

FEMALE AUTHORSHIP REVISITED IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

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Abstract: Anxiety of influence and anxiety of authorship are two common terms in literary history and theory. Both of them refer to the struggle of an artist to come to terms with the impositions of the literary canon. The first one, coined by Harold Bloom, has a general reference over the poet and his relationship to his literary ancestry while the latter, originating from the - by now ‘classical’ – *The Madwoman in the Attic*, addresses this phenomenon from the point of view of feminine authorship – restricted by the constraints of patriarchal culture which has traditionally rendered authorship masculine and attributed women unrealistic roles which they haven’t been able to identify with. Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood approaches the problem of women’s authorship – directly or indirectly - in several of her novels. The present paper sets out to analyze such aspects in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), by tracing in the novel the motif of ‘the double’ and identifying it as a metafictional comment on women’s literary tradition.

Keywords: anxiety of influence, poetic misprision, anxiety of authorship, the double, feminist metafiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Blind Assassin is the somber story of two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase, tracing their lives from a happy childhood in a well-to-do middle class family until Iris’s old age. The novel offers a realistic and accurate social milieu to the Canada of the beginning of the century. From its debut, informing on Laura’s suicide more or less triggered by Iris admitting an affair with Alex, the man Laura had been in love with, we find out about Iris’s unhappy marriage to Richard Griffen, an industrial magnate, the loss of her daughter, the twists and turns that have lead to the tragic conclusion in both sisters lives. The story unfolds through Iris’s narrative who intends it to be some kind of a testimony or confession to her granddaughter Sabrina, whom she has never seen. Parallel to Iris’s story there runs another one about the secret rendezvous of two lovers, the man – a true male *Seherazade* – telling the gruesome story of the blind assassins and sacrificial virgins –victims turned into avengers - on the faraway planet of Zycron. We gradually connect the science fiction characters to the ‘real ones’ (that is,

those in Iris Chase’s story) and realize that the two narratives – interspersed with ‘the official version’ of newspaper cut-outs – are also instruments of revenge. Iris’s story will help Sabrina discover the truth about her origin and ‘reinvent herself at will’ [1]. When it is published, the parallel story – attributed to Laura and generating an actual cult around her image as a one-book rebel who died too young – brings down Richard Griffen, the person causing both sisters’ misery.

2. THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

Harold Bloom, in his remarkable analysis on the mechanisms of poetic (and, implicitly, artistic) imagination employs the term ‘misprision’ in order to trace elements of impact in the creation of new artistic work [2]. The meaning of the term itself covers both the possibility of misunderstanding, as well as that of contempt of authority. As such, it becomes a pertinent word to denominate the position of an artist within the continuum of tradition. Bloom explains this process, which can be described as both appropriation and assimilation, in six episodes. The masterpieces

of predecessors induce anxiety but at the same time they represent an imperative for new creation through the prism of the old one. Misprision implies a deliberate misunderstanding, or, in the case of literature, misreading and miswriting of a preexisting text to the point in which it no longer belongs to the predecessor, much rather, it gives the impression that the work of the predecessor has been actually written by the successor. This last episode is given the name 'Apophrades: return of the dead' and it is an allusion to a belief in ancient Athens that on certain ill-fated days the dead returned to haunt the houses they had lived in. However, this 'literary haunting' is a necessary one, it being the prerequisite frame of new creation. As pointed out elsewhere: "there are no texts, but only relationships between texts" [3], so literature is a vast map of (artistic) misreading, a succession of texts conjured into being by the anxiety of influence.

Margaret Atwood describes this process as 'a negotiation with the dead' and imagines the artist – like Orpheus, Gilgamesh, Dante and so many others - as going down 'to where the story is' and bringing it to the surface. 'All writing of the narrative kind' – Atwood says – 'is motivated, deep down, by a fear and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead' [4]. Risky, because of the danger of not being able to return but important because it is a record of memories on past events, thus, saved for the future, securing one's immortality. The undertaking of Atwood's fictional writer, Iris Chase, who represents the 'key' to the story, is twofold. The narrative saves and recovers the sisters, and the 'truth' for Sabrina who represents both Iris's and Laura's future. At the same time Laura is brought back by an admitted, spiritual contribution to the writing of the narrative.

Yet, a probably more important reason for this memoir being put on paper is that of finally being revealed the truth. By his/her descent to the Underworld the artist fulfills an 'old arrangement': 'The dead get blood; [...] In return, the poet gets clairvoyance and the completion of her identity as a poet' [4], and

so does Iris. By writing the story she settles accounts with Laura, for having caused her suicide. It is an offering in exchange for being given the chance to arrange the pieces of the puzzle and put the fragments of memory into their right place. Throughout the story Iris is the one who 'is asleep' as Laura tells her (185). As opposed to her, 'Laura had such a direct gaze, such blankly open eyes' (190). Despite her 'not being like other people', or perhaps exactly because of that, Laura recognizes the futility of Iris's sacrifice in order to save her own family. By the time Iris can 'see' the truth (the choice of name also suggests the implication of vision) Laura is dead. 'I thought I could live like a mouse in the castle of the tigers, by creeping around out of sight inside the walls; by staying quiet, by keeping my head down. No: I give myself too much credit. I didn't see the danger. I didn't even know they were tigers. Worse: I didn't know I might become a tiger myself. I didn't know Laura might become one, given the proper circumstances. Anyone might, for that matter'(323).

3. THE ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP

One possibility of reading *The Blind Assassin*, offers itself right away, one typically feminist, of a 'feminine voice' negotiating a place of author (ity) exposing her own perspective by weaving – like Penelope – her complex tapestry of resistance. As such, this story can be considered as part of a tradition in women's writing brought into the discourse of literary theory by the second wave feminism of the 60s and 70s.

In an anthological piece of that period, called suggestively *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar produce the famous feminist re-reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

In their view, Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife, who destroys her husband's residence and herself by setting a fire, represents Brontë's (and, as they argue - any woman writer's of that age) hidden desire to break loose from the shackling representations of femininity in 19th century Western culture.

"Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy... she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her "inconstancy" and by identifying her with the "eternal types" they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly." [5] Those masks are that of the angel and the monster, the two extreme images employed by 19th century western canon to represent women and the above quotation could well be a motto for second wave feminism's project to disclose patriarchal ideology behind these images of sweetness and monstrosity. Being feminine equaled being 'the angel of the house', sweet, obedient and selfless, a two-dimensional image of purity that has no story to tell. Yet, the emphasis on the 'mysterious' and 'duplicitous' nature of the feminine betrays both distrust and fear of it and literature has abounded in images of evil, demonic witches and fiends. As artistic creativity has been rendered male, women's coming to terms with literary authorship meant a somewhat schizophrenic state (hence the anxiety) while attempting to find themselves in these unrealistic depictions. According to Gilbert and Gubar the presence of the female monster, the 'writer's 'mad double' within 19th century fiction represents both their anxiety but also an unconscious strategy for 'revising the self – definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them' [6].

Their book has attracted a lot of criticism for various reasons, especially because it regards the final, necessary death of the 'monster-woman' as liberation. Yet, it has undoubtedly contributed to the creation of the image of 'the self-destructive female artist', also reinforced by the lives of writers like Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath. Just how strongly such an image has affected Atwood's self-perception as an artist can be traced in her biography (anxiety confessed over being an aspiring woman writer in the 50s Canada) and also in her fiction, one of such examples being Laura Chase who represents a literary kinship to these fictional or real predecessors. The complexity of her position is given both by her

being Iris's double/*alter ego* within the text, her sister's shadow and constant companion, even after the suicide occurs, and, also, by her figure recalling the literary theme outside the text. Laura haunts the text even if at the end of her narrative Iris admits authorship of both parallel narratives (also the one attributed to Laura): "I can't say Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense – what Laura would have called the spiritual sense – you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers"(490). Laura's death makes it possible for Iris to recognize the truth and set off her 'machinery of revenge' but the revelation comes too late and at too much a cost.

The Blind Assassin is woven through with references to 19th century images of femininity. During their childhood they study 19th century poems, the house they live in, their burial place is decorated with angelic figures, after her marriage, Iris goes to a society costume ball dressed as Coleridge's Abyssinian Maid. Also, the angel/monster divide, duplicity, and mystery related to the feminine is constantly present in the narrative. Laura grows up to be seen by the others as an 'odd child', and her 'being different' is several times suggested. Yet, her characteristic is purity, straightforwardness, Iris even calls her 'skinless'. Laura's clothes are 'less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in'(8), on the other hand clothes are a 'secret consolation' to Iris who is wrapped, hidden by them. Looking in the mirror she sees her own face 'so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking' (43). Early in her childhood they are educated in the name of 'neatness, obedience, silence' (152) but Iris soon learns 'half concealed insolence and silent resistance', she learns 'not to get caught' (160).

Her greatest project is, of course, placing Laura as the author of her book, thus, turning her (or, rather letting her be turned) into a spectacular *double* for herself that hasn't got much to do with reality: "Laura was a "modernist," we are told on the inside flap. She was "influenced" by the likes of Djuna Barnes, Elizabeth Smart, Carson McCullers –

authors I know for a fact that Laura never read" (276). This is not merely a possible action of prudence or cowardice, as she ponders at a given moment (489); it is also the process of an artist being 'obscured by the image he himself has created' [4], the public persona replacing the one that writes the stories. Yet, as Atwood points out, the one cannot exist without the other. "*They alternate. They are attached head to head*" [4]. In the same way, Iris's narrative is "... *a lefthanded book. That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it*" (490). By creating her narrative, Iris refuses to die and succumb to the literary pattern; in addition, she reveals her 'real' face.

The complementarity of the two sisters is more than just a narrative technique; their relation to one another is also a reassessment of artistic creativity, beyond the caveat traditionally imposed on women. Thus, Atwood joins the line of feminist metafiction as explained by Gayle Green. She carries out a *re-vision* of an existing literary pattern and manages to exceed that within the traditional and hardly spectacular frame provided by the 19th century realist novel. Metafictional novels masquerading as realism determine "*critics to reenter old plots to reevaluate them and novelists reenter them to rewrite them or to 'write beyond' earlier endings*" [7]. Iris and

Laura Chase recall some of the female characters rendered to the angel/monster dichotomy of 19th century fiction but also contribute to the dissolution of this artificial divide, thus, representing Atwood's argument for a more complex way of exploring womanhood.

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