turns earth into diamond

(111), but is crushed by the effort. He masters uncertainties (15) until he is bewildered. He negotiates opposites (96) until they tear him apart. And so on: the paradoxes proliferate. Another interpretation stresses how the cost of intimacy must also be paid by the author, as Ondaatje admits on the last page (156), where he depicts himself in dejection. He fails to win the "prize" partly because of the glorious impossibility of his task. No one can capture the ineffable "truth" of Buddy's character; no one can enter truly into the seedy life of old New Orleans. The style and structure of the book guarantee that Ondaatje cannot succeed, but if we adopt either a modernist reading (like Sam Solecki's) or a postmodern one (like Linda Hutcheon's), then his defeat becomes a perverse kind of victory. Paradox overcomes paradox. Bolden succeeded temporarily through his music and was rewarded with madness. Ondaatje succeeds as author and is rewarded with failure; or if you prefer, he fails as author and is rewarded with success.

A third reading, however, would break out of the vicious/delighted circle of paradoxes by recalculating the structure of intimacy as Ondaatje presents it. Such an interpretation is justified by the very nature of intimacy, which applies to readers as well as to the author and characters. *Coming Through Slaughter* invites us to read so closely as to participate in the book by "entering" it. Thus Constance Rooke reveals her experience of reading: "And I think you have to do that: really enter the book, travel in a visceral way through the images..." (268). If we follow her advice, then the act of reading grants us interpretive power by bringing the otherness of the reader into the text. The readers' power need *not* come from applying a different system of values to the book, that is, by proposing a new idiom and structure of intimacy, although this is a viable approach.[9] However, as Jessica Benjamin shows in her discussion of psychoanalytic feminism, an alternative model of intimacy would entail a radical reformulation of all its elements: individuality, subjectivity, otherness, agency and gender representation.[10] I am not willing to go so far, partly because I wish to confine myself to *Coming Through Slaughter,* and partly because Ondaatje positively encourages his readers to exploit the unstable constitution of intimacy as he articulates it. He warns us to mistrust him, to watch his skill closely to see where it fails (31), to inspect "all the possibilities in the middle of the

story" (43). He shows in painful detail that intimacy requires transgression, and we are justified in making a critical intervention in the same spirit. After all, he has depicted himself intervening in Buddy's life, inventing scenes, confusing himself with his hero, compiling "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies" (24), all in the name of "the truth of fiction," as he says in his final acknowledgements. In fact, he graciously provides an image of our role as readers: "The three of them entered a calm long conversation. They talked in the style of a married couple joined by a third person who was catalyst and audience" (111). Interpretive intimacy involves a triangular relation of author, text and reader.

To reinterpret *Coming Through Slaughter* in its own terms, we have to adjust our angle of vision. Periodically Ondaatje tempts us to adopt the view of the victims: those people who are watched, approached, entered and violated. A word that hardly appears in the book is "slavery," yet its fugitive presence is always felt in its pages. As the chronologies make clear (132, 143), the story takes place in the early years of the twentieth century only a few decades after the Civil War. The people are therefore the children and grandchildren of slaves. They live in the segregated world of New Orleans, which is a black world, although the word "black" is seldom spoken.[11] Leslie Mundwiler considers *Coming Through Slaughter* flawed because it virtually ignores racism and social injustice (104-6). I believe, in contrast, that these subjects are constantly present, adding extra violence to the transgressive themes of the book. The word "black" does not have to be mentioned, since racial oppression is the very atmosphere of Buddy's community. Ondaatje treats jazz as the voice of a people released from one form of slavery into another. Earlier I noted that Webb and Bellocq gain an anonymous intimacy with people, because they never open themselves to scrutiny; they touch but remain untouched. The ultimate, one-sided relationship of this sort is the master-slave relationship. Although there are no slaves identified in the book, there are innumerable victims, most of whom are women.

Viewed from the perspective of the victim, the structure of intimacy is masculine, or at least it is a discourse expressed in masculine terms. It presumes a man's experience by adopting a male idiom of "blood sperm music pouring out" (112). The ritual of approach, touch and penetration describes sexual

union from a man's point of view, just as the furious love scenes adopt Buddy's voice and express his fury. Women are constantly present in the book as the objects of scrutiny, possession and destruction. They are essential to Buddy's well-being, yet for the most part they are the unnamed prostitutes who dream of parading "on a beautiful anonymous cloth arm" (54), which will protect them from attack. The very first page mentions Mary Rich, who had her head beaten in with her own wooden leg. She is just an exotic fragment in the story until we realize, not only that women are the prize of intimate encounters, but that they pay the price as well. Just as the word "slavery" seldom appears on the page, so the word "rape" is hardly mentioned, because it is too common to seem necessary. Nevertheless, rape figures as the most intimate and painful of violations. Even in gentler moments, women are assaulted. One popular song is called "All the boys got to love me, that's all": "The lyrics are full of regret, he tells her he is sorry he met her, among other things, and finishes by saying he is going to take her into the woods and shoot her. He kills her but he still loves her and he tells the undertaker to be very careful with his beautiful baby" (154). The worst transgression, indeed the abyss of Ondaatje's survey of Storyville, comes in the description of the "mattress whores" (118), who are degraded by sadistic clients and mutilated by pimps. They are the slaves of the book, the objects of desire turned repulsive. While the razor fight between Buddy and Pickett is described as a painfully, almost gloriously intimate encounter, the brutality practised against the mattress whores is presented as a matter of routine.

Viewed from the perspective of the victim, the structure of intimacy is also the structure of rape. French Emma's 60 Second Plan is no longer a neighbourhood joke but a painful ordeal. I do not mean that intimacy is possible only through rape, or that all intimacies are rapacious. I mean that Ondaatje's idiom of violent penetration and violation proposes rape as the culmination of a line of thought. In following this line, I have come a long way from the Hegelian fall into consciousness, which grants the poet a romantic mission to reappropriate reality through the intimacies of language. But the "chaos" that is Buddy's natural element is also the forum of the romantic agony. Equally romantic is Buddy's *Liebestod*: his devotion to "[e]cstasy before death" (79) and to the "making and destroying coming from the same source"

(55). Even Hegel's comment about the duplicities of language, quoted above, is echoed by Ondaatje's remark: "The right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking" (94).

Traditionally, the object of the poet's quest is expressed as female: as Muse, Psyche, Earth or "interior paramour" (Wallace Stevens). For Ondaatje, too, the goal of intimacy is entry into the female, and what is possessed in women is the fullness of the "other." He is also traditional in regarding transgression as a means of achieving an intimacy so profound that it becomes transcendent.[12] As objects of desire, women are approached, broached and violated, because violation permits a higher (or deeper) state of being: "Coiled into each other under the brown and white cloth. Trying to come closer than that. A step past the territory" (62). Transgression means more than misbehaviour or an infringement of rules; it is a radical shift in the way meanings are constituted and conceived. The step beyond allows Buddy to possess women not just as objects, but as subjects in a "cruel, pure relationship" (88). Cruel as it may be, this abrasive union of mind and matter is not a confrontation of master and slave, but a union of equals who maintain yet share their differences. In Heidegger's words, it is "the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference" (218). When he reaches the heart's space where personalities are exchanged (88), Buddy (in contrast to Webb and Bellocq, who keep the relationship one-sided) undergoes a radical transformation. He pays the price as much as the women do, because he changes places with them.

Buddy has the sympathetic imagination to enter into the lives of others. His empathic gift is a mark of his artistic genius, but it also threatens his integrity, which is why he is attracted by Bellocq who represents the opposite extreme of utter individuality. Buddy's mind becomes the street (42); he shares the lives of the children in the neighbourhood (13); he becomes a different person for each friend (63). At first this power seems masculine in nature, a projection of himself into others: Brock Mumford reports that "[i]n any argument he'd try to overpower you" (76). But gradually Buddy's intuition takes on female qualities. He becomes the one approached and entered. In serving customers in the barber shop, he becomes their slave (48). He collects and is filled by the "luscious poison" of the community, "until he couldn't be entered

anymore" (40-1). He allows Webb to enter his character (63) and to "breed" him into "something better" (89). He permits Bellocq to push "his imagination into Buddy's brain" (64). He becomes "the reservoir where engines and people drank" (112). He becomes, at least figuratively, a mattress whore: "My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back" (119). During his final performance he finds the perfect audience for his music. What starts as another male "[p]arade of ego" (129), however, shifts disastrously as the dancing woman usurps the dominant role that Buddy usually plays. Mirroring his efforts, she pursues him to Liberty Street. She is as aggressive as he is: "She and he keeping up like storm weeds crashing against each other." If he tries to "spear" her, she sends a "javelin" into him (131). Through her "dance of victory," she violates him and sheds his blood, in keeping with his own secret desire.

The final section of *Coming Through Slaughter* is a studied anti-climax. Confined to passivity in the asylum, Buddy keeps touching things (149), but he makes no contact. He submits silently to rapes (148). At last he has taken the step "beyond" and become the person with whom he originally attained such fierce intimacy. Steven Heighton comments on the book's "thematic and structural cross-generic fusion" (238), arising from its blend of fictional, musical and cinematic modes. Another kind of cross-generic fusion occurs when Buddy blends with all the victims in his community and in his life. When he, too, is raped, he joins Mary Rich and French Emma as an object of desire. I am not tempted to see this reversal as either triumph or bankruptcy, as critics have suggested; or to treat the conclusion of the book as a happy ending, as Constance Rooke recommends. I see it more as a fearful symmetry by which the violator pays the final price and becomes the victim.

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NOTES

1 Sam Solecki deals with extremist art in his essay "Making and Destroying: *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art." Intimacy is an extreme encounter that, in Solecki's terms, suffers the fate of trying to reach what lies beyond extremes.

2 Even more than Hulme, Ezra Pound insists on the compelling but illusory intimacy of poetic imagery, especially in earlier essays like *Gaudier-Brzeska.* As Pound shows, we seem to experience the image directly only because we actually know it indirectly through analogy. I offer just one example: "The image is the poet's pigment. ...the author must use his *image* because he sees it or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics. An *image*, in our sense, is real because we know it directly" (86).

3 See for example John Harmer, *Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1975), John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), and Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

4 Hegel distinguishes between reality "in-itself" (apart from our consciousness of it), and truth as "being-for-consciousness" (our ideas about reality): "This is where the ambiguity of this truth enters. We see that consciousness now has two objects: one is the first *in-itself*, the second is the *being-for-consciousness of this in-itself*. ...the first object, in being known, is altered for consciousness; it ceases to be the in-itself, and becomes something that is the *in-itself* only *for consciousness*. And this then is the True: the being-for-consciousness of this in-itself. Or, in other words, this is the *essence*, or the *object* of consciousness. This new object contains the nothingness of the first, it is what experience has made of it" (Hegel 55).

5 Another passage from Heidegger might illuminate his account of intimacy: "Poetry and thinking meet each other in one and the same only when, and only as long as, they remain distinctly in the distinctness of their nature. The same never coincides with the equal, not even in the empty indifferent oneness of what is merely identical. The equal or identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator. The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference. We can only say 'the same' if we think difference" (218).

6 Many critics have studied this modern-romantic tradition. As well as J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality*, which I have already cited, there are: Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); Babette Deutsch, *Poetry in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963); Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969); Louis

Kampf, *On Modernism: The Prospects for Literature and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967); Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

7 See especially the studies by Linda Hutcheon, Naomi Jacobs, Barry Maxwell, Stephen Scobie and Sam Solecki included in the list of Works Cited.

8 A quibble about names: I am not particularly concerned with distinguishing modernist from postmodern theory, as Hutcheon is at pains to do (10, 27), or even from the post-romantic tradition in which I have set Ondaatje, because all these approaches can construe intimacy according to the same model. The model can then be contested in several ways, as I will show.

9 For example, Luce Irigaray proposes a female idiom of touch and inwardness in her essay, "The Sex Which Is Not One." Her description of intimacy reads like a challenge to Ondaatje: "Property and propriety are undoubtedly rather foreign to all that is female. At least sexually. *Nearness*, however, is not foreign to woman, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible. Woman enjoys a closeness with the other that is *so near she cannot possess it, any more than she can possess herself.* She constantly trades herself for the other without any possible identification of either one of them. Woman's pleasure, which grows indefinitely from its passage in/through the other, poses a problem for any current economy [such as Ondaatje's model of intimacy] in that all computations that attempt to account for woman's incalculable pleasure are irremediably destined to fail" (104-5).

10 Benjamin offers an "intersubjective" (female) rather than an "intrapsychic" (male) mode of intimacy based on a sharing rather than a violating of inner and common "spaces": "An important component of women's fantasy life centers around [sic] the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire, who recognizes it when it emerges of itself. This experience of inner space is in turn associated with the space between self and other: the holding environment and transitional experience. The sense of having an inside is dependent upon a sense of the space in between inside and outside — again the paradox that we need to experience being alone in the presence of the other" (96).

11 Is Webb, who is an invented character, black or white? It seems unlikely that at the turn of the century, a black man would be police

detective in New Orleans; but it is even more unlikely that a black and a white man would share apartments and jobs (35).

12 The conflation of transgression and transcendence suggests a related theme that I do not wish to pursue. It recurs in modern, especially French criticism, where the Marquis de Sade becomes a perverse hero of the imagination. For an account of this theme, see Michel Foucault's essay "A Preface to Transgression," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 29-52. For an account of transgression in Ondaatje, see Barry Maxwell's "Surrealistic Aspects of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*."

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# Coming Through the Spider's Web: Ondaatje's Murderous Metaphors

Edward Parkinson

> Spiders like poets are obsessed with power.
> They write their murderous art which sleeps
> like stars in the corner of rooms,
> a mouth to catch audiences
> weak broken sick ("Spider Blues")

> "I don't know whether I'm happy or not. But in the end that is all that's important—that you keep testing yourself, as you say—experimenting on how good you are, and you can't do that when you want to lose." (*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* 83)

> Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation [*dérive*] the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence. That becoming—or that drift/derivation—does not befall the subject which would choose it or would passively let itself be drawn along by it. As the subject's relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity.... And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent. (*Of Grammatology* 69)

How is it possible that a poet, whose job is to create, can also be a murderer? The images in the above epigraph from "Spider Blues" can operate as an analogy for the poet in general, and for narrative voice in *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* in particular. Is it possible to imagine the poet *as* gunslinger, murdering our sensibilities with his images of Livingstone's carefully and deviously inbred spaniels, Charlie's "blood trail he left straight as a knife cut," and Billy's shooting of the drunken rats who "continued to wheel and stop in the silences and eat each other, some even the bullet." At various emphatic points in Ondaatje's work this obsessive analogy erupts into murderous metaphor.

The line in "Spider Blues" that "Spiders like poets are obsessed with power" reiterates a question that Jacques

Derrida considers at the very outset of his essay "Scribble (writing-power)";

> Who Can Write? What Can Writing Do?
>
> We sense that the (advanced) form of these questions can be, already on its own, diverted. It harbors a ruse, of writing, and this is not accidental. What would it divert from?
>
> Fostering the belief that writing *befalls* power... that it can ally itself to power, can prolong it by contemplating it, or can serve it, the question suggests that writing can *come* [*arriver*] to power or power to writing. It excludes in advance the identification of writing *as* power or the recognition of power from the onset of writing. It auxiliarizes and hence aims to conceal the fact that writing and power never work separately, however complex the laws, the system, or the links of the collusion may be.... Writing does not come to power. It is there beforehand, it partakes of and is made of it. ("Scribble" 117)

Derrida sees writing (what he calls "grammatology") as inextricably bound to power in a manner which excludes the notion of power as separate, something to be sought out and attained. This quotation is critical if we wish to consider at all the notion that Ondaatje is a *powerful* poet. Before examining the quite specific implications of this quotation, I will more familiarly situate the notion of power in relation to Ondaatje and summarize how this relationship has been traditionally approached. The concept of power is central to any poet's craft but particularly concerns Ondaatje's since so much of his writing contains explosive—perhaps even exploitative—images, juxtaposing the serene and the violent. In "Spider Blues" we read that spiders and poets "write their murderous art which sleeps/ like stars in the corner of rooms." And in "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens" it is the poet and not the monster whose "hands drain from his jacket" and "pose in the murderer's shadow." The monster is a harmless Hollywood creation ("Fingers are plastic, electric under the skin/ He's at the call of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer") while the business–man/poet is the one with power. So much of Ondaatje's poetry seems to be examining the questions "Who Can Write? What Can Writing Do?...[how can it] ally itself to power?" For our purposes the most concise question will be: what is the "system of power," the "links of collusion" with which

this murderer, who kills us with metaphor, operates? We will examine how Ondaatje's writing "harbors a ruse" which works to consolidate power even as it diverts us from asking such questions.

The site of power has traditionally been assumed to be the poet's narratology, the origin of voice, the beginning of discourse. This has led to an obsession with the author as originator of the text's *presence*. For instance, in his article "Making and Destroying: *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art" Sam Solecki states that

> Ondaatje's poetry as a whole can be seen as a gradual development away from the impersonality of *The Dainty Monsters* and *the man with seven toes* (1969) towards a more directly subjective, though still controlled, dispassionate and dramatic, examination of his own case, his life as a man and as an artist. (250)

Certainly it is true that one of the themes running through Ondaatje's later work is an examination of the artist and artistic processes. But Solecki reads many of Ondaatje's texts as straight autobiography; the violence of the text is frequently described as "suicidal" or "self-destructive" and it therefore is seen to achieve its effects through a sort of self-abuse. This kind of analysis merely repeats the myth of the romantic artist, torn by his inner ("raw") feelings, who struggles with representing the "truth." In effect, the writer "comes to power" by consistently revealing his (true) *self*. Solecki declares that

> ...*Coming Through Slaughter*, even granting that it is fiction and not autobiography or even confessional poetry, is the story of Michael Ondaatje; it is the work in which *he most explicitly declares* that a fictional character created by him is really a self-portrait. (254, emphasis mine)

Although he *grants* that it is *not* autobiography, Solecki frequently treats it as if it were. However, a point where the author "most explicitly declares" himself, an event which is central to us really believing in the whole autobiographical argument, is absent from Solecki's essay (and from *Coming Through Slaughter* as well I think). Solecki further writes "as if the implicit parallels weren't enough Ondaatje enters the novel in the final section to declare his sense of affinity with

Bolden's life." Despite Solecki's pronouncement, there exists *no* explicit authorial *declaration;* we see only "affinities" and "implicit parallels" and while they certainly set up a *theme* of self-portraiture, the outright affirmation of the artistic self that Solecki (and therefore his rationale) desires simply does not occur.

The advantage to Solecki's (and others') arguments which treat much poetry as autobiographical is that it provides a convenient explanation for the apparatus of the poet's power. Solecki begins his essay by explaining the poet's power autobiographically:

> ...the artist I am concerned with literally flays himself psychologically as he returns obsessively to rending emotions and experiences to provide himself with a subject matter.... The most characteristic work in this tradition... is produced on what Alfred Alvarez has aptly termed "the friable edge" of existence where the continuance and value of life are repeatedly confronted with chaos, madness and suicide, and art with its negation, silence. The rhetoric of suffering becomes the mark of sincerity in the work itself; and, in popular mythology, the madness or suicide of the artist authenticates the *oeuvre.* (247)

Within this formulation writers achieve power through the sincerity of their suffering and this is measured by the degrees to which they bear their souls and reveal deeper truths about their selves. This means that writers must *come to* power by writing themselves, must *earn* their power by producing themselves, on the "friable edge" of their personal parchment. I am examining Ondaatje from the position the "writing does not come to power; it is there beforehand, it partakes of and is made of it" so that the whole notion of suicidal, autobiographical revelation is itself a "friable" concept disguising the strategies and force of a power which always already inhabits the grapheme itself. Writing itself *contains* a violence and a power which are only trivialized when attributed to the individual. Of course any originary *presence*[1] is available only as *trace* and we must be careful since even by calling the writing "Ondaatje's" we probably imply a myth of origins long after the author's corpse has been cremated by literary theorists in general. The calling forth of this myth is inevitable, however, since whenever power is concentrated—or made to serve—then it is usually done under a *name* (itself a signifier of origin). But where precisely are the "links of

collusion"? Just how does writing *contain* this power over and against authorial intentions? In this paper I examine how power articulates itself through different Ondaatje texts, and *murder* (rather than *suicide*) is consistently used as an emissary of power.

At the end of *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* is the following passage:

> It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (105)

Different critics have argued that the narrative voice belongs to Billy, Garrett or perhaps Ondaatje himself. Certainly Billy has had a "bad night" since he has been killed. But Garrett is the survivor of the gun battle and so it should be him who speaks and who "smell[s] the smoke on... [his] shirt." Or perhaps the poet has finally "murdered" his creation and is getting ready to check out of the hotel room where he has locked himself up to write.[2] All these arguments have merit and they all indicate possible directions for subsequent criticism. More important, however, is the manner in which the text itself *allows* and *encourages* the multiple interpretations, as if it really were a spider's web waiting to trap critics into sticking a single meaning upon it.

Perhaps all three voices (or more) are simultaneously present and there is simply no separating them (or at least no simple way of separating them). Have we been trapped into finding a meaning which we desperately seek? Why is it that we so desire the separation and the identification of this nicotine-breathed individual? Certainly readers of Ondaatje reach a point where the discourse—after hinting and promising—simply fails to yield forth the position (i.e. identity) of the narrative voice. The authors—and characters—refuse to present themselves. In the case of the character "Billy," some critics have referred to this reticence as exemplifying his "objectivity." For instance T.D. MacLulich in "Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer" states that this objectivity "offers a disturbing commentary on the far-reaching effects of that mechanical way of seeing the world which is epitomized by the photographic

process" (107). Where the author is concerned the matter of self-reticence is far more complex and explanations can range from the autobiographical to the complete disappearance of the "author-function" into the post-modern abyss. However, it is clear that in Ondaatje's work the search for the origin of voice, the quest for the narrator's position, is a search which is invited by the text and one that is *at the same time* 1. *encouraged* by the *origin*ality of the voice manifested through its outright violence (Ondaatje's "raw of feelings"), and 2. *exposed* by the self-conscious metaphors in Ondaatje's corpus and its open discussion of our search (as we will see below, this exposure of his poetry as artifact is often achieved through the addition of a comic (meta-poetic) voice). But rather than satisfying our curiosity—or revealing the place of the poet—the exposing and baring of metaphor as the device of the poet only serves to consolidate power within the discourse. Each revelation offers only what it desires us to know. In effect, these self-conscious metaphors are a bit of a come on, an attraction of the text that does not keep its promises but invites us further and further into complicity.

While *The Collected Works* strategically employs many shifting forms, it contains little of the overt self-consciousness present in so many of Ondaatje's texts (including *Coming Through Slaughter*, a text which it most closely resembles). The relationships among the various narrative forms in *The Collected Works* might be described as dialogic in that "there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (quotation from the glossary to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* 426). *The Collected Works* fuses together a variety of genres, most notably poetry and prose, but there are also interviews, melodrama, photographs and other forms of expression. Pages 59 to 65 provide a good example of these. This section contains the long prose narrative concerning Livingstone's dogs; page 63 is almost entirely blank space with a four line smutty poem ("Up with the curtain/ down with your pants/ William Bonney/ is going to dance"); page 64 contains a rather longer poem (song perhaps) written in wild west vernacular, and page 65 contains a drawing of a supposed prostitute sitting on a bed. The latter pages provide a welcome contrast to the rather grim story of the dogs and their function is certainly similar to the comic voice of many of Ondaatje's shorter poems. Rather than self-consciously exposing its

metaphors, its longer form allows *The Collected Works* to simply juxtapose a plethora of texts whose interaction with each other conditions our reading. While many of the voices are ostensibly Billy's, this authorial control breaks down towards the end of the book where the "other" voices, including those of the "interviewer," Pat Garrett, Miss Sallie Chisum and Paulita Maxwell take over. It is as if the *mythos* is starting to be written and, in fact, the voice of the "interviewed" Billy barely resembles the author figure we have been reading all along.

I would argue that the poem "Spider Blues" is more *dialectical* than *dialogical* in that the different voices are all different forms of the narrator's voice which never loses control. Since it is clear that *The Collected Works* is more novelistic than "Spider Blues," my distinction is implied by Bakhtin's own opposition of poetry and prose. In his book *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle,* Tzvetan Todorov clarifies this part of Bakhtin's thought:

> From as early as the first edition of the *Dostoevsky,* and especially with "Discourse in the Novel," prose, which is intertextual, is opposed to poetry, which isn't.... The poet fully takes upon himself his speech act, which becomes an enunciation in the first degree, not represented, without quotation marks. The prose writer represents language, introduces a distance between himself and his discourse; his act of uttering is double... (64-65)

The poem's first person narrative deliberately includes the poet and the spider in an antithetical conversation. "Spider Blues" directly engages the whole question of power and how it functions in the author/audience relationship and in this way the shorter poem helps explicate many issues which are important in *The Collected Works,* but which the latter poem refuses to discuss directly. In "Spider Blues" both poets and spiders are "obsessed with power" and "write... [a] murderous art." The narrator admires the spider for his "classic control" over his eight legs and also, we may imagine, for his appropriateness as an image of the poet:

> A kind of writer I suppose.
> He thinks a path and travels
> The emptiness that was there
> Leaves his bridge behind

The Spider walks a creative tightrope, defining himself in an absolute sense as he travels over emptiness and leaves his bridge behind. At this point in the poem a comic voice intrudes with what, grammatically, is a parenthetical statement ("looking back saying Jeez/ did I do that?") and then the stanza ends with the earlier metaphysical seriousness ("and uses his ending/ to swivel to new regions/ where the raw of feelings exist."). The alternation between comic and serious voices is a recurring strategy in Ondaatje. Here it operates as a dialectic between a discourse that seeks truth (the serious poet who seeks some sort of transcendent vision) and one that comically exposes the self-consciousness of this search.

The juxtaposing of comic and serious (sometimes horrific) material occurs throughout *The Collected Works* as well, but as I have stated above, it operates dialogically. The most obvious example of this comic voice is the burlesque poetry which is an entirely self-contained form, yet it takes on different meanings when it is read against the other material in the book. The poetic voice itself *burlesques* the more serious material surrounding it. In general *The Collected Works* lacks the same *self-conscious* voice of many of the shorter poems; in Russian Formalist terms *The Collected Works* relies on the juxtaposing itself to "bare the [poetic] device." With its more extended form *The Collected Works* is able to contain a variety of discourses which simply could not be incorporated into a lyric poem.[3]

The spider/fly relationship operates as an analogy for that of the poet/audience. The spider attempts to woo the fly through his *intelligence* (and this term is itself a troping of the material "web" the spider "thinks"):

> And the spider comes to fly, says
> Love me I can kill you, love me
> my intelligence has run rings about you
> love me, I kill you for the clarity that
> comes when roads I make are being made
> love me, antisocial, lovely.

The fly's reply is a comic banter:

> And fly says, O no
> No your analogies are slipping
> No I choose who I die with

> You spider poets are all the same
> You in your close vanity of making,
> You minor drag, your saliva stars always
> Soaking up the liquid from our atmosphere.

The fly's refusal works on two levels: by rejecting the spider's vain advances the fly rejects his style, but it also rejects the spider's art in general. The latter is clear since it is sloppy analogies, rather than body odour or simple narcissism that the fly finds objectionable. A connection between art and life is made explicit here, for the sloppiness of art has a very physical reality for the fly; the opposite of "slipping" analogies would be ones that "stuck," that trapped (i.e. murdered) the fly with their perfect form. To quote Ondaatje, art that murders is art that has a "mouth to catch audiences."[4]

Beneath this analogy lies the fact that the spiders' "art" is their primary means of survival; their web *is* their life and aesthetic discussion necessarily becomes an after dinner affair. Poets are like spiders in that an audience is also necessary to ensure economic and artistic survival. The logic of the parallel ends, however, when we consider that to *murder* one's audience is really a form of artistic suicide since murder, presumably, is not something an audience keeps coming back for. And yet Ondaatje's poetry stops short of this ultimate sin since, while he places the poet in the position of murderer, we never see him carry out the act upon an audience. Wallace Stevens poses "in the murderer's shadow" but he does not kill anyone. With Billy it is more complex because, as the subtitle "Left Handed Poems" suggests, the hand that kills also writes the poems. In *The Collected Works* the line between author and killer is deliberately drawn fine (perhaps they are separated only by our own knowledge of representation). On one level, Ondaatje may merely be stating that the poet must be predatory in his craft by constantly attempting murder. As Billy states in his fictitious interview with the *Texas Star*, you must always "keep testing yourself, as you say—experimenting on how good you are, and you can't do that when you want to lose." Despite the appropriateness of this poet/gunfighter interpretation, the overall analogy is not so simple. We must ask ourselves, what *power* is transferred between gun and pen, between the art of killing people and the art of killing metaphors which "stand in" for people?

In "Spider Blues," the fly's comic refusal results in a chilling conclusion of the stanza:

> And the spider in his loathing
> crucifies his victims in his spit
> making them the art he cannot be.

Finally, the spider asserts his *power* over the fly: he turns the fly into art—and also his dinner, in effect his sustenance—by poisoning it. The spider/artist turns his dinner into something that he can never be: an art object. Significantly, this metamorphosis is accomplished only through the fly's death. However, this murder, as it is staged in the poem, exists firstly to demonstrate the spider's *power*, and secondly to expose the limit of that power (i.e. which is also the limit of the metaphor). The theme of death runs throughout Ondaatje's works and the role of the author is inevitably tied up in it all. Of course the words of the fly—which serve to seal its death—are themselves "dead letters" already inscribed under the *proper* name of the author poet. The fly has always been Ondaatje's deceased, textual property.

The poem could end at this point, the spider triumphant over the crucified fly.[5] Instead, a narrator interrupts to discuss the mechanism of the ending:

> So. The ending we must arrive at.
> ok folks.
> Nightmare for my wife and me:

This narrator's voice consistently interrupts the seriousness of the spider's intent. Or perhaps it interrupts the seriousness of the analogy itself by undermining the murderous intentions of the spider/poet. In any event we again have a dialectic where the serious murder is interrupted, and framed, by the comic narrative voice announcing the nightmare.

The—seemingly genuine—murder of the fly is followed by the dream murder of the narrator's wife. The dream serves as a veil to protect us from believing too seriously in this latest killing; like Wallace Stevens' "shadow," it prevents the poet from being guilty of homicide. Indeed, it echoes the image that begins the poem ("My wife has a smell that spiders go for./ At night they descend saliva roads/ down to her dreaming body."). By veiling the seriousness of the image, the dream narrative functions in the same dialectic sense as the comic

voice, only in this case it could be argued that the dialectic exists within the narrative voice itself (the image can be dismissed as dream and yet it still retains its disturbing aspects). This image clearly shows how power and writing are inextricably bound; we are caught between a horrifying image and the explanation that it is just a dream. Furthermore, the spiders who supply the central revulsion are blandly referred to as "architects" thus further diminishing the sensational aspects.

"Spider Blues" contains a series of dramatizations which continually veil a deadly seriousness. Comic and earnest voices are juxtaposed so that their metaphors are always *deliberately* exposed; as we shall see, this power of deliberation is the poet's only defense against annihilation. That is, the poet has no say over the fact that every poem *must* end, that the poems are inhabited by the *trace*, the carrier of death. But by drawing attention to their own endings, and the cunning with which they have juxtaposed various layers—or veils—of representation, the narrator uses the guise of inevitability as a particular manifestation of power.[6]

In "Spider Blues" a poet's deliberation, like a spider's *thinking* of a path and then *travelling* over that path, is an extreme self-defining strategy, a pushing forth of one's own thought—represented by the metaphor of spinning a web—in an effort to attract an audience. "Deliberation" is also a central figure for control over a discourse since it so obviously points to the process of thought. A discourse's very *deliberateness* is a measure and a product of its intent. In "Spider Blues" we repeatedly see the narrator thinking through a path and then glancing back as if to say, "Jeez, did I do that?" And the only response possible to this hermeneutic catechism is the audience's firm affirmation.

Significantly, it is its very *deliberateness* that distinguishes murder from other types of "killing." These definitions from the OED demonstrate the particularity of murder:

> The most heinous kind of criminal homicide; also, an instance of this. In *English* (also *Sc.* and *U.S.*) *law*, defined as the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought; often more explicitly *wilful murder*.

Murder is a deliberate (some might say "ultimate") *premeditated* violence against another human being. Murder

must be thought through, represented beforehand as it were, and is the product of one's "will." It is also significant that in the penal code there are different degrees of murder, the most severe (1st degree murder) being that which has been deliberated on for the longest length of time. Here we see that poets share the practice of deliberation with the murderer as they hone their metaphors so that they are "killing."

The principle difference between murderers and poets is that the former act upon people, while the latter operate in the realm of the text. Language and texts have always been associated with death. In his essay "What is an Author?" Foucault discusses the "kinship between writing and death":

> This relationship inverts the age-old conception of Greek narrative or epic, which was designed to guarantee the immortality of a hero. The hero accepted an early death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death.... Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer. Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author. (116-117)

The author risks annihilation behind his own textual creations. Once the discourse is created it literally takes over the *name* of the author and disseminates that name into whatever culture is there to receive it. Authors, then, kill themselves repeatedly with whatever words they write. These remarks of Foucault oppose the myth of an originary presence (a "signified") and should be read with Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" in mind. For our purposes the following passage is most important:

> ...writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing. (208)

Writing, then, is a site of destruction where everyone who participates in it risks annihilation (e.g. the destruction of their subjectivity). *Écriture* is inextricably bound to both power and danger, full of risk where each letter, once inscribed as grapheme, forever escapes the control of the poet.

Ondaatje attempts to invert this process by asserting his *power* over his discourse. By killing his creations and even attempting the (metaphoric) murder of his audience he creates the ultimate *image* of power itself. Both "Spider Blues" and *The Collected Works* operate as complex tropes of death. Writing, that eternal carrier of death, is represented as serving the poet as the spider/author attempts to kill his audience. The result of this turnaround (itself the troping of the image of death carried in all writing) is a manifestation of power as writing which is *seen to serve* the *figure* of the poet. I am, of course, paraphrasing the argument in the earlier quotation from "Scribble (writing power)." We *believe* that Ondaatje's writing "*befalls* power... that it can ally itself to power, can prolong it by contemplating [or "deliberating"] it, or can serve it..." (Square brackets mine). But in fact, writing has been there all along and nothing is started or ended by the appearance on the scene of Ondaatje, the spider/poet or the gunslinger/poet. All exist as specific manifestations of death, as a loss of subjectivity, a "becoming-absent" and "becoming unconscious" of the subject, an existence-as-process having an originary place in the structure of the grapheme.

While "Spider Blues" exposes and exploits poetic presence in the form of the author/murderer, *The Collected Works* does so much more surreptitiously. To begin with, the "author-function" is displaced or diverted by the ruse of the character Billy the Kid. This diversion has been so effective that much criticism has been expended upon elucidations of Billy's "character" through an analysis of "his" writings.[7] I am not suggesting that this criticism is "wrong" because it misses the "real" author since that would itself be succumbing to the myth of origin. I merely wish to show how Billy functions as a presence within the system of writing and power and not as a personality within someone's system of humanity. Fundamentally, Billy exists as an alibi for the murdering author (e.g. "It wasn't *me* who shot Gregory on page 15 where the chicken 'hops on his neck/ digs the beak into his throat/ straightens legs and heaves/ a red and blue vein out'; it was Billy.")

There are several comparisons possible between Billy and the spider (both author/murderer figures). They are both murderers who are very self-conscious about their work. Gunfighting is a type of performance and so is spinning a web. The spider attempts to seduce the fly through his poetry

which is really an elaborate metaphor of death. The web, as artistic object, conceals its primitive function so that the fly, unaware of its own powerlessness, attempts to comically reject the discourse it is always already stuck in. Similarly, the myth of Billy the Kid helps disguise much of *The Collected Works'* intentions. The colourful western myth, complete with comic book dialogue, rustic photographs and an "exclusive" interview, balances the more serious aspects of the work. Underneath the artist's apparently benevolent appropriation, however, lies "the murderer's shadow."

On page 45 of *The Collected Works* Garrett offers the following description of William Bonney:

> I joined them just as they were finishing dinner. Bonney seemed relaxed and dressed very well, his left heel resting on his right knee. He ate corn, drank coffee, used a fork and knife alternately—always with his right hand. The three days we were together and at other times in our lives when we saw each other, he never used his left hand for anything except of course to shoot. He wouldn't even pick up a mug of coffee. I saw the hand, it was virgin white. Later when we talked about it, I explained about how a hand or muscle unused for much work would atrophy, grow small. He said he did finger exercises subconsciously, on the average 12 hours a day. And it was true. From then on I noticed his left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel. Curling into balls, pouring like waves across a tablecloth. It was the most hypnotising beautiful thing I ever saw.

Garrett draws a domestic portrait of Bonney, the relaxed and companionable guest on the Chisum's ranch. The only thing out of the ordinary is the killer's hand which "he never used... for anything except of course to shoot." Bonney's hand, as described by Garrett, seems remarkably similar to the spider we encountered above. The phrase "churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel" mimics the motion of a spider crawling towards its victim (of course this could also describe the untanned hand of the poet who spends his days indoors, writing, churning his pencil across the page). By devoting and refining such an essential portion of his anatomy to the singular act of killing, Billy *deliberately* writes his own body into the image of the murderer. And for both Billy and the spider, life is a continual process of hunger,

of always being on the alert, of always assuming the next moment could bring murder.

There are several points in *The Collected Works* where poetry and violence merge. One of the most graphic instances occurs when Billy is shooting the drunken cart wheeling rats in the barn: "...the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears, the smoke sucked out of the window as it emerged from my fist and the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as a emissary across and between the wooden posts that never returned" (18). The bullet is represented as a sort of calm and silent epistle in the midst of the extreme violence of the scene and the madness of the rats who "eat each other, some even the bullet." The image of the bullet as a form of communication (Billy calls it an "emissary" while I call it an "epistle") echoes my comment above that "we will examine how... *murder* is consistently used as an emissary of power." *The Collected Works'* subtitle "Left Handed Poems" directly conflates the figures of artist and murderer. Garrett states that Billy uses his left hand only for killing and yet the title implies he also writes with his left hand. The hand that writes is also the hand that kills and therefore Billy's art exists under the shadow of murder.

To answer one of our initial questions, then, ("Who Can Write? What Can Writing Do?") it is apparent that Billy *can* write and that throughout Ondaatje's work writing functions in collusion with power. Billy "saves himself" for writing, his left hand conflates the gun and the pen making both emissaries of his power. Those figures in the text who can be seen to control writing, who are buried in it, who survive through their allegiance to writing, represent certain forms of heroism. Foucault tells us that in Greek tragedy "The hero accepted an early death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death." Currently, however, the hero uses death as a figure for writing. The hero attempts to write *himself* into history because history *as writing* is the only form of existence available.

Returning to the hotel room, where our gun slinging author/murderer is washing up, we can see that the paragraph's signification is a function of many different voices in collusion with the structuring of power. The image of cigarette smoke "hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof" is especially cinematic so perhaps the narrator—whether he is

Billy, Pat or Michael—is himself caught within a (comic) discourse of a spaghetti western. In any event, power has been exercised through our reading of the text, our spacing of the events, our desire for the return of presence which, instead of returning, manifests itself as the becoming-absent of the subject. Poets are always murderers because they create death through the graphemes on the page which signify only absence, deferral and ruse. Each writing is a return to death, an erasing of subjectivity. This written death, in turn, attracts audiences with its mouth that speaks and beckons with its deliberation, its intelligence. It is not Billy's gun that is dangerous, it is the structure of death that allows it to speak.

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NOTES

[1] "The formal essence of the signified is *presence*, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as *phonè* is the privilege of presence. This is the inevitable response as soon as one asks: "what is the sign?," that is to say, when one submits the sign to the question of essence... The "formal essence" of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence" (*Of Grammatology* 18).

[2] This would parallel the image Ondaatje creates in "Burning Hills": "So he came to write again/ in the burnt hill region/ north of Kingston. A cabin/ with mildew spreading down walls.... What he brought: a typewriter/ tins of ginger ale, cigarettes..."

[3] Here I am identifying the lyric poem with what Bakhtin calls "epic." For a discussion of this see "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

[4] It seems that Ondaatje's comic voice often encourages the reader to ponder the relationship between art and life. In "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens" the line "Is it significant that I eat a banana while I write this?" also forces the reader to question this relationship.

[5] One may wonder about the place of the crucifixion in the scene. Perhaps, as Christ stands in materially for the omniscient holy father, the fly stands in for the omniscient audience who will ultimately determine the cultural place of the poem. This would be consistent with the metaphor of murder. Or perhaps it is meant to be ironic and is really only a cruci*fiction*.

6 I might add, rather generally, that this "recuperating gesture" is characteristic of much of the fiction we call "post-modern." That is, there is a consistent self-consciousness that operates in and around much current fiction and poetry as if seeking to assure the reader that the narrator has already taken all interpretive routes before them. Of course this gesture does not originate with the author, but with the "intentional fallacy"; that is, it originates with our *desire* to find an author, to be reassured, perhaps, by the text's unity guaranteed by its forthright omniscience regarding its own meaning.

7 For instance: "Billy withdraws into emotional neutrality in order to avoid acknowledging his own susceptibility to emotional or physical weakness. In other words, he tries to retreat from inescapable aspects of his own humanity" (MacLulich 111).

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# "That Is to Say a Vision:" Distance and the Differing Eye in Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers*

Anne Raine

> For me nature... means a place where I can be but also a place from which I can have a *view*. It has a lot to do with the eyes. I like a huge expanse of nature where I can both be in it and look at it. (Brossard, *Rubicon* 186)

> Between the individual and the writer there is a free space, a mysterious landscape where one discovers and dares things that the individual cannot afford. It is in that space that I learn about myself and can transform myself. (Brossard, *Rubicon* 189)

> I try to open a path or make space, in fact, for a new perspective on reality, a new vision on reality, on fiction, on language. (Brossard, *Rubicon* 182)

Statements like these express Nicole Brossard's vision of a space, a vista, which can accommodate the viewing eye, the changing self, and the voice of the female writer. This intersection of visual, kinesthetic, psychic, and textual spheres becomes the locus for *These Our Mothers*.[1] Against the patriarchal visual/symbolic field in which women inhere as isolated, fragmented objects of the male gaze, Brossard articulates a new textual space envisioned through the eye appropriated and inhabited by a collective female subject. In traversing this space, the reader gradually comes to see how the distancing of the eye from its context within patriarchy collapses the distance between interior and exterior, perceiver and perceived, subject and object, and how this collapse then opens a space for a multiplicity of female subjects, rather than a number of objectified female fragments, to enter, envision, in vision. When Brossard's text is approached in translation, its exploration of distance takes on yet another dimension, since such a reading must allow a space which respects and

accommodates the ambiguities and permutations of meaning that span the distance between two languages.

For Brossard's child-subject, vision begins in the distance between herself and her father: "I am touching my mother. Her body is obvious, I know her like a sensation. But to know him, I need my eyes, I must speak to him. He won't let himself be touched" (33). The distance "between him (his flesh his power) and me" (34) cannot be crossed through physical contact, but only through seeing and speaking; in learning the father's language, the child must learn not only "to speak. Word for word, like him," but also "To reflect" (33) back to his gaze the patriarchal image of what a daughter should be. From the beginning, then, what matters is not that the child learn to see the father, but that she learn to "speak the truth... Under his eyes... to align [her]self at his side" in order to see, as to speak, *like* him, and to see herself through his eyes: "I have looked at my father, looking at us my mother and me like a mythical statue" (36). To gain access to the power the father represents, the female child must somehow learn to assume the male gaze while at the same time being viewed and viewing herself as aligned with its female object.

The father's gaze creates a duality in which the seeing subject and the object of observation are constructed as absolutely different; the difference, both physical and ideological, between men and women "is confirmed and nourished" by the patriarchal "science of looking." What the male viewer "looks at, he absolutely refuses to look like:" not only does he differ in appearance from women, but in fact his construction of himself as looker and women as looked at prevents him from having any appearance at all, since he is located outside the field of vision altogether. Unexposed to the gaze, he can attain "control and mastery of that which is under observation," that is, of women (35). With "his eyes everywhere on [her] body" (44), woman is object of rather than participant in vision, and cannot create meanings, but can only embody those ascribed to her by man; "she represents in his eyes" (89) but not in hers. The duality "original/reproduction" (38) posits man as original being/ woman as "reproduced" from his rib, or in other words, man as originator/creator of the symbolic field in which woman is not an autonomous being but a "reproduction" of male fears and fantasies. The male gaze thus posits the difference between male viewer and female viewed as an ontological one

which consolidates male power by denying women existence outside the field of patriarchal vision.

From his invulnerable external viewpoint, man can achieve a broad and coherent "global vision" of what he surveys; he can "appropriat[e] for himself the entire symbolic domain" by ascribing his own meanings to the images of female body parts "brain, uterus, vagina, arms, legs, mouth, tongue" (21)—but not eyes, since women are to be seen but not to see. This complex of symbolic meanings reduces women "to the general (to the house) by using the singular" (61), that is, it denies women individuation and identity by subsuming them under the single ideologically loaded category "Woman." Yet each woman's position under this singular collective identity deprives her of a unary individual self-image, since the mirror which shows a man himself shows a woman "only an allusion" to the meanings assigned by men to the imagery of women's bodies. For the female viewer, the gap between the active, viewing subject-self she seeks and the passive male-defined image that confronts her is a difference that "cut[s] her in two" (38).

The female subject's internal fragmentation is mirrored by the divisions the patriarchal context imposes between women. Just as the child's effort to learn the father's tongue/gaze separates her from physical contact with the mother (33), women's position as viewed objects rather than as autonomous viewing subjects denies them visual engagement with other women. Crystallized into image in the lens of the male gaze, they are "split in two, multiplied" into a number of isolated, unindividuated signifying bodies, "unsure of the closeness or remoteness of others" (18), distanced from and unable to see or contact each other. The fragmented female body which Brossard argues prevents women from "broach[ing] the global vision of man" (21) refers not only to the objectified and decontextualized images of female body parts in pornography and advertising, nor simply to the individual divided woman, but also to women's isolation from each other which prevents them from taking collective control of vision.

The "symmetry in the eye" demanded of women suggests both the dualities they represent within the male gaze (such as virgin/whore) and the dual position they must try to occupy as both subject and viewed object. The female eye is thus trapped in dualism, which Brossard elsewhere describes as "a

thinking pattern closed on itself [which] doesn't permit extraterritorial elements" (*Rubicon* 183); Brossard's expression "stymied like a dialectic" describes an irritation (sty) of the female eye, brought on by dualism (dialectic), which prevents it (stymied) from functioning, effectively "blinding it" (36). However the female subject tries to construct a world in accordance with her own vision, it can only remain a fiction that "reality comes out from her eyes" (33), since she herself is constructed as object by the dualistic male gaze that sees female inner subjectivity as an "extraterritorial element" for which it can leave no space.

Brossard explores in various other ways the appropriation and blinding of the female eye. On visiting "the men in the museum," which I take to mean male artists' renderings of the female body, "the eye is trapped in the palace of flesh. To evaluate" (51): the female eye is caught both in the position of the male voyeur/viewer the images imply, and in the depicted and evaluated bodies with which, as female, it must also identify. The economy of pornography also traps the female eye in a system where women exchange their bodies (or images of their bodies) for money and their autonomous eye/vision for that of the rapacious male. Women's eyes thus become physical objects of exchange, of bruising blows that produce "black eyes," and of visual control which blinds ("darkens") their vision: "Eye for eye. Blackout" (55). The physicality with which Brossard here inscribes the female eye parallels the equally tangible dominance of the male gaze over it: women cannot see clearly so long as they are divided internally and from each other by the "fiction in front of our eyes" (98), that is, by the "opaque body of the patriarchy" that not only entraps them, but also "obstruct[s] [their] vision" (Brossard, *Aerial Letter* 79).

In all these contexts, Brossard presents the eye both as a physical object which can be caught and exchanged and as a site of enormous power to envision and articulate reality. The question "Am I myself caught fictive moistening the white globe" (52) expresses the same paradox: a pale, inert sphere, the eye nonetheless holds the power to define reality and fiction. While a man, in control of the visual field, might wonder whether the world is an imaginary construct which vanishes when he closes his eyes, a woman, who is viewed as well as viewer, wonders whether she herself is fictive and liable to vanish in the blink of an eye. In order to make herself

real, she must use both the physicality and the abstract power of the eye, must conceive it both as an object which can be dislodged from its position in patriarchal fictions and as an imaginary location into which she can move away from the objectified visual/symbolic field and through which she can articulate her own vision.

Brossard describes the eye of the female child-subject as "unstitched like a button... Hanging on [the patriarchal mother's] breast" (18); already removed from its place in its owner's subjectivity and attached to a male-defined figure, the eye must be taken back, "distanc[ed]... from her enough so as to see her in a different way, not fragmented into her metaphoric parts" (16). By distancing her eye from the patriarchal mother, the female subject removes it from its isolated entrapment in the visual/symbolic field; she can "find her own place at a distance" from woman's objectified location in the male gaze, a point distant enough from the field of vision that "a woman's eye" can "res[t] on others, on things" (18). As Brossard says elsewhere, the female subject must "get up and move" in order to attain "a certain angle of vision" which is unobstructed by "the opaque body of patriarchy" (Brossard, *Aerial Letter* 79). In this way she can approach the "global vision" (21) which was accessible only to man as long as he alone maintained distance from what was under observation.

A global vision of reality as a whole, then, must be reached by first experiencing the globe of the eye which envisions it. The "white globe" (52) presents an implacable surface, "the eyelid its thickness" (80), "the eyelid oh the sun membrane of the smooth" (51), "the frontier of the eyes" at which the woman survives "in-tension" (65) between her viewing and viewed selves. As this "two-faced" female subject/object "bores into the eyes... in a final struggle against blindness," she breaks free of her immobilization in the patriarchal visual/symbolic field and becomes "migratory," her motion toward the interior of the eye making her "intense unreadable" as male-defined sign (61). No longer a passive image, she passes into the eye itself to become an active viewing subject, "strayed from [her] field" of patriarchal vision (56) to find that the retina is capable of "accommodating [her]" (53) more comfortably than did the entrapping male gaze. The female subject moves "inside to expose [her]self" (57), as Godard points out, to "the sensations of vision from

many different angles... all animated by the passionate centre of her experience" (Godard 29).

The female viewer moves into the eye "to scrutinize as [she] invades" its surface, the source of vision. This surface is "neither more nor less than the darting glance the feverish loss of the singular" (51): just as her own movement out of the male visual field prevents her from being subsumed into the singular generalized image "Woman," the eye cannot be presented as a unity, since each motion of its glance creates new sensations. Thus the section "The Act of the Eye" encompasses a multiplicity of possible experiences of the interior landscape of vision: the salt-like, tortuous violence of opening to look at oppression (51), the blissful blindness of closing the eye so that the pupil widens as far as it can (52), the watery imagery and grey-white blankness perceived by the weeping eye (53), the vital, nourishing sensuality of the "serum" of desire transmitted from one lover's eye to the other's (54), the flickering glance of the eye bombarded by violent images (55), and so on. In releasing herself from the "intension-survival" of her divided existence under the male gaze (65), the female viewer also releases vision from the single intention of that gaze, which, as I discussed above, is to maintain male power through a rigid subject/object duality in which vision must proceed in a single direction, from the male eye to the female object. Abandoning this control over vision, the female viewer admits not one but many images and sensations in a visual field which encompasses not only external objects, but the eye's inner life as well.

In contrast to the male gaze, which seeks to distance itself from its field of vision, the female gaze Brossard proposes seeks in fact to collapse this distance, this duality between viewer and viewed, subject and object, which in the patriarchal construction means for women a fatal internal split. Exploring the effect of distances, Brossard ambiguously concludes that "the visual distance makes the difference in content while close up makes the abstraction" (56). If the distance here separates male viewer and female viewed, or female-as-subject and female-as-object, then it constructs a prescriptive, dualistic difference; but if it means the new distance between the female eye and the patriarchal visual field, then it allows a healthy, positive difference between women's subjectivity and the patriarchal construction of Woman. If what is "close up" is patriarchal viewers and their objects, then the abstraction is a

dangerous obscuring of clear subject/object identities; but if it links the female eye with what that eye surveys, then abstraction can be a means of perception and expression freed from dualism and from the demand to see only what patriarchy admits as "realistic."

The image of two women "close up" together in a lesbian embrace (23) exemplifies such freedom; rejecting patriarchal definitions of the couple as heterosexual, it rejects also the self/Other, subject/object dualisms of heterosexual power relationships. Because of their mirroring forms and because they acknowledge each other as subject as well as object of vision, both "her and me" fuse in "the synthesis of an unique identical woman," and not only "know the road backwards, from object to subject" (37), but in fact collapse altogether the distance that must be travelled between them. In this way the lesbian lover's eye "become[s] the eye of her lover in the distance" (54): the gazes fuse and lose their "one-way" direction, and the distance between them loses its meaning.

Distance, the decision "to see from near or far" (58) quickly appears an artificial distinction when the eye itself takes the forms of a pool (53), a meadow (54), an embattled city (55), a house of sleep and dreams (56); with such an experience of the eye, no clear division can any longer demarcate interior and exterior spaces, so that a movement inward can also be one of exposure (57). In such an undifferentiated reality, "eyes become feeble in space intentionally, from acting with fresh perception" (64): just as the lesbian viewer/subject can no longer distinguish herself from the object of her gaze, so the eye seeking a new kind of perception loses its ability to perceive spatial dualities (near/far, inside/outside) on which the patriarchal gaze depends.

What Brossard's reconstruction of the gaze does, in fact, is to construct a new kind of space in which the female subject can "attain a dimension other than symbolic" (65). As she says in the quotations at the beginning of this paper, she "makes space... for a new vision on reality," a space which the active and viewing woman can both inhabit and survey. In *These Our Mothers,* such a space is found in the eye which is both scrutinized object and welcoming landscape, and which is a kind of crucible from which the new female subject can come forth intact (60) and tactile. But in *The Aerial Letter,* Brossard describes a textual space in very similar terms:

> When we write, we are necessarily slowed down by the act of forming letters... this time constitutes space.... In this space, we are freed up from gravity... from the usual sensations of senses, from ambivalence and from contradiction. When we leave the continuum, we have the memory of what was obvious. (150-1)

Like the eye in *These Our Mothers*, like the landscape between individual and writer in the earlier quotation, this writing space is a place distanced from the usual restrictions of "reality," a place in which perception is free. Spatial and visual exploration, then, intersect with a textual one, making the generation of a text synonymous with the motion through space of the sensual/kinetic female body and of the viewing female eye.

This fusion suffuses *These Our Mothers* through constant identifying, often in very physical terms, of vision with writing or speech. To appropriate the symbolic domain is "to say a vision" (21); "To write about" women's fragmentation in the male gaze "would be a woman's eye" (18); "to put into focus" one opens not only the eye but also the mouth (51); to be able to look is also "to finish [one's] sentence" (53). The writer experiences her text "in [her] mouth, before [her] eyes" (78). This simultaneity of seeing and speaking expresses once more Brossard's rejection of dualism, since it constructs the writer, and presumably also the reader, as both perceiver and producer of the text.

In noting that her text "has a woman's body in [her] eyes, the subject" (78), the writer who earlier conflated speech and vision now also posits a conflated subject: the woman's body "deobjectified," the female eyes which include her in vision, and the writer herself merge and form a "protagonist" in flux. This new subject moves, sees, speaks, but is more implied than depicted, and thus escapes objectification in any field of vision. Because the implied female subject in the text is in fact a multiple subjectivity constantly changing her age, context, pronoun, the reader cannot read her as a passive object; rather than distancing herself from the textual field as the male viewer does from the visual one, the reader too must participate in collapsing the distance between herself and the textual subject, her own space and the textual one. Through her own moving, seeing, speaking, the reader helps to construct the new space into which Brossard's text opens our gaze.

[1] Nicole Brossard, *These Our Mothers*, trans. Barbara Godard (Coach House Quebec Translations, 1983). All further references to this text will appear in the body of the essay; unless otherwise noted, page numbers cited refer to this text. This essay works with Godard's interesting translation of Brossard's *L'Amèr ou le Chapitre effrité* (Montreal: Les Editions Quinze, 1977).

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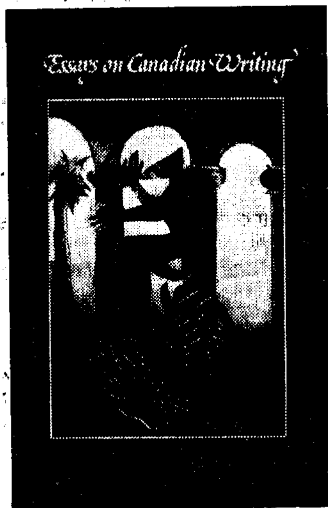


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