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Miranda K. Wojciechowski 5 April 2015

APPROVAL SHEET

“Meditation(s) on a Prison Break”: Feminist Subjectivities of Speech and Silence in the Fiction of Charlotte Bronte, Jean Rhys, and Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

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Throughout Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the narrators attempt to both express and to escape their physical, psychological, and social imprisonment. Bronte's Lucy Snowe and Rhys's Sasha Jensen's internalized perceptions of gendered expectation initially prevent them from breaking free from cycles of isolation and repression. As they experience various nervous breakdowns, these narrators attempt to reconcile their fragmented identities, turning to external remedies such as alcoholic substance and religious rhetoric. These attempts themselves ultimately fail to move Lucy and Sasha towards a more cohesive, conceptualized presentation of identity. However, by articulating these failed attempts, writing themselves, and formulating their own stories, Lucy and Sasha gain insight into the self-perpetuating processes of isolation and repression, eventually acquiring conscious agency over their construction of identity both on the page and in the events which subsequently unfold in their narratives. However, although Lucy and Sasha attain agency through inhabiting the "I," their narratives remain entangled in the internalized strictures inherent in the masculine discourse revealed, performed, and replicated by their constructed subjectivities. Through the interaction of self-reading eye with the self-written "I," Atwood's Iris reformulates the boundaries of reclaimed agency to encompass the multiplicity of the self and the self of multiplicity, ultimately locating subjectivity beyond previous conceptions of the first person. Through simultaneously examining the alternative temporalities and differing narrative perspectives produced by Victorian, Modern, and Contemporary constructions, I hope to parallel Lucy, Sasha, and Iris's narrative journeys by deconstructing the critical categorizations which often limit the interpretative possibilities of the literary works.

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Introduction

"'Stone walls do not a prison make/ Nor iron bars- a cage' so peril, loneliness, an uncertain future are not oppressive evils, so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed."
~Charlotte Bronte, *Villette*[1]

"Every word I say has chains round its ankles; every thought I think is weighted with heavy weights."
~Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*

"I tortured myself with visions of her, imprisoned, struggling, trapped in a painful fantasy of her own making, or trapped in the another fantasy, equally painful, which was not hers at all but those of people around her. And when did the one become the other?"
~Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

Imprisoned language and the language of imprisonment inhabit similarly central and recurring roles throughout the texts of Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. In her feminist critique, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet famously remarked that "*Villette* reads like one long meditation on a prison break" (Millet 146), and *Good Morning, Midnight*'s narrative journey, as well as that embedded within the many layers of the metafictional *The Blind Assassin*, unfold in similar spirals of belabored escape. If "stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars- a cage," however, a few questions remain: what constitutes imprisonment and how do Lucy Snowe, Sasha Jensen, and Iris Chase unlock their cells? Interchanging constructed, constricted fantasies, chained words, and stone walls, the narrators of these novels extensively contemplate their impressions of confinement.

Using figurative framing of prison cells and cages, Sasha and Lucy express myriad types of incarceration, ranging from physical to psychological, internal to social. These narrators navigate the categorizations that confine their potential through formulating and articulating their

[1] Imbedded within this quotation, Bronte quotes part of a poem by Robert Lovelace (1618-1658), entitled "To Althea, From Prison."

own stories. Through the act of writing themselves, Lucy and Sasha gain insight into the self-perpetuating processes of isolation and repression, eventually acquiring conscious agency over their construction of identity both on the page and in the events which subsequently unfold in their narratives.

Although penned in different centuries and novelistic traditions, spanning the Victorian and Modern periods, *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Villette* act as complementary texts, illuminating the predicaments expressed by their narrators through both their psychological intersections and their stylistic differences.[2] Modernism, as a movement, often positions itself as a reaction against the structure, technique, and language of the Victorian novel, inverting the expected linear chronology with experimental portrayals of time ("Modernism," 682). In critical discourse as well, the preoccupations of each period create an emphatic progression of derivative or reactionary philosophies which leaves little ideological space for the exploration of overlap between the literatures produced in different periods. In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Rachel Blaus DePlessis articulates this progression of narrative interests across centuries, asserting that "The struggles between middle and ending, quest and love plots, female as hero and female as heroine, class and gender that animate many central novels of the nineteenth century can be posed as the starting point, the motivating inception for the project of twentieth-century woman writers" (DuPlessis 7). While these distinctions often prove useful when examining a broad spectrum of temporalities and traditions, they often obscure and negate the inevitable blending of themes and narrative foci within literary works, which often transcend these neat categories. Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, although positioned in the Victorian literary convention, contains many elements predictive of Modernist interests, such as "an emphasis on characters' consciousness, unconsciousness,

[2] *Good Morning, Midnight* first appeared in 1939, nearly a century after the publication of *Villette* in 1853.

memory, and perception" ("Modernism," 682). Similarly, Jean Rhys's Modernist novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, examines themes considered characteristic of the Victorian Gothic by exploring "the stranglehold of the past upon the present" ("Gothic Fiction," 422).[3] By acknowledging and deconstructing the invisible boundaries of these classifications, this juxtaposition of Bronte's and Rhys's texts sheds light on these narrators' struggles to escape from the universal imposition of variously specific categorizing expectations and assumptions.

The ambiguous blurring of differing novelistic traditions which occurs throughout both texts accounts for many influential circumstances that position Lucy and Sasha within their specific frameworks as they meet in a common psychological space. Lucy, plagued by her internalization of Victorian self-repression, endeavors to reconcile the self-perpetuated conflict between her emotional and rational selves, progressing from detached references to self buried in the examination of others to a more direct engagement with the first person pronoun. Inversely, Sasha's painful, Modernist consciousness of her tangled, fragmented emotions, both throughout her internalized reflections and her incontrollable public displays of weeping, progresses towards a reconciliation of past with present that enables her to obtain necessary distance from this intense emotional acuity. Equally preoccupied with performance, as their internal realities ceaselessly adapt to external constructions, Sasha and Lucy inhabit opposite extremes on the spectrum of repression and excess. Striving to emerge from the incarcerating intensity of their respective positions, Lucy and Sasha's narratives progress towards a more centrally balanced reconciliation between affirmation of personal emotion and socially acceptable external presentation of self. As their narratives unfold, evolving from impenetrable, internalized performance of external expectation to conscious preservation of a separate inner reality, the

[3] "In English and Anglo-Irish fiction of the Victorian period, the Gothic influence is pervasive" ("Gothic Fiction," 423).

process of writing disentangles Lucy and Sasha's narrative voices from the relentless categorization that imprisons them.

However, although Lucy and Sasha attain agency through inhabiting the "I," their narratives remain entangled in the internalized strictures inherent in the masculine discourse revealed, performed, and replicated by their constructed subjectivities. Both narrators conclude their accounts in the unfolding, retrospective present, ceasing to compose themselves the instant the hand sets down the pen. Yet, this culmination of the completed manuscript proves the mere origin point of Iris Chase's palimpsest of self-construction in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Beginning with a backward glance that simultaneously re-visits the past through remembrance and re-vises the self preserved in the pages of her earlier writing endeavors, Iris negotiates her subjectivity in the flux of shifting temporalities and static texts. Equally engaged in processes of vision and re-vision, Iris reads and interprets herself as previously written by herself, reflexively gazing at her own narrative of masked identity: an autobiographical fiction published under the pseudonym of her dead sister's name, Laura Chase. Beneath the retrospective scrutiny of Iris's narrative gaze, the original text of self-composition illuminates the camouflaged backdrop of the actively silenced object against which she authorizes identity. As the invisible structures of discursive subjectivity acquire visibility through the interaction of the self-reading eye with the self-written "I," Iris reformulates the boundaries of reclaimed agency to encompass the multiplicity of the self and the self of multiplicity. In a continuous act of amendment, Iris writes her self as both the subject of the present and the othered object of the past against which she can inscribe her "I," rendering the creation of a silenced object an unnecessary consequence of subjectivity. Thus, expelling Laura's memory from the shadow cast by her intentionally misattributed narrative, Iris carves out a space within her first person

narrative for Laura's co-habitation within the authorial "I" and consequently re-configures self-writing as a collaborative plurality that might mutually exist alongside individualized process.

The paradoxical rigidity and permeability of the borderlines between self and other, as well as between self and self, within Atwood's corpus has served as a focal point for critical discussions regarding gendered navigations of the word and the world. In her study, *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein correlates the establishment and transcendence of boundaries, particularly corporeal and linguistic boundaries constructed between the masculine and the feminine, with performances and processes of self-constitution in Atwood's novels, asserting that "Atwood dramatizes various dimensions of her female characters' experiences of attachment and separation, division and union, as fundamental to their discovery or recovery of selfhood" (9). Bridging discussions of the body and language through Cixous's assertions of a uniquely feminine linguistic materiality, Rubenstein explores women writers' physical, psychological, and social relationships with interiority and exteriority through their textual representations of spatial demarcation.[4] Despite this initial embracing of essentializing theory, Rubenstein ultimately inhabits a fraught position in relation to gendered writing practices, challenging the notion of inherent difference while still explicitly noting distinctions divided along gendered lines.[5]

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[4] Although centralizing her exploration of boundaries within discussions of bodily barriers and gendered interiorities, Rubenstein often situates the borders of consciousness, between a multiplicity of selves as well as between the individual and the social body, within metaphors of geographical mapping in order to explicate the abstract. Rubenstein further expands these forays into boundary as geography in the second section of her book, *Boundaries of Self: Gender, Culture, and Fiction*, which considers ethnic and cultural identities in addition to the boundaries of nationality.

[5]Rubenstein resists Gilbert and Gubar's assertion in their foundational feminist study, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* that representations of imprisonment and escape constitute "a uniquely female tradition," instead claiming spatial enclosure as a universal non-gendered experience of interiority. Yet Rubenstein simultaneously locates difference in gender identity, cautiously attributing these female-specific departures in the cultural interpretations imposed on gendered bodies. As Joanne Frye notes in her study of contemporary women novelists, *Living Stories, Telling Lives*, the notion of biological difference, regardless of whether it inherently influences the texts that emerge from these authors, remains inextricably inscribed onto their interactions with themselves and with the written word precisely because of the social and intellectual discourses which define them in relation to their bodies: "Consider, first, how

The critical strand of essentialist discourses, which positions gender identity as an inherently determinant influence on a writer's stylistic and linguistic choices, emerges from an enduring tradition which consequently exerts its own problematic influence on the creations and critical reception of women writers.[6] In his 1869 philosophical treatise on women's rights, *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argued that "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own," thus formulating an early precedent for a recurrent thread, as well as a foundational tenet, of feminist criticism surrounding autobiography: the demarcation of essential differences between autobiographical conventions and approaches to self-writing between male and female writers.[7] These critical formulations position a 'masculine' approach to autobiographical writing as normative, assumptively equating "I," as defined as a unified expression of a centralized self that denies the fragmented nature of identity and asserts subjectivity by erasing otherness, to "He." In contrast, within these discourses, "The female autobiographical 'I'…is more likely to be iterative, cyclical, incremental, and unresolved," and "stresses interdependence, community, multiplicity, and a capacity for identification *with* rather than *against*" (Grace 191). This shift of emphasis from the individual to the collective subject proves particularly central to the de-centralization of the self accentuated by these analytical models of female autobiographical

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the biological sexual "polarity" of male and female grounds the femininity text: women *are* their bodies, their capacity for pregnancy and their sexual biological life stage. The female self- examining her own experiences through such a paradigm- feels trapped within her own body" (Frye 70).

[6]Although, as I discuss later on in this introduction, this critical approach has often reinforced the very patriarchal structures that it sought to disrupt and resist, it is important to note that it originally emerged as a genuine attempt to address the absence of discussions of femaleness and women's writing in academic analysis: "Finding it difficult to think intelligently about women writers, academic criticism has often overcompensated by desexing them" (Showalter 8).

[7]This critical approach developed from the emergence of two foundational texts in the 1980s, Estelle C. Jelinek's *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography from Antiquity to the Present* and Mary G. Mason's article, "The Other Voice: The Autobiographies of Women Writers." As Natalie Edwards observes, "many critics in the last twenty-five years have attempted to define different patterns of narration, different approaches to the self, and different reasons for embarking upon self-narrative in female-authored texts" (Edwards 21). For additional insight into gendered essentialism in feminist autobiographical studies, see also *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock.

writings. In her introduction summarizing the re-formulation of the subject as a communal rather than exclusive perspective, Natalie Edwards argues that "Self and other in women's autobiography are not separate, distinct units…Instead, a collective or plurivocal narrative of self in which 'I' and 'we' are either interchangeable or indisociable takes precedence" (Edwards 23).[8] Yet, although this interchangeability between the singular and the plural appears to alter previous conceptions of subjectivity radically, it simply reiterates the silencing tendencies of its predeceasing model by presuming to speak for the collective through a single homogenous perspective.[9]

Since the inception of feminist autobiographical studies, several subsequent theorists have resisted and critiqued these essentialist approaches to women's writing as derivative and replicative of the very discursive structures which they aim to dismantle.[10] Leigh Gilmore confronts this irony in her preface to *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, asserting that "Many feminist interpretative strategies produce gender as a coherent category of analysis even as they fail to reproduce feminism as a political critique of much categorical thought" (Gilmore xi). Although a useful entry point into unbroached critical

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[8]Although Edwards' argument specifically and explicitly focuses on the subject as created in women's self-writing, she also situates the emergence of a multiplicitious self within challenges posed to the unitary self by structuralist, post-structuralist, postmodern theorists, as well as psychoanalysis which is "predicated upon the notion that human beings are split subjects with an unconscious" (Edwards 18). Globalization and consequent "increased awareness of non-Western approaches to subjectivity…that are based upon group identity, family identity, tribal identity, and community identity rather than any single entity" (Edwards 18) are also proposed as factors for the overall shift in the conception of the self across genders and genres.

[9] Leigh Gilmore addresses the problematic assumptions behind this model of the unified female voice in her preface to *Autobiographics*, declaring that "I cannot locate female identity and experience in a unitary transhistorical female experience and female body and claim those as unproblematical and unifying grounds of meaning" (Gilmore xii). By normalizing a single, dominant female autobiographics at the expense of diverse accounts of female experience, this re-formulated "collective" version of subjectivity uncomfortably echoes the masculine autobiographical erasure of otherness in the wake of the centralized ego.

[10]Although Rubenstein concedes that women's "subordinate position" manifests its silences within discourse, she similarly resists this notion of inherently gendered and distinct languages as "reinforce[ing] the status quo" (Rubenstein 8). For other theorists who critique essentialist critical approaches to women's writing, see also Donna C. Stanton's essay, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" and the preface to Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation.*

conversations, this tacit replication of categorizing discourses, Gilmore further argues, re-creates an unquestioned psychology patterned upon gender ideologies of individualism by positioning the masculine as uniformly autonomous and the feminine as uniformly dependent.[11] In addition to the de-centralization of the self, the notion of inherent fragmentation and interrupted linearity in female autobiography serves as another epicenter of anti-essentialist critique, as Joanne Frye notes in *Living Stories, Telling Lives*: *Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience.* Frye also interrogates the limitations of autobiography, which "assume[s] a reality that is defined by what is given" (Frye 54), as a site of feminist subversion, locating true transformative power in the narrating "I" rendered discursively and imaginatively possible within the fiction of novels.

Frye's notion of the self-narrating woman writer's "capacity both to claim difference and to refuse entrapment within it" (63) proves a particularly formative and generative premise for my project. However, while uncovering a space for the paradoxical coexistence of demarcating, inhabiting, and resisting categories, Frye's unequivocal elevation of speaking subjectivity fails to recognize its own fraught philosophical history of perpetuating the discursive imprisonment of the othered object. While emerging from an exploration of narrative agency through the transgressive female "I" this project ultimately seeks to examine the margins of subjectivity as a subversive potentiality by locating resistance in silence as well as speech.

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[11]Gilmore asserts this anti-essentialist critical stance as a prefacing framework for her approach. However, the core arguments of her project depart drastically from the feminist theories of autobiography set up by the sources previously outlined, providing instead an feminist study of the discourses the produce, interpret, and evaluate autobiography: "the discursive legacy of 'truth' and 'lying' in the ongoing project of self-representation especially the attachment of 'lying' to women's cultural productions…the kinds of human agency licensed or criminalized…the extent to which authority and power are structured through their historically shifting modes for women and men in relation to institutions" (Gilmore ix).

Chapter 1

The Distorting Mirror: Performances of Womanhood in *Villette* and *Good Morning, Midnight*

Despite the wide chronological gap between publication dates, spanning late Victorian to early Modern periods, the narrators of Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* and Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* exhibit similar anxieties regarding their separation from the collective normative life. Rather than displaying the internal transparency traditionally associated with first person narration, Bronte's Lucy Snowe and Rhys' Sasha Jensen inhabit intentionally constructed voices. This fictionalization of self, generated and deconstructed throughout both novels, becomes deeply linked to each narrator's cautious attempts to repress, isolate, and mold herself into a persona aligning with an allotted gender role. Their heightened consciousness of the social gaze bleeds into a heightened consciousness of the unknown audience as they seamlessly create and enact socially cohesive versions of themselves. This alternately conscious and unconscious, gendered performance of social expectation manifests itself through varied levels of narrative disclosure. Throughout *Villette,* Lucy Snowe's social anxiety reveals itself through insistent disassociation from conventional female tropes of emotional excess, sensual coquetry, demure innocence, and officious manipulation.[12] The course of the narrative yields a fragmentary identity for Lucy, pieced together from her reactions to the behavior and opinions of other female characters that embody these archetypal qualities. Although equally enthralled and entrapped by the possibility of self-construction, Sasha Jensen's approach to narrative performance is more deeply entrenched in the isolation of her position. Jensen's initial lack of connection to other people turns her gaze more excruciatingly inwards towards her emotional turmoil, even as her

[12] Each listed trope derives from another female character, one of Lucy's potential alternate selves; Ginervra Fanshawe (emotional excess and sensual coquetry), Polly Home (demure innocence), and Madame Beck (officious manipulation).

social apprehensions construct an identity founded on self-alienating reconstructions of name and position. Although ostensibly transparent when contrasted with Lucy Snowe's buried and detached references to self, Sasha's ambling, observational tone, self-referential refrains, and incontrollable public displays of emotion constitute an equally opaque performance.

Since the words "performance" and "performativity" encompass a wide variety of meanings and nuances within different critical discourses, it is essential that I clarify my use of the terms:

> The stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of 'performative' seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the *extroversion* of the actor, the *introversion* of the signifier…in its deconstructive sense, performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performance is the theatrical. (Parker and Sedgwick 2)

As an act of translation between the internal and external worlds, performance and performativity combine to create cycles of constructed meaning and identity within both narratives. In my reading of the female experience as an enactment of social expectation, I draw upon Judith Butler's definition of "gender [as] performative…constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 33). Assuming the existence of this precedent self residing beneath the narrative performance, Lucy and Sasha's acquisition of socially imposed gendered constructions merely obscures, rather than erases, previously conceived internal realities.

Lucy and Sasha's restricted narrative disclosure throughout the beginning of both novels sets up an initially dichotomous distinction between externalized construction and inner reality,

which assumes various guises out of perceived contextual necessity. As the narratives progress, however, dichotomous boundaries blur into cyclical exchanges, revealing inner realities which ceaselessly adapt to external constructions. Both narrators, simultaneously isolated from society and inextricably entangled in its mandated mores, develop an almost gleeful awareness of the precariousness of perception and identity. Following a particularly awkward exchange fraught with misinterpreted intentions, the hitherto verbally veiled Lucy Snowe offers the reader a rare, albeit distant, glimpse into her own emotional responses, reflecting that "There was a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction; and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored" (Bronte 111). Through minimization of the first person singular, she remains consistently remote from her own subjectivity, situating personal opinions in the objective omniscient of the detached third person or forgivingly communal impulse implied by the collective personal pronoun "we." While further cultivating this distance through the self-condemning descriptor "perverse," Lucy explicitly connects the act of misconstruction with relief and pleasure. Lucy augments this impression of pleasure with delighted self-satisfaction, rhetorically inquiring "What honest man on being casually taken for a housebreaker, does not feel rather tickled than vexed at the mistake?" (Bronte 111). Just as mistaken identity becomes a source of gratification for Lucy, Sasha derives a sense of security, however dubious, from distancing herself from her given name, disclosed briefly as Sophia: "I thought it might change my luck if I changed my name. Did it bring me any luck, I wonder- calling myself Sasha?" (Rhys 12). Sasha, like Lucy, associates positive, self-empowering sentiments with this deliberate construction of self, utilized as a mechanism of camouflage from the oppressively machinating structures of society and fate. Despite the reclamation of intentional deception invoked throughout Lucy and Sasha's

narrationally mediated self-examinations, the necessity of incessant externalized performance results in a blurred distinction between enactment and actuality within internal perceptions of self.

Although Sasha's penetrating circumstantial isolation brings interior life to the forefront of *Good Morning, Midnight's* narrative, the ambiguous juxtaposition of fictive performance and personal truth continues to reveal itself through Sasha's intentional modification of even the most basic self-identifiers. Unlike Lucy's deeply entrenched repression of the inner life, Sasha's contradictory internal life is insistently present, floating on the acknowledged surface of the narrative and bleeding into the external during numerous transgressive scenes of crying in public. Yet her interior landscape remains lifeless and chaotic in its avoidance of the investigation of what lies beneath her words. The narrator exposes the layered turmoil of fabricated identity simmering beneath the assumed transparency of her account through her nonchalant usage of a false name. By "calling [herself]…Sasha" (Rhys 12), the narrator reveals her name, a significant convention of identification within the social context, to be yet another extension of performed identity. Sasha's assumption of identity passes through the permeable membrane between the external and the internal as she admits that "I thought it might change my luck if I changed my name" (Rhys 12). This association between the transformation of "name" and "luck" reveals Sasha's hopes of altering her internal, almost spiritualized relationship to the world through an alteration in external presentation and social identification. Social performance further saturates Sasha's internal process of self-positioning in her insistence on obtaining an upscale hotel room associated with higher social standing: "I shall exist on another plane at once if I get this room, if only for a couple of nights. It will be an omen. Who says you can't change your fate? I'll escape from mine, into room number 219" (Rhys 37). The juxtaposition of transcendent phrases such as

"omen" and "fate" with the mundanely substantial details concerning the hotel room emphasize the mutuality of external presentation and internal fabrication. Sasha's sense of urgency in obtaining the more expensive room hinges upon much more than a mere impulse of social assertion or a need for approval and acknowledgement from the hotel clerk. Her willingness to be transformed completely by any external change in environment and circumstance elevates room number 219 from a mere physical locality to a means of existential redemption as "another plane of existence." Hyper-conscious of her external performance's effect on internal self-construction, Sasha frantically scrambles towards exterior modification as a means of salvation, even as she conspicuously evades interior inquiry as a source of knowledge and change.

Although inhibited by her unconscious immersion within her own internalized mechanisms of social performance, Sasha's elided examination of her psyche emerges subconsciously through her dreams. While describing one particularly recurrent and vividly symbolic dream, Sasha encounters an allegorical representation of her own participation in identity's social imprisonment:

> Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don't want the way to the exhibition- I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign. Everywhere the fingers point and the placards read: "This Way to the Exihibition…I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say 'I want the way out.' But he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel. I walk along with my head bent, very ashamed, thinking: 'Just like me- always wanting to be different from other people.' The steel finger points along a long stone passage" (Rhys 13).

The Exhibition, positioned as a central source of anxiety throughout the dream, evokes apprehension towards performance as experienced by Sasha, both as active social adjustment and as the passive embodiment of the object under scrutiny. In the dream, Sasha notably and actively seeks to extricate herself from the constraining dictates of social mandates. However, not only do "fingers point and placards read" in collective affirmation of the designated path, the reiterates usage of the "steel finger" connotes the cold, constraining inflexibility of its reinforcement. This process of internalized external expectation succeeds to such an extent that the ramifications of her desire for a differing existence beyond the codified world she inhabits results in internalized shame, guilt, and compliance as she "walk[s] along with…[her] head bent, very ashamed." Rather than inhabiting the passive role of narrative reflection traditionally reserved for utilitarian scenery, the environment assumes an active role in re-making Sasha in its own image throughout this passage. The inordinate, unyielding power of external environment and the subsequent defeat, submission, and integration of Sasha's dream representation in this scenario reflect the leaking of external mandates of social performance into the interior life of the individual.

This internalization of constructed performance manifests itself throughout *Villette* through Lucy's self-asserted alienation from traditional conceptions of femininity. Bronte's deftly presented compilation of stereotyped female roles and behaviors, ranging from waiflike submission of the young Polly Home to the impervious and inquisitorial Madame Beck, inhibit Lucy from direct association through the creation of alternate selves. Lucy's only self-referential remarks throughout the first third of the novel directly isolate her from represented conceptions of femininity, even as her experiences seem to partially align with them. A noticeable tension resides between Lucy's direct descriptions of herself in opposition to these other characters' representational prototypes and her unguarded reactions inherent in unforeseen situations. For

example, Lucy continuously asserts that her thoughts, opinions, and emotions derive "independently of romantic rubbish" (Bronte 119), which seems paradoxical when correlated with her deeply psychologically affecting encounters with the ghostly nun that recurs throughout her narrative. Although moments of overlap exist, her inner emotional life remains both too complex and too buried to completely align with any single, simplified depiction of the feminine experience. Unable to insert herself completely into a context coherent with social expectation, Lucy's living, breathing reality becomes stranded in an undefined liminal space.

Rather than attempting to delineate the contours of this uncharted internal landscape, Lucy initially establishes her narrated identity through investigations into external realities, reacting to situations and language wrought by other female characters. Whenever employing the infrequent first person pronoun, Lucy roots these expressions of personal feeling in the incidents of other peoples' lives. In the opening chapters of *Villette*, the presence of Polly Home enables the first revelation of Lucy's contradictory skirmishes with sense and sensation, as well as a vague presentiment of her consequent emotional repression. Commenting upon their continued occupancy of overlapping spaces within the house, Lucy blends her own narrative with Polly's permeating existence: "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination; but whenever, opening a room-door, I found her seated in a corner alone, her head in her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted" (Bronte 15). Ever-conscious of the perceived criticism of her social audience, Lucy defensively denies the traditionally female crime of "an overheated and discursive imagination." Yet, in the same breath, she attributes obviously imaginary ethereal characteristics to Polly's petite frame and self-contained isolation, deeming the occupied room impractically "haunted" rather than simply "inhabited." This imposition of Lucy's unresolved performative contradictions onto the external

figure of Polly reveals their existence to the reader while maintaining a carefully assembled distance that avoids direct investigation of the self. This evasion of internal exploration further manifests itself through Lucy's reactions to a reunion enacted between Polly and her returning father, as she observes that "It was not a noisy, not a wordy scene: for that I was thankful; but it was a scene of feeling too brimful, and which, because the cup did not foam up high or furiously overflow, only oppressed one the more" (Bronte 16). The paradoxical blending of intense, "brimful" emotion and the containment which inhibits its' "overflow" appeals to Lucy and her sensible boundaries erected between internal sensibility and outward expression, causing her to be "thankful" for the scene's lack of overt demonstrativeness. However, the same restraint which appeals to Lucy simultaneously "oppresse[s]" her, evoking a painful and exaggerated awareness of her own repression, caused both by social expectation and self-perpetuation. Even as she reflects on the stifling effects of Polly's curbed emotions, Lucy channels these brief glimpses into her inner thoughts through an incident of another's life, rather than from any direct personal experience or interaction. This position of unrelenting observation results in a narrative cautiously once-removed from both the external audience and her internal self.

In addition to avoiding self-examination through heightened investment in others and limiting revelations of her inner life to mere reactions to other, simplified female experiences, Lucy often wishes for her own emotional desires to be vicariously enacted through Polly. Ironically, Lucy often condemns Polly's archetypal dependence upon her father and later Graham Bretton, accentuating her compulsive self-evasion and her need to "live, move, and have her being in another" (Bronte 28).[13] Even as Lucy criticizes the entombment of self within the emotional life of another, her identity, at this stage of the narrative, wholly relies upon

[13] Reference to Acts 17:28, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring," possibly implicating Polly in idolatrous re-creation of self in the image of the social ideal.

extrapolating the details of Polly's emotional responses. Lucy's evaluative, observational position expands from mere reactions and assessments of her brief, overlapping experiences with Polly to include the displacement of her own wishes and desires onto the figure of Polly, revealing a parallel subconscious longing to not only "have her being in another" but to also reveal her being through another. While observing the restrained intensity of Polly's reunion with her itinerant father, Mr. Home, Lucy silently ventriloquizes the expression of her emotional discomfort upon her wooden perception of Polly, confessing that "I wished she would utter some hysterical cry, so that I might get relief and be at ease" (Bronte 17). At other times, chaffing against Polly's reverential attention to Graham's every anticipated whim, Lucy expresses an oppositional desire for quietude, admitting that "I often wished she would mind herself and be tranquil; but no- herself was forgotten in him: he could not be sufficiently well-waited on, nor carefully enough looked after" (Bronte 28). Whether invoking a desire for "hysterical" or "tranquil" responses from Polly, Lucy displaces tangled and inhibited responsive realities onto external figures in order to vicariously express, fulfill, or even simply acknowledge her inner life. But in seeking recognition of self through the mirror of another, Lucy perpetuates the very cycles of reduction, repression, and re-writing which inhibit her from finding "relief" and "ease" through direct and cohesive self-articulation.

As Lucy's tale advances across time and circumstance, she continues to partition identity into acceptable increments patched together from other reductively perceived female experiences. Unlike her previous wishes to revise Polly's behavior, Lucy negotiates confidence and independence through her observation and evaluation of the indomitable Madame Beck. Despite her gradually accumulating awareness of Madame's complex and flawed nature, Lucy initially endows her descriptions with liberating and suffocating strength, effusively cataloging

Madame Beck's commendable attributes: "That school offered for her powers too limited a sphere; she ought to have swayed a nation...Wise, firm, faithless; secret, crafty, passionless; watchful and inscrutable; acute and insensate- withal perfectly decorous- what more could be desired?" (Bronte 83). Regardless of the negative connotations of several selected adjectives, Lucy expresses admiration and approval for Madame's embodied qualities, of which nothing "more could be desired," suggesting a craving for intelligence, action, inscrutability, and above all, unconventionality. Despite these burgeoning inclinations towards external freedom, Lucy continues to maintain societal and self-imposed internal restraint, as she emphasizes the mutual exclusivity of wisdom and passion, perception and feeling. The ability to stem any welling of passionate emotion frequently appears throughout the narrative as one of the traits most championed by Lucy, especially in moments of stress and crisis such as the emergency operation upon Madame Beck's daughter, Fifine: "I was anticipated: Madame Beck had put out her own hand- hers was steady while mine trembled…Mine would have been feigned stoicism, forced fortitude. Hers was neither forced nor feigned" (Bronte 107). Anxiety regarding pretense and performance permeate, emphasizing the "feigned" and "forced" nature of Lucy's envisioned actions, as she once again attempts to mold herself into the unnatural shape that circumstance demands. Lucy, hovering on the edge between observer and active participant, measures herself against Madame's impassive brand of strength and finds herself wanting. Lucy's deeply rooted insecurities manifest themselves in her implicit reliance upon external realities of others as standards of both self-condemnation and self-elevation, a contradiction magnified by her assumption of superiority over Polly.

Despite her use of these female characters' presence as a deflection from direct engagement with her own emotional responses, Lucy reveals an ingrained tendency to reject the

feminine as inefficient, irrational, and trivial. Supplementing Dr. Graham's efforts to revive an older Polly, smothered by the stampeding crowds of the theater fire, Lucy remarks that "Making the women stand apart, I undressed their mistress, without their well-meaning but clumsy aid" (Bronte 298). By "making the women stand apart," both within the specific, chaotic scene and within the text itself, Lucy intentionally separates herself from the feminine, rejecting the relevancy of their efforts as "well-meaning but clumsy." Upon the resurrection of Polly Home as Countess Paulina Mary de Bassompierre, Lucy remarks that "I was not accustomed to find in women or girls any power of self-control, or strength of self-denial. As far as I knew them, the chance of a gossip about their usually trivial secrets, their often very washy and paltry feelings, was a treat not to be readily foregone" (Bronte 326). Ascribing "washy and paltry feelings" as oppositional to "power of self-control, or strength of self-denial" to the female population, Lucy's denunciation echoes her recurring quest to suppress and deflect her emotional needs in order to preserve her performance of hyper-rationality. Her value of control and denial, carefully acquired and defensively maintained throughout the opening chapters of the narrative, has progressed to "self-control" and "self-denial," mirroring the imposition of containing and silencing ideals upon another which Lucy simultaneously suffers from and re-enacts. Both external, societal norms, and the internalization of these archetypes, combining to create an integral, conflicting conglomeration of expectation, bar Lucy from establishing a self embedded in anything other than denials of affinity for the criminally feminine.

Echoing this instinct of separation, Sasha constructs, emphasizes, and meticulously maintains the gulf between herself and the mass of humanity populating the margins of *Good Morning, Midnight's* textual landscape. Expressing her exasperation with the human race, Sasha reveals the internalized dichotomy between the internal and the external, the self and the world:

> ‘We consider you as dead. Why didn’t you make a hole in the water? Why didn’t you drown yourself in the Seine?’…They think in terms of a sentimental ballad. And that’s what terrifies you about them. It isn’t their cruelty, it isn’t even their shrewdness- it’s their extraordinary naiveté. Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives by a cliché. And they believe in the clichés- there’s no hope (Rhys 42).

Transitioning smoothly from the “we” and “you” framing of external comments to the “they” and “you” of internal thought, Sasha’s blending of memory and response illustrates the mechanism of internalization and instinctive separation, more subtly and incrementally revealed throughout Lucy’s narrative. Sasha’s unusual juxtaposition of cruel suggestions of suicide and “extraordinary naiveté” exposes a carefully acquired impermeable membrane through which wounding words are mechanistically separated from personal meaning and deconstructed to reveal social contrivance. By attributing her isolation to the blind perpetuation of “clichés,” Sasha emphasizes the hollow, masklike echo of human interaction: “The close-set eye-holes stare into mine. I know that face very well; I’ve seen lots like it, complete with legs and body. That’s the way they look when they are saying: ‘Why didn’t you drown yourself in the Seine?’” (Rhys 92). The vacancy of “eye-holes” connotes both lack of interpersonal connection and perpetual, inanimate performance, resonating with “that rosy, wooden, innocent cruelty” (Rhys 97) which haunts Sasha’s blanket categorization of other people. Throughout her narrative, the insensate mask of collective humanity encloses only residual, mechanical echoes enforced by ceaseless ritualistic performance.

Although conscious of her inherent participation in donning this mask, Sasha claims exemption from the interior blank terrifyingly glimpsed beneath other people’s performances.

Further complicating this separation between self and humanity, she declares that "It isn't my face, this tortured and tormented mask. I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail. Or shall I place on it a tall hat with a green feather, hang a veil over the lot, and walk about the dark streets so merrily? Singing defiantly 'You don't like me, but I don't like you either'" (Rhys 43-4). Blurring boundaries by invoking agonized inclusion and immersion in "their world," as well as exuberantly voluntary exclusion, Sasha enacts a strangely doubled performance in which she seeks to both obscure and exhibit her performativity, to "hang a veil over the lot…singing defiantly." Acknowledging the role of deeply-embedded and circumstantial insecurities in her contentious relationship with the external world, Sasha describes the perpetuating cycle of attack and defense which sustains her need for this masking armor: "Because I am uneasy and sad they all fling themselves at me, larger than life. But I can put my arm up to avoid the impact and they slide gently to the ground" (Rhys 50). For Sasha, the internal and external worlds do not simply overlap, they collide with dangerous and tangible consequences which require an equally solid, protective barrier wielded proactively like "put[ting]…[an] arm up to avoid the impact." This violent contact elicits both defensive and offensive strategies through which Sasha negotiates her intense emotions through the perceived, savage emptiness of the world around her.

Constantly wavering between the enduring desire for inclusion and the defiant, peremptory rejection of her rejecters, Sasha's contentious thoughts fluctuate between often simultaneous attempts to separate and to merge with the crowd:

> But this is my attitude to life. Please, please monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat, every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else. Every word I say has chains round its ankles; every thought I think is

> weighted with heavy weights. Since I was born, hasn't every word I've said, every thought I've thought, everything I've done, been tied up, weighted, chained? And mind you, I know that I don't succeed. Or I succeed in flashes only too damned well…But think how hard I try and how seldom I dare. Think- and have a bit of pity. That is, if you ever think, you apes, which I doubt (Rhys 106).

Through her use of the first person pronoun in conjunction with a "you" that accumulates the weight of "everybody else," Sasha reveals crucial processes of self positioning in relation to the social landscape. In the context of this acknowledgement of concurrent interdependence and isolation, her violently self-alienating language, her dehumanization of humanity through epithets such as "you apes," acquires yet another dimension of performance: that of self-deception, and by extension the attempted deception of the reader. The vulnerability and admission of her preoccupation with "trying to make [herself] look like everybody else" transforms into accusation as the defensive façade of indiscriminate dismissal reconstructs itself. Sasha's mention of appearance, of "looking," triggers associations with successfully achieving social acceptance through fashioning a conventional identity from the garments of outward performance. Selecting "a hat" takes on the existential gravity of "the tortured and tormented mask" worn in the stead of a face, becoming the lens through which Sasha creates points of intersection between herself and her environment.

Throughout both *Villette* and *Good Morning, Midnight*, ornamentation through clothing and other instruments of self-decoration serves as a physical manifestation of performed identity, inhabiting the junction between constructions of the feminine as internal and external norms. The effortless interchangeability and multiplicity of costume becomes a pivotal catalyst, prompting both Lucy Snowe and Sasha to actively examine the role of visual perception in their own

processes of self-making. Recurrent nods to mistaken and blended identity occur throughout their narratives, linking external appearance to social topography, such as the love letters mistakenly delivered to an unsuspecting Lucy Snowe instead of the proper recipient based on "the waving of [her] gray dress- dress that I should recognize amongst a thousand" (Bronte 125). The lover's act of attributing individual distinction and recognition to an external garment which proved to be "a sort of every-day wear which happened at that time to be in vogue" (Bronte 126) suggests a crucial reliance on external guise in the assumption and fabrication of identity. Sasha's remark that "the mannequins and the saleswomen [appeared] all mixed up" (Rhys 23) conjures a similar, albeit more surreal, image of appearance as the ultimate identifier, to such an extent that animate people might be easily mistaken for inanimate objects. This transference of queries of identity to matters of dress situates personal selection and social compulsion as factors in the complex perception and misperception of inner realities.

In *Villette*, Lucy imbues the selection of her dress with almost mythic powers of self-creation, as it becomes the focal point at which anxieties regarding social perception converge. Elevating her temporary wardrobe change from her customary gray to a subtle pink for the opera to the status of existential crisis despite the "extreme simplicity" of the dress, Lucy exclaims that "I thought no human force should avail to put me into it. A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me." (Bronte 235). The magnitude of Lucy's vehemence that "no human force should avail to put [her] into it" reflects her subversive reluctance to consciously assume a performed guise, as she projects the social gaze of recognition onto the dress itself. Despite her fervent disinclination, Lucy proceeds to clothe herself in the alien pink dress, "without force at all…led and influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled" (Bronte 235). Emphasizing the passive inertia and the absence of conscious choice despite the lack of "force" throughout the act

of dressing, Lucy's account of the experience describes the influence of her compulsion in terms synonymous with powerlessness and subjugation. Compounding the initial reluctance of mere personal preference, Lucy asserts that fear and social anxiety exacerbate the situation as "light fabric and bright tint…scared [her]" (Bronte 236). Interestingly enough, Lucy's anxiety proves unfounded, as she concludes that "since Graham found in it nothing absurd, my own eye consented soon to become reconciled" (Bronte 236). Her powerlessness in this process of self-creation cultivates an intense anxiety which reveals her profoundly internalized need for emotional repression and austerity, despite altered external circumstances which allow general social acceptance and admiration of gaiety and color. Her subsequent recognition and reconciliation with Graham's unanticipated approval, "[finding] in it nothing absurd," reveal a sense of identity derived from social expectations and crafted from a fear of vivid or frivolous expression. The progression of rejection, compulsion, and acceptance throughout this brief incident mirrors the processes of social expectation and internalization involved in constructing, exhibiting, and maintaining a particular public identity.

Sasha expresses similar, albeit inverted processes of self-construction through material attire throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, as she strives to assimilate her wardrobe rather than distinguish it. Like Lucy's attribution of social gaze onto the offending pink garment itself, Sasha ascribes smothering qualities to her apparel, noting that "My dress extinguishes me. And then this damned old fur coat slung on top of everything else- the last idiocy, the last incongruity" (Rhys 15). Sasha frequently seeks escape from social constructions which define and limit, such as name and societal position; however, the prospect of the complete erasure of identity suggested by the usage of "extinguishes" terrifies, while the "incongruity" that exists between her outward performance of attempted assimilation and her internal isolation perpetuates her

debilitating insecurities further. The cycle of shame and self-amendment continues, as Sasha frequently seeks to remake her "fate" through an almost superstitious belief in physical renovation: "I must go and buy a hat this afternoon, I think, and tomorrow a dress. I must get on with the transformation act. But there I sit, watching the same procession of shabby women wheeling prams, of men tightly buttoned up into black overcoats" (Rhys 63). Mirroring Lucy's tendencies to turn to external means of sorting through increasingly pressing inquiries of identity, Sasha compulsively purchases new trappings, "a hat" or "a dress," which equate to "transformation." Her associations between appearance and social acceptance initially beckon towards a future in which a different mask, a more fashionable dress, integrate her more indistinguishably from the surging, carelessly cruel crowd. However, even as she strives towards this more complete, incarnated performance of social ideals, Sasha betrays ambivalence regarding the ability of an act to truly transform as she observes women still constrained by "wheeling prams" and men "tightly buttoned up" into the social fabric of their "black overcoats." The process of dressing and re-dressing echoes Sasha's cyclical tendencies to make and re-make herself, consequently searching for a knowledge of identity that eludes her perpetuating solutions and ceaseless vacillating between her desire to integrate and her defensive, separating rejection of humanity.

Fusing Sasha's opposing inclinations to merge and emerge from the crowd, ornamentation and the social conventions of appearance wield a power to obscure the individual within the collective. Early on in the narrative, Sasha, working at a clothing store surrounded by mannequins and fashionably dressed inanimate figures, recalls "watching those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart- all complete" (Rhys 18). Synthesizing language evoking

both fabric textures and anatomical parts, Sasha emphasizes the construction and revision involved in sculpting the insensate, ornamental societal ideal. By equating “success” with attractive external features and a “sawdust heart,” Sasha effectively connects her conflicting and ambivalent desires for self and society by revealing the inevitably inanimate future that lurks behind compliance with the feminine normative as she perceives it enacted around her. Despite this awareness of the emotional lobotomy required by socially imposed constraints, the possibility of transforming herself through appearance (or even superficially obscuring her inner life through more effective external disguise) unrelentingly torments her imagination, particularly her yearning for the chameleon potential of hair dye: “I try to decide what color I shall have my hair dyed, and hang on to that thought as you hang on to something when you are drowning… First it must be bleached, that is to say, its own colour must be taken out of it- and then it must be dyed, that is to say, another colour must be imposed on it” (Rhys 51-2). The thought of dying her hair anchors Sasha to the separate, collective world where appearance signifies everything. In order to merge into the fabric of that realm, her inner life must be “bleached,” drained and erased rather than simply masked, and remade in another image, effectively concealing her inner turmoil even from herself.

In the midst of negotiating identity in imposed and internalized communal paradigms, Sasha encounters various individuals who reinforce her insecurities and attempt to mold her into a more acceptable form of the feminine, collectively embodying the social engulfing visions of self. Describing a visit from a friend, Sasha blends her friend’s concern for her best interest with visions of her improvement dancing in her words: “I had looked at this, I had looked at that, I had looked at the people passing in the street and at a shop-window full of artificial limbs. I came in to somebody who said: ‘I can’t bear to see you looking like this’” (Rhys 11). By

juxtaposing the anonymous freedom of the open street and her detached observation of the "artificial," Sasha revels in the fragmented subjectivity that accompanies her observation of a collected whole deconstructed into separate "limbs." For one impossible moment, she embodies the unobserved liberty of the urban spectator, Walter Benjamin's *flaneur*, shedding the weight of the social gaze's relentlessly constructed object. As Raymond Williams notes in *The Country and the City*, "the forces of the action have become internal and… there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it" (Williams 243). Yet, upon re-entering an enclosed space of the private sphere, the whole promptly demands her participation in its design. This re-integration of self into social observation employs an appeal to external alteration, emphasizing the visual perception of "I can't bear to see you *looking* like this" (my emphasis) rather than the internal renovation implied by "I can't bear to see you *being* like this." Further elaborating the central role of the masking, performative surface in social integration, a disquieted witness to one of Sasha's numerous weeping paroxysms in cafés remarks that "Sometimes I'm just as unhappy as you are. But that's not to say that I let everybody see it" (Rhys 10). Ironically, the most isolating of Sasha's characteristics appears to be the vulnerability of her transparent mask, the permeable boundaries between interior and exterior rather than any distinctive, inherent otherness. Her true societal offense lies not in perceiving and feeling but in expressing and exhibiting these discordant internal dialogues between thought and emotion.

Sasha's distinctive exhibition of this schism effectively exposes the universal performance unfolding around her, laying the mechanistic structures of societal self-modification bare through her insulated interactions with others. During a confrontation with her sales supervisor, aptly labeled Mr. Blank, Sasha simultaneously reports and interprets the exchange: 'Just a helpless, hopeless little fool, aren't you?' he says. Jovial? Bantering? On the surface, yes.

Underneath? No, I don't think so" (Rhys 28). Sasha's skeptical, unspoken questioning highlights the discrepancy between her manager's outward demeanor and his internal attitude, a distinction which renders his spoken words ambiguous. Since presentation protects her supervisor's words from the offense of definite meaning, Sasha relies upon her intuitive suspicion of social performance to pinpoint a discrepancy between superficial tone and connoted intent. In a rare retrospective glimpse to her traumatic past pregnancy, Sasha's nurse employs rudimentary reconstructive procedures, a visual camouflage analogous to the tonal masking of verbal subtext enacted by her employer: "'Now I am going to arrange that you will be just like what you were before. There will be no trace, no mark, nothing.' That, it seems, is her solution. She swathes me up in very tight, very uncomfortable bandages …When she takes them off, there is not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease" (Rhys 60-1). Echoing Sasha's preoccupation with external ornamentation as an effective form of performance, her female nurse emphasizes external appearance, encouraging a remedial construction of a smooth, opaque façade with "no trace, no mark, nothing" that reveals the experience. By suggesting that this physical modification can "arrange that [Sasha] will be just like what [she] was before," the nurse implies that erasure of external evidence with the "very tight, very uncomfortable bandages" of social conformation can expunge the past altogether. In this enactment of intentional isolation from self in the pursuit of social acceptance, the "solution" to Sasha's social offense requires impenetrable boundaries between internal suffering and external presentation; The absence of "line…wrinkle..[and] crease" must transcend the skin, permeating her psychological contours with a corresponding evenness, and Sasha must suppress her torrential waves of public anguish in favor of Lucy's internalized self-deception. Yet the failed fulfillment of the nurses' scheme reveals that social integration on these terms of self-abandonment ultimately engenders its own brand of isolation,

even as the poignant nonchalance of her suggestion exposes the universality of performance and consequent loneliness.

While Sasha acquires and reinforces her rituals of separation and performance through preemptory interactions with other complexly layered and socially molded figures, Lucy engages more explicitly with the social gaze as a distinctly male simplification and idealization of the feminine. During her cherished solitary visits to Villette's museums, Lucy wanders through galleries of stereotypes in their most distilled, still-life incarnations from the sensually exotic Cleopatra to the austere portraits of devout women, "cold and vapid as ghosts…as bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers" (Bronte 229). Just as the detailed descriptions of the portraits themselves provide direct glimpses into the archetypal dichotomy of female presentation, M. Paul's infuriated interruption of Lucy's observation and his forceful, albeit fruitless, re-direction of her gaze from the Cleopatra to the pious ghosts highlights a complex duality within social expectation. In her feminist classic, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet attributes this comic interaction between Lucy, M. Paul, and the two paintings to "the social schizophrenia of masculine culture," claiming that it "has converted one woman into sex symbol…for itself to gaze upon. And onto woman herself is reserved the wearisome piety…of serviceable humility" (Millet 144). On one level, M. Paul, both within this scene and throughout many subsequent exchanges, attempts to apply the values of the austere, spiritual women onto Lucy's person, like paint to a canvas, urging her to an external performance akin to the corrective aesthetic endeavors of the nurse and Sasha herself throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*.

However, beyond this astute symbolic analysis of the exchange and M. Paul's own hypocritical enthrallment with Cleopatra's image, the wealth of Lucy's internal reactions and vocalized replies throughout this scene remain unaddressed. Acutely conscious of both M. Paul's

manipulation and her advantage, Lucy delights in her calm awareness of M. Paul's hypocritical ire, revealing that "Beginning now to perceive his drift, I had a certain pleasure in keeping cool, and working him up" (Bronte 228). Reminiscent of her perverse pleasure in mistaken identity and intention, this small insight into Lucy's internal processing frames her subsequent protestations against both portraits, those "ugly picture[s]" (Bronte 228-9), as feigned ignorance, undermining and rewriting their true source of offense. Cognizant of M. Paul's efforts to obscure her gaze from the same depictions of female sexuality that he himself enjoys, Lucy's remarks latch onto the Cleopatra as a passive mechanism of defiance, declaring "But I have looked at her a great many times while Monsieur has been talking: I can see her quite well from this corner" (Bronte 232). By emphasizing the futility of his efforts to control her "examining, questioning, and forming conclusions" (Bronte 225) about the portrait, Lucy subtly asserts her autonomy from his maneuvering judgments. However, throughout her performance of benignly inadvertent rebellion, she fails to fully address and perceive the futility of her continued gaze at yet another extreme example of female presentation molded by male perception. Even in her attempts to undermine M. Paul's presumed authority over her thoughts and observation, she remains trapped in her habitual liminal space between two unbreathing idealizations of womanhood, opposite yet equal in their unattainability.

Vashti's performance similarly elevates a particular enactment of womanhood from the social sphere of the everyday to the stage of artistic inspection. Yet, as Gilbert and Gubar have noted in *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Vashti's theatrical spectacle functions differently from the portraits, both in intent and medium, as "Vashti uses her art not to manipulate others, but to represent herself" (424). The living dimensionality of Vashti's performance imbues her representation with the raw, dynamic expression of "a personal utterance," rather than the fixedly

demarcated contours of “an object meant to contain or coerce” (Gilbert and Gubar 424). The nuanced mobility of Vashti’s animate portrait revives Lucy’s contempt for the inert, framed visions of female experience, provoking her aside instructing her audience to “Place now the Cleopatra, or any other slug, before her as an obstacle, and see her cut through the pulpy mass” (Bronte 292). Highlighting the contrast between Vashti’s active agency and Cleopatra’s “slug[gish]” dormancy, Lucy simultaneously verifies and discredits the potential threat of these stagnant ideals as “obstacle[s]” to a more complex female enactment of female experience. By suffusing the Cleopatra with an aura of fictional construction, Lucy also evokes her own parallel failed attempts to reconstruct lived experience on her own “pulpy mass” of paper. Discerning Lucy’s incessant struggle to define herself beyond the framed boundaries of these past representations, Nancy Harrison unravels the necessary stages of Vashti’s defiant triumph: “To act, to speak, the woman must first find a voice. To find a voice she must…define her own body in space, lay claim to her boundaries and her own arena of performance” (Harrison 25). While this analysis of self-expression illuminates interesting interpretative possibilities, it obscures the necessary role of both the audience’s perception and role designation in Lucy’s and Vashti’s performances.

Despite the perceived improvement in personal intricacy, Vashti’s performance remains performance in every sense of the word, constrained by both Dr. John Graham’s condemnation and Lucy’s ambivalent fascination as well as the boundaries of the stage. Vashti’s enactment of lived female experience inhabits “the stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of ‘performative’” (Parker and Sedgwick 2), as she both displays a typified spectacle and evokes the internalized performance of the viewer. Scrutinizing her companion’s reactions to the spectacle, Lucy attributes his disapproval to his preconceived notions of female identity,

concluding that “He judged her as a woman, not as an artist: it was a branding judgment” (Bronte 294). Yet, even as her audience forms judgments rooted in her position as a woman, her identity fails to transcend its scripted, artistic role as Vashti. And even as Lucy evaluates Dr. John’s reductive verdict, she likewise reveals her own discriminatory and conflicting tendencies, as her descriptions vacillate between admiration of the “marvelous sight”, enthrallment with the “mighty revelation,” and revulsion towards the “spectacle low, horrible, immoral” (Bronte 291). Furthermore, Lucy fuses violence, anger, and insanity into a single, embodied perception, observing that “I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man; in each of her eyes sat a devil…They writhed her regal face to a demonic mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate, she stood” (Bronte 291). She saturates the figure of Vashti with an androgynous, otherworldly intensity reminiscent of Jane’s descriptions of Rochester’s mad wife, Bertha Mason, a correlation solidified by the flames that consume the theater after Vashti’s performance. Although captivated and confused by the originality of Vashti’s role, Lucy perceives her as yet another vision of a female type and another alternate self, limiting Vashti’s agency to determine boundaries by imposing her own.

Consistent with the cyclical exchange between internal and external perceptions seen throughout both novels, this imposition of boundaries also extends to Lucy’s perceptions of herself. Throughout *Villette,* mirrors shed their traditionally self-reflective role, reflecting the more nuanced likeness of the self as perceived by the detached, social observer. Upon Lucy’s arrival at the Rue de Fossette, the mirror becomes an explicit device of social monitoring and control, “fixed in the side of the window recess- by the aid of which reflector madame often secretly spied persons walking in the garden below” (Bronte 111). By invading a private space associated with silent reflection and solitude, Madame’s mirror appropriates internal space for

external manipulation, as the image of the self becomes subjected to another's gaze. Later, upon entering the theater in her uncharacteristic pink dress, Lucy assumes the role of both observer and observed, internalizing the analytical gaze of social perception:

> We suddenly encountered another party approaching from the opposite direction…I noted them all- the third person as well as the other two- and for the fraction of a moment, I believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance…before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror (Bronte 237-8)

During this brief glimpse into the "impartial impression" of "seeing myself as others see me" (Bronte 238), Lucy enters the precise moment of convergence between internal and external processes of self-creation and social construction. The revelation of external disguise as seen through social distance signals the existence of an inner reality at least partially separate from outward performance. Paradoxically, the very act of observing herself through a socially partial lens, despite "the jar of discord" and "pang of regret" (Bronte 238), reveals the possibility of a self beyond that scrutiny, the self that regains "consciousness" of her observation.

The motif of mirrors that frequently materializes throughout *Good Morning, Midnight* occupies a similarly autonomous, almost voyeuristic perspective akin to that of the disconnected social observer. While describing and evaluating a café's atmosphere, Sasha seeks reassurance in her reflection: "So clean, so resplendent, so well lit, with plenty of looking glasses and not a soul there to watch you. Am I looking all right? Not so bad. Surely, not so bad…" (Rhys 156). In the absence of "a soul there to watch," Sasha herself assumes the mantle of social observer, monitoring and evaluating her appearance through the "well lit" reflection which answers her inquiry. As that reflection moves to occupy a more ostensibly private yet publicly possessed

space, the washroom, the mirror gains an even more active role in the interaction, engaging in both speech and projection:

> Another of the well-known mirrors. 'Well, well,' it says, 'last time you looked in here you were a bit different, weren't you? Would you believe me that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one- lightly, like an echo- when it looks into me again?' All glasses in all lavabos do this. (Rhys 170)

Adopting the role of interrogator, the mirror wields memory like a weapon, bringing the past into the present through ghostly images and vocalizing comparative judgments. This animation of the inanimate, transforming a mere reflective surface into a source of external knowledge, enables Sasha's simultaneous awareness of not only coexisting internal and external selves, but also an infinite spectrum of discarded past identities.

As female narrators navigating and performing a wide of array of social and gendered expectations, both Lucy Snowe and Sasha Jensen's voices remain trapped within intricately woven webs of intentionally and unintentionally constructed narratives. Lucy, struggling to carve a new space through the negation of alternate selves, constantly wavers between her reverence for reason and her naturally passionate inclinations. Although engaged in a similar conflict of opposing desires, Sasha's struggle lies in her attempts to reconcile the self and world, as she seeks self-creation through separation and identity through communal belonging. As narratives progress and dichotomous boundaries begin to blur, neither narrator can substantiate and reconcile the two overlapping extremes of her paradoxical experience. When they see themselves, they peer into a mirror distorted by internalized social ideals and warped by their own convoluted performances, exposing the schism of self and perpetuating cycles of isolation, confinement, and repression.

Chapter 2

Things Rootless and Perishable: Isolation, Depression, and the Narrative Landscape

In their struggle to reconcile the self with the social world, Rhys' Sasha Jensen and Bronte's Lucy Snowe internalize external ideals, cyclically converting presentation into modification and self-creation into self-perpetuated isolation. However, social performance and navigation of reductive gender roles remain mere factors in the equation of their perpetual psychological and physical confinement, as well as the consequent depression exhibited by both narrators. Having previously examined implicit social mechanisms involved in the formation and preservation of internal isolation, my focus in this chapter primarily examines explicit manifestations of spatial and external isolation, in addition to their consequent effect upon the narrator's expression of their internal states and mental conditions.

Many scholars of Bronte and Rhys, performing extensive diagnostic criticism, have analyzed their texts alongside symptom checklists for various psychological conditions, recognizing between the two protagonists traces of clinical depression, hysteria, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and schizophrenia.[14] While this medicalization of the text often helps provoke profound examinations of the narrator's actions and reactions, this chapter will primarily explore the relationship between social isolation, consequent conceptions of self, and the narrators' depressed psychological condition; therefore, the term depression throughout refers to the mental atmosphere of general despondency rather than any exhibition of specific medical symptoms. At the same time, these readings offer intermediate insights into the subject's interactions with self

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[14] Lucy Snowe has been diagnosed with hysteria, read in pre-Freudian terms as the result of sexual deprivation rather than of a past sexual encounter (Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body*). Sasha Jenson has been diagnosed with depression (Czarnecki, "Kristevan Depression in Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*"), schizophrenia (Abel, "Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys), and PTSD (Linett, "'New Words, New Everything': Fragmentation and Trauma in Jean Rhys").

and world prior to their final diagnostic categorization. For instance, while Elizabeth Abel's article "Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys" applies R.D Laing's conceptions of the divided self and ambulatory schizophrenia to Sasha's narrative consciousness, her analysis reveals fundamental underlying truths regarding Sasha's complicated relationship to the external, surmising that "Greater than her need for human contact is her often mentioned need for a place in which to hide, the need to keep her inner self apart and undefined" (Abel 163). Abel's integration of mental isolation and spatial demarcation accentuates the crucial relationship between the internal spaces constructed and shaped by narrative voices and the social, urban landscapes that sculpt the very perspectives which perceive them. I argue that Lucy Snowe and Sasha Jensen's incongruous position as social anomalies that simultaneously embrace and reject condemning archetypes obtains expression through desperate inner vignettes and the desolate urban framework which surrounds their narratives.

The formula of communal expectation becomes further complicated by the geographical, and consequently cultural, displacement experienced by both narrators, as distinctly English women transplanted in foreign soil. In *Villette*, M. Paul's condemning tirade during his birthday fete accentuates Lucy Snowe's heightened alien status as an already singular English woman marooned in the mythical French-influenced nation of Labassecour. Having consciously chosen to prepare a gift differing from the conventional bouquet, Lucy faces the public censure of her hostile peer, Mademoiselle St. Pierre who obliquely critiques her assumed social gaffe: "For Meess Lucie, Monsieur will kindly make allowance; as a foreigner, she probably did not know our customs, or did not appreciate their significance. Meess Lucie has regarded this ceremony as too frivolous to be honoured by her observance" (Bronte 384). Simultaneously excusing her with postulations of ignorance and snidely critiquing her for snobbery, Mademoiselle St. Pierre's

comments apparel Lucy in the doubly binding guise of benignly uninformed and blatantly insensitive outsider. Bitterly expanding upon his colleague's more subtle jabs, M. Paul targets Lucy's distinctive behavior by eviscerating the entire British female population:

> Never have I heard English women handled as M. Paul that morning handled them: he spared nothing- neither their minds, morals, manners, nor personal appearance. I specifically remember his abuse of their tall stature, their long necks, their thin arms, their slovenly dress, their pedantic education, their impious skepticism (!), their insufferable pride, their pretentious virtue. (Bronte 385)

M. Paul's manner of addressing Lucy's idiosyncrasy not only reveals the isolation automatically achieved by her national identity as "English," but also exposes an emphasis on gender that transcends national boundaries. In addition to specifically scorning her role as a woman, ridiculing female "minds, morals, manners, [and] personal appearance," the majority of the qualities which he chooses to disparage such as "tall stature," "long necks," "pride," and "virtue" align with specific cultural archetypes of feminine beauty and temperament. The discrepancy between the external ideals which Lucy engages with and internalizes in England and those which she confronts in Villette reveal a variety of gendered and national societal codes which prove nearly impossible to navigate and reconcile. The savage unity of complicit approval which follows M. Paul's generalized rebuke, the collective "grin of vindictive delight" (Bronte 386) which confirms "how these clowns of Labassecour secretly hate England" (Bronte 386), imparts the significant capacity of national exclusion in Lucy's habitual sense of separation. Mademoiselle St. Pierre and M. Paul's individual aggressions, absorbed by unified biases, target superficial categories of Lucy's social identity, effectively alienating her even in the midst of the crowd.

These intensely xenophobic and misogynistic modes of reaction and assumption gain poignant implications when juxtaposed with Lucy's personal rationale for abstaining from the tradition: "I like to see flowers growing, but when they are gathered, they cease to please. I look on them as things rootless and perishable; their likeness to life makes me sad" (Bronte 381). Associating the severed stems of cut flowers with her ingrained experiences of loss, solitude, and impermanence, Lucy's disdain for flower giving resists the deliberate imposition of separation yet effectively results in the reinforcement of her own disconnection from the estranged world which she inhabits. Although deriving from personal and universalized human sentiment rather than national or sexual identity, Lucy's actions or lack thereof cannot resist the impulse of categorization and exclusion which infiltrates and dictates her social experiences.[15]

Similarly, *Good Morning, Midnight*'s Sasha Jensen encounters external tendencies to conglomerate experience into national and gendered generalizations, further illuminating the inherent role of classification in exclusion. Snippets of overheard dialogue between strangers, such as "The Englishwoman? No, I don't know her. Why should you imagine I know her?" (Rhys 41), correlate lack of recognition and association with Sasha's foreign national identity. The rhetorical quality of this sequence of questions renders French knowledge of an "Englishwoman" an absurd presumption, implying automatic alienation. However, both compulsory exclusion and compulsory inclusion ultimately isolate individuals from themselves by placing the determining power of identity onto the collective community rather than onto their own intrinsic realities. Employing intertwined national and sexual identities as weapons of repudiation, the gigolo inserts reductive presuppositions into café conversations: "At the end of

[15] Ironically, this same passage has been interpreted according to the contrast between artificially organized French gardens and natural, chaotic English ones found in later eighteenth century aesthetic discourse. These categorizations appear to be inextricable from Lucy's interactions both with other characters and within certain critical conversations, as well.

my arguments he says calmly: ‘You talk like that because you’re a woman, and everybody knows England isn’t a woman’s country” (Rhys 157). This attempt to extinguish Sasha’s individual perspective underneath a blanket statement relies entirely upon assumptions regarding the cultural patterns and geographically-delineated standards. When Sasha, sensing the underlying hostility of his Othering remarks, attempts to disentangle herself from dichotomizing boundaries, declaring “’Don’t tell me that I’m like other women- I’m not.’” (Rhys 161), the gigolo responds with the equally limiting “‘Yes, but all women say that too’” (Rhys 161). Besides emphasizing the role that generalizing categorizations perform in invalidating the individual, this exchange exhibits the paradoxical ability of exaggerated communal associations to isolate their members. By nullifying Sasha’s attempts to establish an identity apart from her allotted stereotype, the gigolo imposes multiple layers of isolation onto Sasha’s social position, effectively separating her views from her current locality and from her own interior world by deeming them mere derivatives of the external.

Despite the prevalence of imposed categorizations which effectively tether Sasha to her socially designated sphere throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, her internalized sense of isolation produces an external lack of communal identity, creating a feedback loop that reaffirms her impressions. Attempting to articulate her intense detachment, Sasha rejects both individual and collective classification, declaring that “I have no pride- no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don’t belong anywhere” (Rhys 44). This sequential lack of “pride,” “name,” “face,” and “country” implies a connectivity between internal sentiments and external expression, embodiment, and spatial realities. Sasha situates her mental and emotional turmoil within the contours of external circumstance:

> I'm not talking about the struggle when you are a strong and good swimmer and there are willing and eager friends on the bank waiting to pull you out at the first sign of distress, I mean the real thing. You jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink, you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter. (Rhys 10)

Employing the explanatory overtones of her opening, "I'm not talking about," to counter the reader's assumed expectations, Sasha implies that "the real thing" of individual lived experience remains emotionally and physically separate from labeling presuppositions. Throughout this passage, she contrasts the brutal actuality of her isolation "with no willing and eager friends" against the backdrop an anticipated experience of communal support and personal safety. Intricately delineating her psychological experience in concrete terms, Sasha molds her interior landscape into forms and features, populating the "banks" of her consciousness with derisive, disembodied "laughter." The detached nature of both Sasha's distress and the laughter that accompanies it transfers the source of environmental antagonism from internal perception to external manifestation.

This continuous cycle of projection and enactment reinforces Sasha's awareness of her own social isolation, converting the anomalistic circumstances of the exile into patterns of normalcy. Accustomed to the instantaneous alienation produced by human interaction, Sasha ponders the possibility of achieving permanent physical and visual separation from others, asking "Isn't there something you can do so that nobody looks at you or sees you? Of course, you must make your mind vacant, neutral, then your face also becomes vacant, neutral- you are invisible" (Rhys 19). The sequential process of "mind" to "face" to being implies the familiar pattern of the translation of thought into external expression and manufactured reality. Sasha's ingrained desire for invisibility through neutrality, the necessary rejection of limiting social,

national, and sexual categorization, recasts isolation, a previously hostile and psychologically damaging condition, as secure and alluring: "I crept in and hid. The lid of the coffin shut down with a bang. Now I no longer wish to be loved, beautiful, happy, or successful. I want one thing, and one thing only- to be left alone" (Rhys 42-43). With "a bang" of "the lid of the coffin," Sasha's desire to hide from the consequences of systematic exclusion inverts as she gravitates towards isolation, and implicitly suicide, as the "one…and only" desirable consummation. The rejection of several variables, love, beauty, happiness, and success, which ostensibly engender social inclusion, catalyzes this metamorphic shift in Sasha's objectives by dissociating lack and solitude. Reversing cause and effect within her perception of social circumstance, Sasha redistributes meaning and desirability in order to more advantageously position herself despite the habitually proved inevitability of her isolation.

Although circumstances of isolation throughout *Villette* primarily feature the external, spatial limitations of physical seclusion, Lucy Snowe's narration often highlights a similar self-preserving and positioning impulse to mold and redefine internal expectation according to external realities. Recounting her experiences under Miss Marchmont's service, Lucy simultaneously cultivates and reconciles the split between the narrow existent world and the internally constructed expanse of remembered possibility:

> Two hot, close rooms thus became my world; and a crippled, old woman, my mistress, my friend, my all. Her service was my duty- her pain, my suffering- her relief, my hope- her anger, my punishment- her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an everchanging sky outside the steam dimmed lattice of this sick chamber; I was almost content to forget it. All within me became narrowed to my lot. (Bronte 42)

Charting the gradual yet exhaustive reduction of space, social interaction, and purpose, Lucy seamlessly links the limitations imposed by practical, external realities to her consequently narrowed emotional and imaginative scenery. "The steam dimmed lattice" of both her current physical entombment and her fading past memory abridges the vagaries of landscape, confining both her external and internal perception to the monotony of four, unyielding walls. While the "forgetting" and "narrowing" renovations of self and world initially appear mere functional derivatives of Lucy's situation, the hesitant, conscious acceptance of the phrase "almost content" signifies a simultaneously active and ambivalent submission to reality. Later on the narrative, Lucy further articulates this self-preserving tendency to eliminate all speculation of alternative, inner perceptions, declaring that "The hermit- if he be a sensible hermit- will swallow his own thoughts, and lock up his own emotions during these weeks of inward winter" (Bronte 300). By juxtaposing a specific seasonal time frame, "weeks…of inward winter," with sporadically self-imposed emotional and mental repression, Lucy invokes the language of instinctual survival in which "swallow[ing…thoughts]" becomes as essential as swallowing sustenance and "lock[ing] up…emotions" as necessary as seeking shelter from a blizzard. Like Sasha, Lucy copes with the bleak reality of perpetual social and physical isolation by narrowing the boundaries of fantasized alternatives, consequently removing any condemning contrast between her inner life and her inevitable extrinsic one.

Despite her recurrent attempts to assimilate and adapt to habitual isolation, Lucy's protective self-restraint amplifies her confined external circumstances as the impoverishment of her amended mental landscapes cages her thoughts. Lucy formulates her meager correspondence with Dr. John in terms of spatial confinement and restricted sustenance, speculating that "I suppose animals kept in cages, and so scantily fed as to be always upon the verge of famine

await their food as I awaited a letter" (Bronte 302). Equating her protracted lack of social interaction with starvation, Lucy reiterates language evocative of survival in which the "cage" of both internal and external distance constructs inhibitive barriers between need and fulfillment. Anticipating the inaccessibility of her situation to more privileged populations unaccustomed to madness and extended solitude, Lucy further cements the correlation between human contact and food, and by extension, social isolation and famine, in order to bridge the gap between her personal experiences and those of society: "The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement…the long-buried prisoner disinterred" (Bronte 309). Simultaneously sealing the unapproachable entrance and the labyrinthine exit of her involuntary seclusion, she emphasizes the duality of her confinement as both a physical situation to be "enter[ed] into" and a strange mental landscape to be navigated and "follow[ed] out." Lucy, having internalized her isolation, remains a prisoner "long buried" in her own dissociated thoughts and "mad from [the] solitary confinement" of her separation from social interaction achieved by inconsistent correspondence and vacationing students. This metaphorical connection between loneliness and imprisonment echoes an earlier passage in which she asserts that "'Stone walls do not a prison make/ Nor iron bars- a cage' so peril, loneliness, an uncertain future are not oppressive evils, so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed; so long, especially, as Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star" (Bronte 62). However, having consistently advised herself "to swallow [her] own thoughts and lock up [her] emotions" (Bronte 300), to crush hope in the absence of liberty, Lucy constructs an effective prison from her own ruthless rationality, starving herself of the mental freedom essential to combating and escaping the "oppressive evil" of her isolation.

Throughout *Villette*, Lucy's self-repressive cycles of passion and reason trigger internal mutinies suppressed and contained in their formative stages by her relentless mental and emotional policing. She systematically dismisses hope and desire as mere catalysts for disappointment and dissatisfaction, explaining that "The hopes which are dear to youth, which bear it up and lead it on, I knew not and dared not know. If they knocked at my heart sometimes, an inhospitable bar to admission must be inwardly drawn" (Bronte 177). This seamless escalation from "knew not" to "dared not know" highlights the central role of fear in Lucy's rejection of optimism as her past lack of hope informs her current, defensive elimination of future expectations. However, in doing so, she creates an effective mental prison, "an inhospitable bar to admission…inwardly drawn," to supplement the physical and temporal constraints of her homogenous routine. Further elaborating her defensive, self-ensnaring aversion for hope, Lucy equates desire with foolish stupidity, enlisting her strict belief in rationality in her internal struggle: "I say *half* a wish; I broke it and flung it away before it became a whole one, discovering in good time its exquisite folly" (Bronte 118). By emphasizing the interruptive nature of her rational intervention, she admits to the subconscious possession of wishes and speculative visions of a hopeful future even as she attempts to alienate herself from their harmful influence. Lucy acknowledges her continuous spectrum of external and internal contradiction, declaring that "I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future- such a future as mine- to be dead" (Bronte 122). Simultaneously embedding herself in emotional response and extricating herself from it, Lucy draws significant distinctions between past, present, and future. Her emphatic declaration of her ability to "feel" asserts the existence of an inner life tenaciously separate from her "passive," silent, and "cold" external performance, even

as it concurrently relegates that inner life to "past days." Within this temporal formulation, Lucy's eradication of emotion becomes a dangerously inconsistent survival mechanism: useless when applied to unalterable past experiences, momentarily effective for sustaining present endurance of monotonous circumstance, and self-destructive when projected into an unyieldingly hopeless future.

While equally prone to these cycles of spontaneous emotional insurgence and suppression throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha inhabits an inverted chronology in which her present rejection of emotion operates as a means of subduing a volatile past. Aware of her inaccessibly distinct position, she clarifies her impassive relationship to the encroaching changeability of the external world, remarking that "When you've been made very cold and very sane you've also been made very passive. (Why worry? Why worry?)" (Rhys 12). Replicating and realigning Lucy's descriptions of the compulsorily "passive," "sane," and "cold" present, Sasha imbues the future with a blasé inevitability which renders both anxiety and hope obsolete. Like Lucy, Sasha also frequently cautions herself against buoyant emotions, unfolding the consequences as a deterrent: "Don't get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don't you?...Yes…And then you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon, don't you? Having no staying power…Yes, exactly…So, no excitement" (Rhys 15). Delineating her rapid descent from exaltation to collapse, Sasha's thoughts follow circular loops contained by a fear of the future derived from past experience. Unlike Lucy's conception of the past as a safe container for emotion, Sasha's memories seep into and shape the present, infiltrating even innocuous moments with emotional turmoil. In order to combat the dangerously continuous past, Sasha attempts to fill any temporal space within her days: "The thing is to programme, not to leave anything to chance- no gaps. No trailing around aimlessly with cheap gramophone records

starting in your head, no 'Here this happened, here that happened'" (Rhys 15). Sasha attempts to obstruct the permeation of past into present, even as she acknowledges the inherently circular, repetitive nature of "cheap gramophone record" recollections. This avoidance of cyclically inevitable memory proves both unsustainable and insufficient, further perpetuating these temporal circuits of temporary solutions.

Despite these internal efforts and mandates to suppress resurgence of past emotions, Sasha continues to experience spontaneous, public breakdowns throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*. Frequently occurring in cafés amidst the very activity which Sasha cultivates to distract from harmful memory, these emotional paroxysms underline the futility of these attempts and Sasha's inability to control and restrain subliminal impulses. Echoing the patterns of narrative interruptions established by recurrent paraphrasing of the past, Sasha's crying unexpectedly interferes with her daily life: "I am talking away, quite calmly and sedately, when there it is again- tears in my eyes, tears rolling down my face. (Saved, rescued, but not quite so good as new...)" (Rhys 93). By invoking and revising the intermittent revision of "saved, rescued," Sasha circumscribes her recovery by pinpointing the past as a direct influence on the present disruption of her mental and emotional coherence. Provoked by this resurfacing of dammed internal tumult, Sasha's breakdown escalates further as "Now panic has come on me. My hands are shaking, my heart is thumping, my hands are cold. Fly, fly, run from these atrocious voices, these abominable eyes…" (Rhys 25). The reactive conglomeration of depression, "tears," and "panic" aggravate Sasha's social fear, demonizing surrounding "voices" and "eyes" and stimulating her desire to escape through isolation. Following this progression of exponentially increasing consequences, this impulse of flight and evasion intensifies into a habitual, detached desire for death: "After that first week, I made up my mind to kill myself…

Next week, or next month, or next year I'll kill myself" (Rhys 86). Her plan for self-destruction, trickling down from a declaration with all the urgency of an immediate intent to an indeterminate "next week, or next month, or next year," necessitates an amended strategy for reintegration of self and future possibility. However, by occupying both the role of the subject and the object in these conjectures of violence, Sasha encloses herself in loop of a self-perpetuating invalidation, which separates the "self" from the narrating "I."

Throughout *Villette*, Lucy enacts a similar splitting of the self, as her narratively expressed "I" exerts agency through the subjugation of her own thoughts, desires, and existence. Describing one brief, episodic precursor to her "nervous fever" (Bronte 206), Lucy retrospectively constructs the past as a safe space in which to relegate the threatening emotions of the present, recounting that:

> I did long, achingly… for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did…after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die; they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core (Bronte 123).

This passage, although similarly imbued with the language of destruction, seeks the suppression of the self through a more linear narrative; it is not the despair of the past, but rather her hope for the future, which requires strict restraint. "This longing, and all [desires] of a similar kind" become alienated from Lucy's perceived self, as she marks them as necessary targets for tortured silence. While explicitly eager for emotional eradication, Lucy's emphasis on the resurrections of these forcibly repressed longings, which "did not die," renders her attempts ineffectual, as well

as intensely painful. Her inability to extricate these exiled, hopeful desires further materializes, as these "transiently stunned" acquire heightened agency in their own resistance against Lucy's suppression, "turn[ing] on nail with a rebellious wrench." Lucy's narrative vindication of her rationalizations over her objectified impulses and aspirations backfires, as her split emotions actively reclaim subjectivity and engage in a violent struggle to reintegrate into a cohesive vision of self.

This undercurrent of emotional dissent remains integral to Lucy's crusade to establish a coherent, reconciled selfhood, released from painfully tangible mental disintegrations. While recovering from her central nervous collapse and her subsequent semi-conscious wanderings through the streets of Villette, Lucy retrospectively reflects on the source of her uncharacteristic behavior, repeatedly connecting unexplained action to emotionally driven reaction:

> I suppose you will think me mad for taking such a step, but I could not help it…my days and nights were grown intolerable; a cruel sense of desolation pained my mind: a feeling that would it make its way, rush out, or kill me- like…the current that passes through the heart, and which, if aneurism or any other morbid cause obstructs its natural channels, seeks abnormal outlet… poured out was a dreary, desperate complaint. (Bronte 211)

Progressing from momentarily effective subdual of sensation to complete, involuntary acquiescence to it, Lucy rationalizes her behavior by claiming a temporary absence of rationality, and consequently a temporary suspension of the narrating "I's" absolute authority. Since "I" "could not help it," the subject-object formulation of her previous narratives of inner tumult becomes reversed. Rather than inflicting torturous pain upon her suppressed emotions, those emotions surge into the position of dominance, inflicting pain on "[Lucy's] mind"; likewise, the feelings previously endangered by Lucy's desire to expunge them from the narrative become a

threat to the narrator herself, as they "would…rush out or kill *me*" (my emphasis). Further expounding this reversal in the power dynamics between selves, Lucy formulates the emotions, previously designated as irrational, in scientific, anatomical terms, validating both the force of their influence and their ultimately triumphant coup of tyrannical rationality. Combatting the assumed social pronouncement of insanity which overshadows the incident, Lucy frames her psychological anomaly in terms of comprehensible medical malady, metaphorically translating her "nervous fever" to an "aneurism" and her discordant, stigmatized emotions to familiar fluid such as blood, a "current that passes through the heart." This assumption of medical terminology, similar to that expressed in diagnostic criticism, implies a perpetuation of the same problematic impulse to categorize which drives Lucy to this acute mental anguish. Even within this seemingly desegregating configuration, Lucy still categorically approaches her emotional need as an entity both separate and diametrically opposed to her vision of self.

With the shadow of this self-splitting inner contention, as well as alienating social categorizations, looming over both Lucy and Sasha's narrative voices, their depictions of the urban landscapes acquire another dimension of communal isolation, which both shapes and is shaped by their perceptions as they wander through the labyrinthine city. During these solitary journeys, Sasha and Lucy momentarily inhabit the modified role of the metropolitan spectator and masculine flâneur, a term originally popularized by Walter Benjamin's analysis of motifs that emerge in Charles Baudelaire's poetry. Navigating and observing the city streets, "the flâneur encounters the crowd of people whose ubiquitous presence is the decisive factor in shaping the experience of the modern metropolis" (Steiner 159). The flâneur's central position in discourse surrounding urban modernity hinges upon his ability to engage with his surroundings through an objectifying and interpretative gaze, often obscuring and symbolizing female

presence by means of the very social assumptions which plague Sasha and Lucy's conceptions of self. In her examination of the female struggle to occupy and narrate an equally subjectified gaze, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City,* Nord addresses this gap in critical discussion, claiming that "the particular urban vision of the female observer, novelist, or investigator derives from her consciousness of transgression and trespassing from the vexed sexuality her position implies, and from her struggle to escape the status of spectacle and become a spectator" (Nord 12). This transition from "spectacle" to "spectator," crucial to their presentations of self as isolated outsider in relation to the city, remain incomplete, as Sasha and Lucy continue to strive towards a cohesive, internal perspective through which to view the external world. During the urban wanderings which occur as a physical enactment of mental disarray, Lucy and Sasha reveal their inner turmoil as they project their acute awareness of the social gaze onto the architectural environs. By granting internalized judgment influential agency over their own interpretations and observations of themselves as urban participants, Lucy and Sasha initially fail to fully assume the mantle of the female flânerie, instead remaining partially subject to external evaluation.

Throughout *Villette*, Lucy's impulses to amble through the city streets often signal internal upheaval, and her solitary strolls emerge as a remedial process, the "abnormal outlet" (Bronte 211) through which sudden surges of passionate longing pour out. As Lucy progresses through her nervous fever-induced journey across Villette, her descriptions of the urban landscape begin to mirror her tumultuous psychological topography, amassing layers of social significance which ultimately obscure the original impression:

> I had become involved in a part of the city with which I was not familiar…I was still too careless of my own welfare and safety to be cautious. I grew embarrassed; I got enmeshed in a network of turns unknown. (Bronte 185)

Transitioning from the familiar to the unfamiliar, the city evolves from its typical embodiment of freedom and connection to a space pervaded with shame and uncertainty, a permeating self-consciousness which undermines detached observation. Lucy's casual dismissal of her "own welfare and safety" echoes with knowledge of the gapping deficiency of an "adequate social or economic structure for the independent existence of the genteel single woman… [or a] respectable context for her appearance in the city landscape" (Nord 182). Acutely aware of this absence, Lucy, in her embarrassed and careless exploration of the unknown, negotiates space with the specter of the fallen "woman of the streets," which haunts her with the burden of social assumption as well as that of isolated objectification. As she wanders aimlessly through the picturesque avenues, lost and physically exhausted, Lucy futilely endeavors to assert agency in a space restricted by self and social perception, declaring that "I tried to reach the porch of a great building near, but the mass of frontage and the giant-spire turned black and vanished from my eyes" (Bronte 185). Her sight, essential to her identity as a spectator, "vanishe[s]" even as the architectural structures, the objects of her gaze, fade into indistinguishable darkness. Although ostensibly rooted in Lucy's physical loss of consciousness, this disappearance act connotes her inability to establish a visual connection with the city while she remains partially disconnected from herself.

This lack of connection between spectator and surroundings characterizes Sasha's observations of the city streets throughout G*ood Morning, Midnight*. Projecting internally

perceived danger and isolation upon the cityscape itself, Sasha becomes the object of her own split gaze as her impressions of the buildings acquire the authority of social scrutiny:

> Walking in the night with the dark houses over you like monsters…If you are quite secure and your roots are well struck in, they know. They stand back respectfully, waiting for the poor devil without any friends and without any money. Then, they step forward, the waiting houses, to frown and crush...Frowning and leering and sneering, the houses, one after another. Tall cubes of darkness, with two lighted eyes at the top to sneer. And they know who to frown at. (Rhys 32)

Imbued with the personified powers of motion, facial expression, and social discernment, "the dark houses" revoke Sasha's role as the subject, subjecting her instead to "frowning and leering and sneering." The urban Parisian landscape, a character in its own right capable of both respect and menace, possesses the sight and knowledge typically reserved for the narrating observer, a reversal further reinforced by the absence of Sasha's first person persona. Easily sensing and identifying Sasha's alienation as "the poor devil without any friends and without any money," the animated buildings "step forward" like antibodies hostilely converging around a foreign object. This transference of insight regarding social and financial positioning onto the houses who "know who to frown at," augmented by her later assertion that "Nobody else knows me, but the street knows me" (Rhys 107) evoke a threateningly atmospheric sense of unease and exposure, in which the comfortably free anonymity of the street wanderer is stripped away. However, unlike Lucy's confused, indistinct rambling and eventual collapse, Sasha acquires fresh knowledge from this involuntarily perceived animation of the environment and detached dehumanizing of the crowd, remarking that "If you think I minded, then you've never lived like that, plunged in a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can

almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets. Close-up of human nature- isn't it worth something?" (Rhys 90). Drawing upon her lack of connection to the scene and her targeted position of isolation, she momentarily establishes a narrative voice as a flânerie, engaging in an "illusory attempt to confront this disquieting experience with a heightened knowledge of human nature" (Steiner 159). Yet, even as Sasha cultivates this illusory awareness of social mechanisms, her strolls through the streets as both object of observation and observer further reinforce her perceived alienation from self and others.

In addition to manifesting itself through depictions and interactions with the metropolitan landscape, Sasha's isolated, despondent, and divided mental state emerges through her descriptions of room interiors. Throughout Rhys' portrayal of urban modernity, the public sphere inextricably seeps into traditionally private and domestic space as Sasha drifts from one transient, identical hotel room to the next. Explicitly blurring these boundaries between private and public, internal and external spaces, Sasha repeatedly laments that "This damned room- it's saturated with the past…It's all the rooms I've ever slept in, all the streets I've ever walked in" (Rhys 109). Emphasizing the ceaseless monotony of her migration from one anonymous, rented space to the other, Sasha asserts that she lives in "the Hotel Without-a-Name in the Street Without-a-Name, and the clients have no names, no faces. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room. The room says: 'Quite like old times. Yes?...No?...Yes'" (Rhys 145). The hotel room, as permeated with recurrent, self-referential memories as the café or the street, develops into yet another stage for the exchange between selves, whether past or present, individual or communal. By infusing inanimate space with the anthropomorphic ability to engage in dialogue, Sasha is able to confront her own expressed, yet unaddressed, inner demons and social insecurities. However, just as her urban wanderings reveal "the strings that are pulling

the puppets," Sasha's interactions with interior space expose masking mechanisms of external difference, prompting her to reject identity and enabling her to further avoid reconciling the disparate aspects of her own.

Through these solitary interactions with their environment, Lucy and Sasha, effectively isolated by circumstance, separated from home and family, and entrapped by the constraints of daily existence, chronicle their struggle to circumnavigate the impasse presented by their mental disarray. Entangled in cycles of emotional suppression and resurgence perpetuated by self-preserving impulses, Lucy attempts to eradicate passionate attachment from the present in order to eliminate hope, and therefore potential disappointment, from the future. While similarly imprisoned by her attempts to adjust internal expectation according to external reality, Sasha's emotional tumult arises from the uncontainable past which continues to permeate and shape the present. Embedded in a present both firmly rooted in past memory and deeply fearful of an imminently rootless future, both narrators entrench themselves in self-stagnated, internalized perceptions with prevent them from breaking free of these cycles and moving towards a more cohesive conceptualized presentation of identity.

Chapter 3

Unveiling Social Specters: Alcoholism, Religious Sentiment, and the "Writing Cure"[16]

"I found when I was a child that I could put the hurt into words, it would go. It leaves a sort of melancholy behind then it goes…I would write to forget, to get rid of sad moments. Once they were written down, they were gone."
~Jean Rhys, Interview with Vreeland for *The Paris Review*

"When the protagonist of the novel is made her own narrator, she thus achieves a very immediate kind of agency… She is the agent by which events come into being as part of her story: she makes the plot, she constructs, she sets the context for the casual links in her own life"
~ Joanne Frye, *Living Stories, Telling Lives* (56)

Immersed in cycles of internalized self-splitting and mental disarray, Lucy and Sasha construct narratives that strive to navigate their continuous isolation. Having previously examined social circumstances and internalized expectations that both necessitate and perpetuate this isolation, this chapter I will primarily explore Lucy and Sasha's attempts, both failed and successful, to escape from and reconcile themselves to these frameworks of external and internalized isolation. Actively recognizing the cyclical consequences of their social estrangement, both narrators establish mechanisms for coping with their discordance with normative structures. Lucy Snowe, imprisoned and anesthetized by her relentlessly self-policing burial of emotion, seeks solace in religious sentiment throughout *Villette*. Whether evoked in narrative asides or encountered in others, outbursts of religious rhetoric often provide a respite from her self-enforced present hopelessness, prompting a passionate outpouring of emotion and a revived interest in escape. Similarly, throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha Jensen seeks to extricate herself from her imprisoning recollections of past pain and their intense emotional reverberations in the present through systematic consumption of alcohol. While these antidotal

[16] "Writing cure" is a phrase popularized by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's self-stated cure from hysteria through the act of writing. When used throughout this paper, it simply refers to general alleviation of mental disarray and the cycles of self-splitting previously defined, rather than specifically to hysteria.

strategies initially alleviate each narrator's self-defeating tendencies, momentarily counterbalancing Lucy's repression with release and Sasha's relentless emotion with soothing numbness, they provoke an exaggerated awareness of their own persistent deviance from models of social acceptability and prompt further cycles of self-repression and modification. These attempted solutions, although temporarily successful, ultimately fail to liberate Lucy and Sasha from patterns of social and self ostracism.

Despite these ineffectual efforts, both narrators demonstrate a positive shift in their powers of self-description and their physical and mental well-being by the end of their respective novels, actively participating in their own lives and reconciling previously disparate selves. I argue that the process of writing, the simultaneously intentional and unintentional construction of these narratives, yields this positive progression towards a more cohesive self-perception. Rather than subscribe to the restrictive notion of the single, categorical self, both Sasha and Lucy acknowledge the integrated influence of varied constructions and contexts upon the formulation of identity. While this act of writing does not necessarily precipitate the discovery of a conclusively true self, the awareness gained through detailed, introspective articulation of these cycles contributes to both narrators' acquired autonomy in their construction of self.

Throughout her struggle to escape from her haunted, painful present in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha initiates a cycle of substance abuse, exploiting alcohol as a source of consolation and numbness. According to Thomas Gilmore's critical study, *Equivocal Spirits: Alcoholism and Drinking in Twentieth Century Literature*, alcohol often provides "some important spiritual means…for escaping…the ordinary" and "the humdrum realities of suburban living" (Gilmore 11).[17] However, this formulation, derived from examination of exclusively

[17] Gilmore's use of the word "spiritual" encompasses "many elements of the irrational and emotional" (Gilmore 11) in addition to the religious.

white male writers, operates on certain privileged assumptions, removing many factors, which might contribute to alcoholism, through the sheer homogeneity of his subjects. By neglecting to examine female or minority authorship, Gilmore severely limits the frameworks through which alcoholism might be viewed, eliminating any examination of social categorization or assumption. Rather than reducing alcohol abuse to an antidote to boredom and dissatisfaction, "[Rhys'] novels link alcohol dependency to social issues" (Nardin 50).[18] Within the context of my previous examination of Sasha's internal and external performance, social expectation and categorization initiate and sustain the very cycles that necessitate her escape and thus prompt her attempts to escape through alcohol.

The numbness to both social opinion and past experiences generated by drunkenness initially offers Sasha an escape from the relentless isolation aggravated by her public exhibitions of intense emotion. Having completed a meal at a café without incident or emotional outburst, Sasha reflects that "When I remember how one well-directed 'Oh, my God,' lays me out flat in London, I can only marvel at the effect this place has on me. I expect it is because the drink is so much better" (Rhys 45). Directly linking her recently improved resistance to social rebuffs to the improved quality of "the drink," Sasha simultaneously identifies negative external interactions and internal reactions as a problem and actively proposes alcohol consumption as the solution. By attributing her momentary external composure and internal nonchalance to her habitual drinking, Sasha fuels future desires to turn to alcohol in moments of unanticipated emotional crisis: "I am talking away, quite calmly and sedately, when there it is again- tears in my eyes, tears rolling down my face. (Saved, rescued, but not quite so good as new...)…'If I could have a

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[18] Nardin's argument counteracts previously established critical discourse, which links alcoholism to a lack of volition, constructing a binary between addiction and voluntarism. More specifically, Nardin reacts against John Cowley's *The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction* and its depiction of narrated alcoholism as "the story of a sensitive, artistic male who heroically and freely chooses alcohol for its power both to affirm his cosmic despair and to render it bearable" (Nardin 46).

drink'" (Rhys 93). This progression from self-possession to emotional disintegration, from the recurring echo of past phrases to present alcoholic impulse, establishes a cause and effect relationship between release and repression. In addition to using alcohol as an anesthetic for sudden torrential emotion, Sasha relies on intoxication to dilute her awareness of the social shame which inevitably follows these outpourings, declaring that "I have an irresistible longing for a long, strong drink to make me forget that once again I have given damnable human beings the right to pity and laugh at me" (Rhys 94). Thus, Sasha's dependence upon alcohol derives from the infiltration of past pain and internal isolation into the present and the social isolation provoked and perpetuated by her uncontrollable external displays of emotion.

Addicted to the paradoxical emotional control enabled by her drinking, Sasha discovers that inebriation replaces habitually negative emotions with an equally intense, positive attachment to the present moment. Reflecting on her tendency to burst spontaneously into tears, Sasha fails to articulate the source of her distress. She asserts that "On the contrary, it's when I am quite sane like this, when I have had a couple of extra drinks and am quite sane, that I realize how lucky I am" (Rhys 10). Reversing the expected formulation of sobriety as rational, Sasha reveals her dependency upon alcohol, normalizing its excessive consumption by equating drunkenness and sanity. In addition to its usurpation of sanity, alcohol possesses the power to rewrite Sasha's perceptions of the past and its projection into the present, converting unhappiness and despair to realizations of luck. Alcohol appears to produce similar alchemic effects for other strangers who "Neither can imagine what it is like to be happy or even to be gay…They lap up the rum sauce. I've never seen anybody's mood change so quickly as the mother's did, after they had had two helpings of it" (Rhys 30). Sasha perceives that the mother's consumption of "rum," even in the diluted form of "sauce," neutralizes the deficiency of happiness and gaiety within the

realm of her imagination and experience, enacting a visibly radical and presumably desirable "mood change." Echoing this observed phenomenon, Sasha's narrative asides during her forays into Parisian cafés emphasize the transformative qualities of liquor, as she announces, "I certainly will have another little Pernod (Food? I don't want any food now, I want more of this feeling- fire and wings)" (Rhys 88). Momentarily freed from the pervasive past by the "fire and wings" provided by the wine, Sasha continues to drink wine as she attempts to prolong her passionate interest in the unfolding, unchained present.

As this dissipation temporarily loosens her excruciating entanglement with memory, Sasha mistakes this numbing of the past for permanent resolution. However, the positive results produced prove unsustainable, constantly fading and thus requiring habitual replenishment. This inevitable cycle of alcohol consumption progresses from temporary solace to established routine, eventually traversing the blurred boundary between routine and addiction. "I have decided on a place to eat at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life" (Rhys 9). Integrating alcohol within the framework of daily necessity alongside food, Sasha builds her new "little life" around her imbedded desire to drink away the emotional trauma of her daily existence. Similarly, alcohol embeds itself into Sasha's narration of her sleeping patterns, as she cites wine as a dispeller of nightly agony: "In the middle of the night you wake up. You start to cry, What's happening to me? Oh my life, oh my youth…There's some wine left in the bottle. You drink it. The clock ticks. Sleep…" (Rhys 90). Stripping away the previous guise of social respectability, "the drink after dinner" becomes a frantic, tear-blurred grasp for the "wine left in the bottle" in the middle of the night, an incident as commonplace as the ticking of the clock on the nightstand. Her reliance on alcohol to numb her anxiety and despair in order to fall back asleep establishes a routine, which escalates into a

dependency. Even in moments of relative emotional stability, Sasha ponders and craves these substances, reflecting that "I am not sad as I go upstairs, not sad, not happy, not regretful, not thinking of anything much. Except that I see very clearly in my head the tube of luminal and the bottle of whiskey. In case…" (Rhys 176). The addendum, "in case," augments her desire to drink from a mere response to adverse circumstances to a premeditated remedy. By exposing a longing for alcohol's soothing effects prior to any internal or external emotional upheavals, Sasha signals a transition from her use of alcohol as a mechanism of self-control to alcohol's inevitable control over her.

Dismantling any illusion of Sasha's agency over her drinking, her dependency reveals that the temporary remedies gained by alcohol consumption revert over the course of protracted use, eventually further perpetuating the cycles that Sasha meant to disrupt. Although initially effective in facilitating social interaction through mitigating Sasha's anxiety of rejection, her intoxication ultimately interferes with social connection and becomes yet another prop in her elaborate internal and external performances. Sasha's socially unacceptable reliance on alcohol plagues her interactions with others, transferring the anxiety from Sasha to her companion and back again: "'No I'll have a brandy, please.' He looks anxious, orders the brandy and a coffee for himself. God, this is awful!" (Rhys 102). While Sasha's desire for brandy emerged from an inability to relate to others, it ironically inverts, as her growing addiction becomes a source of social anxiety in itself. Noting the intricacies of social expectation and assumption surging underneath the surface of this exchange, Sasha resumes a position of apprehension, remarking that "I can't stand this business of not being able to have what I want to drink, because he won't allow me to pay and certainly doesn't want to pay himself" (Rhys 103). Unable to "stand this business," Sasha remains trapped within the rhetoric of desperation as she merely exchanges the

prison of emotional excess and past memory for an equally imprisoning need for alcohol. Still internally detached and externally alienated, Sasha plunges further into her inadequate solutions as she continues to speculate that "I'll look at bracelets studded with artificial jewels…necklaces of imitation pearls, cigarette-cases, jeweled tortoises…And when I have had a couple of drinks I shan't know whether it's yesterday, today or tomorrow" (Rhys 145). By correlating ornamentation and inebriation as remedies for inner isolation and social alienation, Sasha implicates herself in repetitious stagnation as she chooses insufficient and transitory relief over internal reconciliation.[19] For Sasha, drinking eliminates the agony of time by insuring that "yesterday, today, or tomorrow" indistinguishably resemble each other.

Although the infiltration of the past into the present paradoxically catalyzed Sasha's persistent use of alcohol, this temporal stagnation which results further blends the present into the past and threatens to deprive Sasha of a future. Coherently delving into the much-referenced past through her failed love affair with a man named Enno, Sasha reveals deeply ingrained past associations with alcohol such as, "We have more port. It's the first time that day that I have felt warm or happy" (Rhys 115) and "I'm alive, eating ravioli and drinking wine. I've escaped" (Rhys 124). Within these remembered scenarios, the presence of alcohol correlates with warmth, happiness, and escape, all desired effects of Sasha's current drinking. Thus, even in her efforts to escape memory through alcohol, she draws upon recollected connections between intoxication and the emotions that she wishes to evoke, involuntarily bringing the inescapable past into the impressionable present. This compression of time, although initially innocuous and ostensibly beneficial, proves counterproductive to both intention and result. As Thomas Gilmore notes in his preface regarding the reality of addiction, "Alcohol, which in some uses seems to be a life-

[19] See "Chapter 1- The Distorting Mirror: Performances of Womanhood in *Villette* and *Good Morning, Midnight*" for a more in-depth discussion of the role of ornamentation in Sasha's social performance

renewing force, is always potentially and sometimes actually a destructive force" (Gilmore 12). In Sasha's narrative, this latent destructive potential emerges explicitly through her habitual suicide attempts, "as usual trying to drink myself to death" (Rhys 34). Her reliance on alcohol to obliterate the past ironically becomes a mechanism in the elimination of the future as well, further aggravating, rather than alleviating, existent, harmful impulses.

Throughout *Villette,* Lucy Snowe undergoes similar cycles of escape, dependency, and re-enactment as she attempts to escape from her own unrelenting self-repression through expressions of religious sentiment. Although substance abuse and religious rhetoric seldom materialize in the same discussion, they serve nearly identical functions within their respective narratives, offering a preliminary expectation of cathartic escape which degenerates over time and eventually further catalyzes harmful pre-existing cycles. Interactions with religion momentarily peel away the rigidity of Lucy's beloved reason, releasing her suppressed passions and providing relief from her sense of isolation derived from physical seclusion and emotional repression. However, since religious rhetoric requires more abstract consumption than the explicit ingestion of Sasha's alcoholism, Lucy engages in these cycles in a multiplicity of complex ways, encountering them through personal investment in religious belief and communal experience. As many scholars have noted, the nationalization of religious sects manifested in Lucy's foreign Protestantism transplanted in the midst of the Catholic Labassecour occupies a central role in her interactions with religion throughout the novel.[20] The prominence of this divide subjects these allegedly purely spiritual convictions to the same social constructs and categorizations that dictate and perpetuate the national and gender cultural norms that isolate her. Religion, with its exclusive and constricting demarcations, ultimately fails to fulfill its initial

[20] For an introduction to the intricacies of the conflict between religious sects in the novel, see Marianne Thormählen's *The Brontës and Religion*.

promise of escape. For Lucy, the combination of Catholic exclusion and her Protestant values only further strengthens her subsequent self-repression.

Religious rhetoric occupies a central role in unfolding and enacting the consequences of Lucy's isolation, emerging in her descriptions of her agonized holiday and subsequent nervous fever. Serving as both an aggravation of her hopelessness and a paradoxical consolation, Lucy's belief in an omnisciently divine creator surfaces in her reflections as she seeks to reconcile her experiences with her faith:

> With what dread force the conviction would grasp me that Fate was my permanent foe, never to be conciliated. I did not, in my heart, arraign the mercy or justice of God for this; I concluded it to be a part of His great plan that some must suffer while they live, and I thrilled in the certainty that of this number, I was one. (Bronte 178)

Throughout this passage, the invocation of an eternal power, whether "Fate" or more explicitly "the mercy or justice of God," simultaneously eliminates the possibility of reconciliation and supplies the fortitude needed to endure an inescapably bleak future. Lucy's notion in "His great plan" both neutralizes the desperation of her status as a "permanent foe" of Fate with its "thrilled…certainty" and destructively subverts any potential attempts to escape her suffering by implying its inevitability. Lucy experiences similar cycles of potential remedy and contingent reiteration of oppressive isolation upon interrupting her feverish urban wanderings to seek shelter in a Catholic confessional cell. In the throes of mental agony after weeks quarantined from even minimal human contact, Lucy frantically searches for relief inside a cathedral, declaring that "Any solemn rite, any spectacle of sincere worship, any opening for appeal to God was as welcome to me then as bread to one in extremity of want" (Bronte 182). However, the "spectacle of sincere worship" saturated with a divine love disassociated from earthly concerns eludes

Lucy's grasp. Instead, upon exposing her alien status as a Protestant stranded in a Catholic sacrament, the priest further reminds Lucy of her anomalous position as a religious other, asserting that "It is my conviction that these impressions under which you are smarting are messengers from God to bring you back to the true church" (Bronte 183). By targeting her Protestant faith and declaring her nervous symptoms divinely ordained as "messengers from God," the priest superimposes religious belief with social categorizations. Thus, in seeking freedom from her unrelenting isolation through spiritual consolation, Lucy becomes further entangled in the very social frameworks that divide her from others.

These social constructions complicate Lucy's internalized perceptions of religious belief, which frequently emerge in narrative asides elaborating her internal struggle in which religion aids rationality in silencing rebellious emotions. In her critical examination, *Reading the Bronte Body,* Beth Torgerson attributes the entirety of Lucy's social isolation and mental disturbance to a dichotomous contrast between sects, staging Catholic reliance on external authority and institutions as a problematic policing of the inner reality and Protestant reliance on self-restraint and individual authority as an avenue to self-discovery. Although this nationalistic clash between religious sects and ideals certainly contributes to Lucy's social isolation during her residence in Villette, this reiteration of explicitly partitioned categories fails to address many nuances of Lucy's own ambivalent relationship with Protestant self-restraint and its adverse effects on her mental health. During her recovery from her disastrous collapse following her visit to the cathedral, Lucy reflects that:

> These struggles with the natural character, the strong native bent of the heart, may seem futile and fruitless, but in the end they do good. They tend, however slightly, to give the actions, the conduct, the turn which Reason approves, and which Feeling, perhaps too

> often opposes: they certainly make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated, more equable, quieter on the surface: and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. As to what lies below, leave that with God. (Bronte 204)

Directly implicating religious reasoning in the contentious, self-splitting struggle between "Reason" and "Feeling," Lucy asserts that her belief "regulate[s]" by contradicting her "natural character," or more simply put, herself. While adamantly maintaining that "struggles with the natural character…do good," Lucy simultaneously reveals the superficiality of this improvement by stating that life merely becomes "quieter on the surface" for the benefit of "the common gaze." This formulation, although displayed as a positive mechanism of self-control, dismisses "what lies below," and allows Lucy to further avoid more deeply rooted sources of her distress. Thus unresolved and merely re-buried, these inner fissures of self continue to resurface, perpetuating these detrimental cycles of isolation and repression.

Further exhibiting her personal investment in religious doctrine, Lucy's many encounters with the elusive, ghostly nun reveal the complex ambiguities of the religious glorification of self-restraint. Much criticism has been written analyzing the frequent appearance, symbolic connotations, and psychological implications of the ghostly nun. These interpretations mainly emphasize the psychosexual possibilities of repressed desire, claiming that the nun represents "Lucy's sexual desire for these men, a desire she feels it necessary to repress" (Torgerson 69) and might be "a projection of Lucy's [contrasting] desire to submit in silence, to accept confinement, to dress in shadowy black, to conceal her face, to desexualize herself" (Gilbert and Gubar 426). Expanding upon this theme of embodied restraint in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the nun as an incarnation of "the only socially acceptable life available to single women- a life of service, self-abnegation, and chastity"

(Gilbert and Gubar 426), and thus a representation of the social limitations which obstruct Lucy's paths of escape. While both are interesting and illuminating interpretations of Bronte's motif, the concluding revelation, exposing the nun as an elaborate charade in Ginervra Fanshawe's elopement scheme, problematizes these examinations of the nun as a derivative figment of Lucy's psyche. Assuming the solidity of the nun's existence as Ginervra's suitor in disguise, my examination will focus on Lucy's presentation of these incidents, as well as the significant structure within which Lucy frames and interprets her appearances.

Although haphazardly reliant upon the convenience of the lovers' rendezvous, the nun's appearances, as viewed through Lucy's projected apprehensions, often correlate with her struggles between emotion and reason, expression and repression, linking religious presence to the perpetuation of these cyclical conflicts. Lucy's relationship to the site of the entombed nun, a mythical remnant of the boarding school's past history as a convent, conveys both defiance and conformation to social and, by extension, religious expectation: "The legend went, unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this was the portal of a vault, imprisoning…the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave… had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow" (Bronte 119).[21] Explicitly associating digression from self-control and consequent burial of the self, the alleyway becomes a container for religious and social consequence and a spatial representation of Lucy's self-perpetuated imprisonment. Yet, this evoked language of confinement and prohibition acquires a paradoxical appeal, as Lucy reveals that "Though thus secure, an alley, which ran parallel with the very high wall on that side the garden, was forbidden to be entered by the pupils…From the first I was tempted to make an exception to this rule of

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[21] According to Michael Charlesworth's theories regarding the role of "Ghosts and Visions" in *Landscape and Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France*, "the spiritual terror lurk[ing] in the still-sacred heaps of earth and rubble of ancient monastic places" (Charlesworth 38) may derive from Protestant guilt over the political violence of the Reformation, particularly the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

avoidance; the seclusion, the very gloom of the walk attracted me" (Bronte 120-1). Thus, the alleyway becomes a subversive, contradicted locale, both haunted by the specters of religious restraint and designated as a site of defiance and impulsive attraction. This interrelation between Lucy's consciousness and the tomb serves as a microcosmic enactment of the interaction between Lucy's perception and the nun's presence. Initially appearing after Lucy's elatedly receives a letter from Dr. John, the nun reproachfully emerges from the darkness, curtailing Lucy's surge of passionate emotion and vanishing only after the mysterious disappearance of the letter. Later, she reappears as Lucy literally buries her articulated emotions in the form of her unsent letter to Dr. John, underneath the pear tree and as she confronts M. Paul's corrective and oppressive remarks. Although indicative of repression, Lucy's vision of the nun encompasses a much broader suppression of feeling beneath rationality, mirroring her mental formulations of religion as an ally against emotional expression of her "natural character."

Just as Lucy's personal investment in religious sentiment fails to fulfill its initial assurance of escape, communal enactments of religion, such as the nightly Catholic lectures at Madame Beck's, sustain the cyclical exchange between suppression and passion, containment and escape. Actively witnessing and yet barred from participating in these collective ceremonies, Lucy declares that "I would have given two francs for the chance of getting that book once into my hands…perusing with my own eyes the enormous figments which, as an unworthy heretic, it was only permitted me to drink in with my bewildered ears" (Bronte 131). Acutely aware of her social positioning as "an unworthy heretic," the Protestant from abroad, and longing for inclusion, Lucy is simultaneously entranced and repulsed by the sermonic words that she hears, as she recalls that "The ears burned on each side of my head as I listened, perforce, to tales of moral martyrdom inflicted by Rome…tales that were nightmares of oppression, privation, and

agony. At last it made me so burning hot, and my temples and my heart, and my wrist throbbed so fast, that I could sit no longer" (Bronte 131). Ablaze with a "burning [heat]" inconsistent with her habitually cold exterior, Lucy Snowe sheds her self-enforced tranquility and gives voice to a restless passion, "throb[bing] so fast, that [she] could not sit." The act of hearing these "tales…of [Catholic] oppression, privation, and agony" prompts Lucy with a sudden, acuter awareness of her own tales of oppression to flee: "When I vanished it was into darkness…leaning out, [I] looked forth upon the city…thinking meantime my own thoughts, living my own life in my own still, shadow-world" (Bronte 132). For the first time, Lucy radically claims a personal world, "my own still, shadow-world," and takes ownership of "[her] own thoughts." Only by fleeing the cycles of alienation and oppression perpetuated by social interpretations of religion does Lucy experiment with self-identification, "leaning out" towards alternate possibilities. However, this initial liberating advance does not permanently mitigate her status as a "fugitive" (Bronte 132), as the cycle inevitably completes itself, resurrecting Lucy's ingrained self-restraining impulses.

Although Lucy's interactions with religion, as well as Sasha's alcoholism, eventually fail to extract their narrative voices from paralyzing cycles of self-splitting, the act of articulating these abstract mechanistic processes in detail precipitates a more concrete consciousness of their captivity within both narrators. Writing these narratives proves curative, enabling Lucy and Sasha to present more cohesive self-narrated identities, the "temporal armature that supports and sustains [their] operative sense of who [they] are" (Eakin 102). Recognizing the narrowness of her escape from these repressive circuits, Lucy reflects that "The probabilities are that had I visited [the Catholic priest] at the hour and day appointed, I might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent" (Bronte 184). By setting up an opposition between "writing" and "counting beads in [a] cell," Lucy

endows the construction of her narrative with the power to free her from her previous imprisonment, as well as an uncharted existence beyond social frameworks. As Lucy narrates *Villette* retrospectively, it is clear that the act of writing her past, rather than the mere transpiring of events, alters her vision of the world and her ability to construct self.

Emphasizing this enlightening union between remembrance and the written word during particularly transformative moments throughout *Villette*, Lucy Snowe elevates the act of writing to occupy a crucial position within the narrative itself. When engaging in correspondence with Dr. John Bretton, Lucy actively reflects on the role of the writing process in relieving her desire, previously unrelentingly suppressed by her own rationality:

> I wrote these letters two answers- one for my own relief, the other for Graham's perusal. To begin with: Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped in ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart. When we had done- when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly-adherent affection… I had given expression to a closely-clinging and deeply honouring attachment. (Bronte 286)

Throughout this scene, writing enables Lucy to articulate both how and why her intricate double selves of Feeling and Reason interact. In addition to coherently expressing this struggle, writing alters the balance of power by legitimizing the expression of feeling, allowing Lucy to reconcile herself to its existence. Acknowledging the actuality of Feeling within the present, rather than confining its influence to memory and the unalterable past, Lucy grants her emotions agency and collaborates in their expression. This radical shift in her narrative voice allays her incessant struggle for expression as the oppositional "I" unifies into a cohesively presented "we." Having validated "natural [emotional] character" through its articulation, "Then…the doors of [Lucy's]

heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write" (Bronte 287). While complete overlap of Lucy's rational and emotional selves remains unattainable, writing enables the expression of both the uninterrupted flow of emotional expression that satisfies the self and the subsequent rationality of revision which molds the self according to social expectation. By providing a space that conciliates both extremes within a linear, temporal formulation, the processes of writing and revising interrupt their circular exchange.

In addition to disrupting Lucy's cycles of self-negation, this passage highlights a change in Lucy's enactment of narrative performance and the relationship between her, as the narrator, and the assumed reader. Shifting from the position of social observer to nearly omniscient voyeur, the reader transcends the narrative curtain previously constructed by Lucy's self-deception and social distrust. Not only does the reader glimpse the evolving development of Lucy's presentation of self and events, Lucy proceeds to uphold narrative transparency, declaring that:

> It is right to look at our life-accounts bravely in the face now and then, and settle them honestly. And he is a poor self-swindler who lies to himself while he reckons the items and sets down under the head of happiness that which is misery. Call anguish- anguish, and despair- despair; write both down in strong characters with a resolute pen. (Bronte 409)

Throughout this passage, Lucy advocates for courageous and candid examinations of self and life, declaring with authority that "it is right." Lucy, the narrator who conscientiously evaded usage of the first person pronoun throughout the first portion and routinely interred her emotional responses beneath layers of logic, exhorts the reader to not only feel, but to name emotion.

Within this formulation, the mere vocalized definition "call anguish-anguish, call despair-despair" implies ambiguity, requiring the "strong characters" and "resolute pen" of physical writing to provide an indelible confirmation of truth. This directly drawn correlation between writing and honest, morally commendable self-reflection reveals Lucy's perception of her autobiographical account as a vehicle for revealing and discovering difficult truths. However, Lucy also wields writing as an instrument of agency, dismissing her examinations by announcing that "I would neither write nor speak another word for their satisfaction, that their theme did not suit, nor their presence inspire me" (Bronte 454). By refusing to write in order to please an audience, Lucy claims narrative as a space of self-determination, moving further and further away from her original systemic social conformation.

Transposing Lucy's retrospective process within the blurred tenses of Sasha's present narration, acts of remembrance and her re-articulation of the past similarly illuminates the unfolding events of the conclusion, providing Sasha with both conscious closure and the interpretative tools needed to navigate an escape from her self-confinement. Projecting the eventual defeat and demise of other Rhys heroines, mostly prostitutes and chorus girls, onto Sasha, alternate interpretations of *Good Morning, Midnight*'s conclusion have assumed Sasha's eventual destruction, claiming that "Rhys shows Sasha as being defeated by these discourses in the end; she is an amateur and will always be perceived by others as such, and her last violation by her neighbor points to her inevitable fate" (Haliloglu 107). While the general critical consensus asserts that Sasha progresses imperceptibly as a narrator, ultimately failing to effectively negotiate internally and externally imposed constraints, I argue that she manifests

both increased awareness and investment in her life, as well as in her construction of identity.[22] Throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's inability to cope with the past and its pervasive effect on her present raises a substantial obstacle to the controlled construction of any future self. A litany of phrases recurs and resurfaces at different points in the novel, portraying both time and memory as cyclical and thus tethering innocuous present occurrences to vague and undefined past traumas. However, when Sasha finally and explicitly discusses past events in a detailed, linear manner in the third section of the novel, she provides both herself and the reader with the key through which to decipher these recurring phrases and their corresponding signified meanings. By attaching each phrase to its associated event or sensation, Sasha acquires the conscious awareness of her emotions and memories necessary to exert control over them, and to some extent, she manages to break free of these cycles of emotional excess, mental disarray, and internalized isolation.

Furnished with the insight gained through the process of narrating, constructing and presenting multiple selves throughout the novel, Sasha negotiates her concluding encounter with the gigolo with a clarity of language and self-description unmatched by previous sections. Upon rejecting his advances, she intentionally splits herself according to her conflicted emotive responses to the situation and facilitates a dialogue between these fragmented selves in the stairwell, reflecting that "I cry in the way that hurts right down, that hurts your heart and your stomach. Who is this crying? The same one who laughed on the landing, kissed him and was happy. This is me, this is myself, who is crying. The other- how do I know who the other is? She isn't me" (Rhys 184). While this schizophrenic conversation between separate selves initially appears repetitive and indicative of a stagnated conception of identity, Sasha actively

[22] See Nagihan Haliloglu's *Narrating from the Margins: Self-Representation of Female and Colonial Subjectivities in Jean Rhys's Novels*, as well as Jessica Gildersleeve's article, "Muddy Death: Fate, Femininity, and Mourning in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*," which compares Sasha Jensen to a modernist Ophelia

manipulates each emotion in order to construct a more cohesive portrait of her situational self derived from her own previous narrative descriptions. Using the comprehension acquired from verbal articulation of her own cycles of self-splitting, Sasha applies these involuntary processes as an interpretative lens. For a moment, performance and social conformation fall away, revealing an ascertainable identity, which Sasha adamantly claims, stating "this is me," as she rejects the other self that "isn't me." Sasha further emphasizes her use of this internal split between conflicting emotions as a mechanism of self-determination upon the return of the gigolo and the commencement of their encounter, pronouncing that "My mouth hurts, my breasts hurt, because it hurts, when you have been dead, to come alive" (Rhys 182). Once again, Sasha exerts uncharacteristic determination when confronted with multiple, transitional realities, occupying the identity of "coming alive" at the expense of eliminating the previously "dead" from the equation of established selfhood. In the famous concluding lines of the novel, as Sasha yields to the gigolo's seduction, she applies this newfound cohesive presentation of self to her interactions with the external world, recounting that "I look him straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time… Then I put my arms round him and pull him down on the bed, saying: "Yes- yes- yes…." (Rhys 190). Reconnecting the self to the social world, "despis[ing] another…human being for the last time," Sasha overcomes the final barrier to her reintegration into a passionate investment in her own existence as her defensive, self-perpetuating cycles of hatred and isolation from others dissipate into an echoing affirmation.

While unable to attain the unadulterated, ultimate self, both Lucy and Sasha acquire increased agency in their navigation of socially and psychologically constricting frameworks through the act of telling their own stories. Even their failed attempts to extricate themselves

from compulsory social conformation precipitate a shift towards a more cohesive vision of self by sparking queries regarding the source of failure and more meticulous examinations of the cycles that ensnare their narratives. As John Paul Eakin notes in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves,* the formulation of self transpires through a process of elimination, just as "the capacity to be addressed as a 'you' by others is a preliminary to the ultimate capacity of being able to say 'I' of oneself" (Eakin 48). Only through verbally delineating the liminal, performative space of what they are not do Lucy and Sasha acquire the capacity to sculpt their own mental landscapes, separate from allotted and previously internalized social categorizations, through narrative construction. Just as Jean Rhys discovered as a child that she "could put the hurt into words, [and] it would go" (Vreeland), both Lucy Snowe and Sasha Jensen gradually embrace progressive self-constructions and reclaim their own female subjectivity by discerning the power of articulation to disintegrate lingering anguish and trauma, accumulated through their daily existence as an isolated cog in the social machinery.

Chapter 4- Eye-Witness and I-Witness: The Vision and Revision of Self in *The Blind Assassin*[23]

"In the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. But…she has not a bone in her body."
~Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (100)

"By its very nature, the self is open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process"
~James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" (25)

While Bronte's Lucy Snowe's and Rhys' Sasha Jensen's articulated subjectivities ultimately fail to unveil an innate self untainted by internalized social influence, the written word disentangles the multiplicitous threads of their identities and weaves a cohesive portrait conscious of their framed captivity. Whereas Lucy and Sasha begin to carve out their escape through this meticulous verbal delineation by removing themselves from the shadow of the masculine "I," the narrator of Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin,* Iris Chase, uncovers the cathartic power of the narrative process only by illuminating the shadow cast behind her own "I." Exposing the scaffolding behind self-construction, Iris retrospectively examines and revises her previous attempt to write herself through an autobiographical novel, *The Blind Assassin*, published under the pseudonym of her deceased sister, Laura Chase. Haunted by the untold trauma of Laura's life, obscured and written over by this falsely attributed autobiographical novel, Iris alternately confesses her complicit guilt in her sister's death and reveals her own abuse at the hands of her husband. However, her own hand sets down a narrative subject to the flawed memory and revisionist tendencies of retrospect, as well as the elaborate performance of a self which has never attempted to completely reveal itself. Thus, Atwood's authorial

[23] In her essay, "An End to Audience?," originally published in the autumn of 1980 in the *Dalhousie Review*, Atwood asserted that "A writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness."

protagonist composes a "gendered Self… that denies logical categories…and presents instead a cyclical, iterative, layered narrative that invites exploration rather than arrival, one that reveals gaps instead of disguising them in seamless narrative" (Grace 202). Rather than attempting to conceal the limited subjectivity of her first person perspective, Iris extravagantly displays her own fallibility by inhabiting a vision which emphasizes the process of self-assemblage, rather than the exposure of an absolute self implied by "I," as the ultimate aim of her narrative gaze.[24] Unlike the visual encounter with a physical semblance depicted and popularized by Laura Mulvey's exploration of the "male gaze" within narrative cinema, the narrative gaze entails an intertwining of vision and discourse in which the self reads the self as previously transcribed on the page by the self.[25]

Within Atwood's metafictional novel, acutely aware of its own continuous creation, the text, an inextricable collage of performed fiction and autobiographical confession, both imprisons and releases Iris. Iris' eye rarely distinguishes performed identity and inner self as separate entities, as her "I" encompasses them both. "A fiction, a creation, and a discourse" (Grace 189), these layered autobiographical "I's" substantiate the subversive potential of first person narrative. Atwood imbues Iris with the vision to write the self as subject and the subjectivity to write perceived others as objects obscured in the shadow of the self. However, through the inclusion of intertextual dialogue between imbedded texts, Atwood also endows Iris

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[24]Many Atwood scholars, including Sherrill Grace and Caterina Ricciardi, have noted the lack of an ultimate and unequivocal identity in her fictional protagonists and the resulting emphasis on their processes of self-construction. Theorists studying metafictional novels have also recognized emphasis on the writing process over the product of the writing (i.e. the emergence of a definitive self) as a fundamental aspect of the genre. See Alice Palumbo's article, "On the Border: Margaret Atwood's Novels," and Linda Hutcheon's foundational work, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, which asserts that "Narcissistic narrative… is process made visible" (Hutcheon 6).

[25] It is important to note that any self-knowledge attained from this encounter is always qualified and limited by the self who reads and the self who wrote. For more detail on the male gaze, see Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

with the ability to read herself as previously written and thus, with a radical recognition of the discursive process through which the subject silences other selves. While much critical attention has focused almost exclusively on processes of self-writing throughout the novel, the reflexive quality of metafictional narrative emphasizes processes of self-reading as equally essential to Iris' conception of confession and self-construction.[26] By envisioning the feminine other both writing and reading the composite self, Atwood has created a closed loop of subjectivity, in which the narrative "I" becomes both the authorial subject and the retrospective, written object of the narrator's own eye, thus eliminating the necessity of the external object against which subjectivity typically defines itself.

Simultaneously inhabiting the triumvirate identity of author, reader, and critic through this self-contained and self-reflexive metafictional awareness, Iris' authorial "I" sifts through layered constructions of the past and re-envisions her former self as a narrative protagonist, all the while providing extensive commentary on her processes of creation. While the elder Iris retrospectively reads and scrutinizes her previous novel, *The Blind Assassin*, imbedded within her current confessional reflections, remembrances, and reconstructions, she repeatedly ruminates on the compulsive force behind her re-writing:

> For whom am I writing this? For myself? I think not. I have no picture of myself reading it over at a later time, *later time* having become problematical. For some stranger, in the future, after I'm dead? I have no such ambition, or no such hope. Perhaps I write for no

[26]For discussions of self-writing in Margaret Atwood's novels, see Caterina Ricciardi's "*The Blind Assassin*: Myth, History, and Narration," J. Brooks Bouson's *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, Sherrill Grace's "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical 'I,'" Cynthia G. Kuhn's *Self-Fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: Dress, Culture, and Identity*, Nathalie Cooke's "*The Blind Assassin* (2000)," and Madeleine Davies's "Margaret Atwood's female bodies."

> one. Perhaps for the same person children are writing for, when they scrawl their names in the snow. (Atwood 53)

Iris's introductory question "For whom am I writing this?" positions the identity of the intended reader at the center of self-inscription by figuring the presence of an interpretative gaze as a catalyst for her impulse to write. However, systematically eliminating her own future self as well as any unknown future "stranger" as potential witnesses of her revised account of events, Iris subsequently denies the existence of a premeditated observer and instead aligns her narrative account with a transient claim to existence, a "scrawl[ed]…name in the snow." Iris's erasure of an intentionally addressed audience, as well as her vision of the implicitly inevitable erasure of her narrative efforts, proves a performance indispensable to her narrative disclosure. Situating this absence of an anticipated audience as an enacted act of necessity, Iris, the retrospective narrator, asserts that "The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not be any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself" (Atwood 345). Within this formulation, Iris's fictional construction of the unreadable text becomes the condition of possibility for any utterance of "the truth," as well as the imminent absolution essential to the recitation of a complete, self-condemning confession. Further emphasizing the necessity of conceptualizing writing and erasure as simultaneous processes, Iris explicitly insists that "You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it. Impossible, of course" (Atwood 345). Asserting the mutual necessity and impossibility of extricating the act of writing from the imposition of readers' interpretative judgments, Iris both strives to convey truth and fears the consequence of this conveyance. Yet, by acknowledging the unattainability of a truth untainted by this counterintuitive desire to

obscure her own revelations, Iris also discloses the integral influence of the specter of the distantly read self upon her written assertion and presentation of the self.

Inhabiting both the reading eye and the writing "I," Iris's perception of self inexorably encompasses the split identities of embodied interiority and detached external observation. Caught within this cyclical exchange between internal and peripheral vision, Iris's first person perspective revolves around a self-definition paradoxically attained through self-distancing. Remarking that "I never had a favourite letter that began my name-- *I is for Iris*-- because *I* was everybody's letter" (Atwood 110), Iris inverts the paradigm of individual subjectivity by attributing the voice of the ego to the indistinguishable collective. Consequently, the symbolic means of self-expression evolves into an instrument of self-alienation through which Iris both transcribes herself and disengages herself from the confines of transcribed identity.

This self-detachment permeates Iris's perception, disenfranchising her ownership of an "I" even as she communicates this estrangement through her occupation of a first person perspective. Regarding herself as an intruder in her own life, Iris remarks that "My various possessions were floating in their own pools of shadow, detached from me, denying my ownership of them. I looked them over with a burglar's eye, deciding what might be worth the risk of stealing, what on the other hand I would leave behind" (Atwood 71). In this passage, Iris inhabits an "I" which surveys itself and its immediate surroundings with an impersonal, "burglar's" eye engaged in the appraisal and re-evaluation of "various possessions" which actively resist and "deny… ownership." This sense of dispossessed possession similarly plagues Iris's embedded characterization of her "I" as an invader of the body to which it belongs: "I've had it before, the sense that even in the course of my most legitimate and daily actions-- peeling a banana, brushing my teeth-- I am trespassing" (Atwood 70). By positioning her inhabitance of

her own identity as a transgressive act of thievery and trespass which overlays its inherent legitimacy, Iris simultaneously asserts a first person voice and dissociates this articulation from even the most mundane acts of lived experience.

The schism between internal reflection and external reality revealed by this disembodied, trespassing "I" further manifests itself through Iris's initial assumption of third person narration throughout her original embedded autobiographical novel, *The Blind Assassin*. Additionally distancing the expression of personal experience from the self through her selection of the deliberately deflective pseudonym, Laura Chase, Iris narrates her existence by attributing her inner life and secret experiences to an external figure and appears to locate the self through disavowing explicit expression of it. As the authorial Iris retrospectively revisits and revises her previous portrayal of events, the distance between the living and the remembered self attained through the lapse of time alienates Iris's narrating subjectivity from the former self abstracted into a third, external person by her evaluative gaze. After initially describing a photograph of herself with the detachment of an objective observer, Iris clarifies her unconventional usage of self-referential third person, explaining that "I say 'her,' because I don't recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person" (Atwood 292). By figuring remembrance as a cessation of continuity, and thus an act of self-splitting, Iris predicates her present writing "I" upon the absence of the past self which she endeavors to reveal.

Similarly, her narrative paradoxically reintegrates her disembodied internalized first person voice into her first person experiences through these previous, recurrent enactments of conscious and unconscious self-distancing. As Iris meticulously chronicles her own narrative

process, she contemplates the ambiguous result of her simultaneous attempts to write and erase herself:

> My black scrawl…unwinds in a long dark thread of ink across the page, tangled but legible. Do I have some notion of leaving a signature, after all? After all I've done to avoid it, *Iris, her mark*, however truncated: initials chalked on the sidewalk, or a pirate's X on the map, revealing the beach where the treasure was buried. (Atwood 118)

Syntactically embodying the dispossessed possession which Iris consistently negotiates, the "black scrawl" of Iris's narrative both belongs to the authorial "I" and "unwinds…across the page" with an agency completely independent from the actions of the writer. The strange authorial passivity implied by this automatic, mechanical writing appears to effectively distance the written word from the self that wields the pen. However, by seamlessly conjoining the "notion of leaving a signature" with Iris's intentional avoidance of ego-centric aims, the continuity of "after all" renders the transcribed mark of identity and the exposure of "buried" possession as logical derivatives of the circumvented self. Further deliberating on the interdependence of these contradictory concepts, Iris remarks that "The combination of presence and anonymity-- confession without penance, truth without consequences-- it has its attractions. Getting the blood off your hands, one way or another" (Atwood 603). This necessary "combination of presence and anonymity," self-inscription and self-evasion, enables the articulation of the estranged self as well as the illusion of its exoneration from the consequent, incriminating scrutiny of the reading eye.

While "this narrative is…told, like all confessions, with a particular audience in mind" (Cooke 148), ultimately revealed to be Iris's estranged granddaughter, Sabrina, Iris also remains acutely conscious of external eyes, reading, interpreting, and criticizing the contents of her

narrative.[27] Perceiving the intrusion of a peripheral, voyeuristic gaze into her revised account of Laura's and her own history as an inevitability, Iris remembers the concurrent moral outrage and ravenous consumption of the novel's public reception, remarking that "People snuck off to Stratford or London or Toronto even, and obtained their copies on the sly, as was the custom then with condoms…they drew the curtains and read with disapproval, with relish, with avidity and glee-- even the ones who'd never thought of opening a novel before" (Atwood 49) . Alternately emphasizing the readers' stealthy and eager consumption of the socially stigmatized and the moral disapproval with which they condemn the scandalous source of their enjoyment, Iris implicitly aligns the act of reading, even published fiction, with voyeurism and the reader with the pervasively evaluative stare of social judgment.[28]

Iris both acknowledges and subversively evades this anticipated scrutiny by unraveling and exposing the tangled relationship between the observing eye, the continuously dynamic writing "I" which remembers and the transcribed "I" which remains static on the page. As Atwood asserts in her brief treatise on the relationship between the author and their written selves, "By the time you read these words, the *I* that wrote them will have forgotten what *it* was, though the *it* lingers on, haunting the paper, unheard until you happen across it… At the same time a miasmic image rises…Wavering, indistinct, part fear, part wish-fulfillment, she is me as you conceive me ("Me, She, It," 17). By shifting continuously between pronouns, from first person to third, from gendered person to textual object, Atwood acknowledges the inadequacy of the "I" to convey the elusive spectrum of self as it evolves with the passage of time and with the

[27]Immediately following her revelation as to the novel's true author, Iris answers the question of the audience, stating that "When I began this account of Laura's life- of my own life- I had no idea why I was writing it, or who I expected might read it once I'm done. But it's clear to me now. I was writing it for you, dearest Sabrina" (Atwood 627).

[28]As a reader and critical analyst of both her own novel and Laura's actual hidden notebooks, Iris subsequently implicates herself in this tendency to voraciously peer into the private life of another, asserting that "We'll spy relentlessly on the dead: we'll open their letters, we'll read their journals…We're all voyeurs, all of us" (Atwood 603).

observation of an interpretative gaze. Casting "the *I* that wrote" as equal parts elusive fugitive and unattainable ghost, the urgent finality of the reader's belated discovery and the author's triumphant escape imbedded within the opening phrase, "by the time you read this," evocative of last words and suicide notes, renders the self preserved within the text as an "it," a mere transitory snapshot of the living, speaking subject. As readers engage with the "miasmic image" of this fixed textual self, their deciphering scrutiny compresses the authorial "I" into a "she," an observed object defined by the viewer's imposed perception. "Part fear, part wish-fulfillment," this condensation of the written "I" by the evaluations of the reading eye effectively obscures the inscribed self beneath a surface more reflective of the interpreter's expectations and anxieties than the author's voice and vision. As both writer and reader of a fragmented, forgotten past self, an actively dynamic authorial "I" that exists beyond its transcription and the constructed, construed object of social suppositions, Iris inhabits the paradoxical position of an eye-witness partially defined by others' observation and an I-witness partially masked by the inherent evanescence of its own identity.

Cognizant of this inevitable, encroaching revision of her vision by both time and external interpretation, Iris maintains a degree of incomprehensibility, and thus narrative control, by transparently exposing the unreliability of her perception, the imperfections of her memory, and the consequent alteration and fictionalization of her confession.[29] Underscoring the impossibility of recording an objective, factual account by discrediting her own ability to distinguish between external reality and internally imagined alternatives, Iris amends her version of events, rhetorically asking herself "Had I actually spoken, or had I simply opened and closed my mouth like a fish?" (Atwood 51). This inability to discriminate between internal thought and spoken

[29] As Nathalie Cooke notes in her article, "The Politics of Ventriloquism: Margaret Atwood's Fictive Confessions," Atwood's narrators "draw attention either to their own unreliability…or their mythic or ambiguous status…within the world of experience" (219).

word accentuates her unreliability as narrator, while her descriptive figuration of her potentially unarticulated speech as “open[ing] and clos[ing] [her] mouth like a fish” reverberates with a deeply rooted consciousness of her own habitual impotence. Employing the very uncertainty which discloses her internalization of powerlessness to assert a reclaimed control over the unfolded events of her narrative, Iris ultimately surmises that “Nothing I can recall, but is what I remember the same thing as what actually happened? It is now. I am the only survivor” (Atwood 266). Despite any potential disjuncture between memory and actuality, the act of translating recollection into enduring record grants Iris the authority to equate her internal reality with historical truth. She imbues the act of writing with a determinative political omnipotence, declaring that “On this page, a fresh, clean page, I will cause the war to end-- I alone, with a stroke of my black plastic pen. All I have to do is write: *1918. November 11. Armistice Day*. There. It’s over” (Atwood 93). Directly correlating the written word with unfolding event, Iris affirms the absolute power of authorship and its implicit ability to convey, conjure, and create the past in her own image, as well as its propensity to elide trauma by casting it into the shadow of this self-mage. As Linda Hutcheon argues in her classic examination of the intricate relationship between author and reader in metafiction, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox,* “By reminding the reader of the book’s identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of fiction” (139). Yet, even while Iris’s exposure of the novel’s construction implicates the reader in its creation, her implicit and explicit accentuation of narrative gaps, her performative declaration of unknowability, also expands the articulated self beyond the scope of readers’ interpretations.

However, these limitations of scrutiny and articulation also inextricably extend to Iris's perceptions of herself. Throughout *The Blind Assassin*, mirrors enact a cyclical exchange between internal and external perception, serving as instruments that merge self-reflection and self-alienation through their creation of an imperfect mimetic image. As the eye observes and obscures the evasive "I," Iris confronts the impossibility of completely inhabiting a subjective and objective self through engaging with the qualified perceptive possibilities of reflection: "In [the mirror] I tried to catch the back view of myself, but of course…you can never see yourself the way you are… to a man looking at you, from behind, when you don't know-- because in a mirror your own head is always cranked around over your shoulder" (Atwood 390). Attempting to glimpse the self as perceived by the detached, unobserved social observer, "a man looking at you, from behind, when you don't know," Iris encounters the obstructive gaze of her reflection reflexively meeting her own. This inevitable interruption of Iris's aspired self-objectifying vantage stages a radical recognition of both subjectivity's and objectivity's fallibility by situating the partial unknowability of the self in the unattainable space between perspectives. In addition to revealing this liminal expanse between Iris's own vision and an external objective (and objectifying) gaze, the mirror reflects the disjuncture between the dynamic present "I" which perceives and the statically remembered "I" which remains accessible, albeit permutated, through retrospective re-vision:

> When I look in the mirror…Sometimes I see an older woman who might look like the grandmother I never knew… But sometimes I see instead the young girl's face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems…so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking. (Atwood 53)

Positioning the reflected self-image as a permeable boundary between the remembered past and the speculatively perceived present, Iris confronts the same mirrored figure with temporally distinct frameworks. Alternately recognizing “an older woman” with the conjectural uncertainty of “might” and “the young girl’s face” marked by the retrospectively acquired knowledge of “once,” Iris imbues both identities with the detached hue of performance. While Iris characterizes her “present face” as “loose,” “transparent,” and ultimately disposable mask, Iris’s retrospective perspective renders the youthful face floating beneath the surface paradoxically concrete by reading the past that she has inscribed on her own visage. This collision of the narrative “I”’s internal reality and the narrative eye’s vision of past and present selves reveals a layered palimpsest of perceptions both written on and read from, adhered to and detached from, the body.

Simultaneously staging and interrupting this complex performance of layered identity, the fluid interchangeability and often intentional multiplicity of clothing further implicates visual perception in processes of self-presentation and self-deflection throughout the novel. As a textual transmitter of personal intention and cultural narrative whose meaning hinges upon the collaborative participation of an external observer, “Dress as text is an endlessly interactive boundary, both presenting and problematizing its own narrative before the eyes of an actively interpretative audience” (Kuhn 27). Enacting the metafictional triumvirate of writer, reader, and critic, Iris’s narrative relationship with clothing replicates an authorial anxiety regarding the negotiation and performance of identity beneath her own detached interpretative gaze, as well as anticipated social scrutiny. Attire establishes a visual dialect through which Iris conveys and confronts the complex alienation between her internally and externally perceived temporal realities. Examining and processing these discrepancies between remembered youth and

embodied age through apparel, Iris asks “What has become of my real clothes? Surely these shapeless pastels and orthopedic shoes belong on someone else. But they’re mine; worse, they suit me now” (Atwood 44). This transference of perceptions and misperceptions of reality, self-recognition, and self-alienated otherness to matters of dress conflates authentic self-presentation and disguise. Further blurring the distinction between dress as identification and dress as performance, Iris asserts that “Both [uniforms and costumes] served the same end: to avoid being who you were, you could pretend to be someone else. You could become bigger and more powerful, or more alluring and mysterious, just by putting on exotic clothes” (Atwood 408). Facilitating a nebulous transition from self-avoidance through pretense to actual transformation through perception, the act of “putting on exotic clothes” simultaneously obscures, narrates, and transmutes the self through revising both social and internal vision.

Within this formulation of dress as a textual narrative enacting layers of performed and transfigured identity, Kuhn implicitly figures the body as the paginal site of inscription, the undetected stage upon which social performances are enacted. Yet, throughout the novel, the boundary between clothing and flesh constitutes a permeable membrane which serves to amalgamate rather than to enforce a binary distinction. As Iris navigates the social transition necessitated by her upwardly mobile marriage to Richard Griffin, the partition between permanent body and dispensable fabric promptly disintegrates: “Clothes could always be purchased, naturally, but I would have to learn to wear them to effect. ‘As if they’re your skin’” (Atwood 285). The performance of dress extends beyond mere assumed external presentation, merging into the realm of inherent bodily characteristic as clothing acquires the integral permanence of skin and the face assumes the disposability of a stocking (Atwood 53).

As body and textile operate as imbedded textual narratives, flesh embodies yet another language of transcription within Atwood's labyrinthine metafictional landscape of the self.[30] Thus, although "clothed bodies are inextricably bound up with ideology and power" (Kuhn 22), unclothed bodies prove equally subject to ideological disempowerment and interpretative exposure. The bared body enacts its own inscribed code of legibility and erasure, reprising the indeterminate identity disseminated and concealed by the observers' perceptions and assumptions imposed on the dressed frame. Iris's preoccupation with sartorial suitability seamlessly transitions into aesthetic alterations of her flesh, as "diddling with straps, with buckles, with the tilt of hats, the seams on stockings" becomes "filing my nails, soaking my feet. Yanking out hairs, or shaving them off" (Atwood 370). Emphasizing the subtle violence of self-erasure enacted through these bodily modifications, Iris asserts that "It was necessary to be sleek, devoid of bristles. A topography like wet clay, a surface the hands would glide over" (Atwood 370). In her attempt to comply with a mandated appearance defined by the necessity of being "(de)void," Iris refashions her body as a blank slate rather than a textual narrative, endeavoring to chart herself as a malleable geography, "a [moldable] topography like wet clay." This reconfiguration of the body as a tractable surface wrests Iris's authorial power from her own grasp by exposing her material self to the encroaching pressure of external revisions. Reflecting on the pliability of her identity, Iris perceives the incremental alterations in her vision of self through the self-reading narrative gaze of her mirrored reflection: "I myself however was taking shape-- the shape intended for me, by him [Richard Griffin]. Each time I looked in the mirror a

[30] Atwood criticism has frequently identified and postulated on the inseparable correlation between the feminine body and processes of self-creation throughout the novel. In her article, "*The Blind Assassin*: Myth, History, and Narration," Caterina Ricciardi proclaims that "*The Blind Assassin* is obsessed with the act of writing connected with the body" (221). However, in addition to re-affirming this recurrent association between body and text, I would like to suggest that the interwoven textuality of bod y and clothing mimics the narrative structure of the Iris's layered self-writings within the novel.

little more of me had been coloured in" (Atwood 370). Iris's perception of her body as a contoured outline signifying absence exposes the estrangement of her "I" from her physical self, "shape[d]," "coloured in," and fleshed out by the imposed intention of her husband.

This abusive annexation of Iris's powers of self-definition echoes the long-established discursive violence of the female identity written in the image of a male dominant discourse. In her foundational treatise on *l'écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous diagnostically asserts that "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (334).[31] By situating the reintegration of the distanced feminine "I" with the body as integral to the formulation of a female textual narrative, Cixous marks the coerced distance between female identity and female physicality as inherently silencing. Similarly, Madeline Davies' article, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," identifies the dispossessed possession with which Iris regards her own body as a recurrently violent interruption:

> Repeatedly [the female body] … is linked with metaphors of disembodiment, a failure to be completely *there,* or with the occupation of liminal territories which mark uneasy gaps between "real" and "other"…fractured or disrupted psyches result in alienated bodies. (Davies 38)

While acknowledging Atwood's often-articulated aversion to essentialist ideologies, Davies aligns the bodies of Atwood's female protagonists with the subversive potential of gendered transcription.[32] However, I would argue that, for Iris, embodiment yields to the plasticity of an

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[31] *L'écriture feminine*, which literally translates to "women's writing," refers to the creation of an essentialist female discourse that would inscribe the female body into language.

[32] Davies cites the anti-essentialist sentiments of Elaine, the protagonist of Atwood's 1988 novel *Cat's Eye*, as evidence of Atwood's resistance to totalizing ideologies of womanhood: "I am not Woman and I'm damned if I'll be shoved into it" (379). However, a closer examination of Atwood interviews, before and since the publication of Davies' article, reveals a much more conflicted relationship between Atwood and the idea of gender as a

invasive external presence that paradoxically performs both possession and alienation. The molding influence of her husband both pervasively colors and colonizes her own vision of herself, displacing and negating conceptions of the body as an extension of self, even as his violent sexual possession abruptly reduces her identity to the anatomical. Imprinted by the trauma of enforced gendering that exists on the fringes and writes itself into the margins, a space historically endowed with a blankness positioned exclusively beyond explicit formulation, Iris remarks on the elusive quality of these marks: "I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it? I was sand, I was snow-- written on, rewritten, smoothed over" (Atwood 455).[33] As a blank site of textual inscription and erasure signifying a lack of bodily autonomy, Iris aestheticizes her abuse into "a code to which she does not hold the key" (Davies 61), distancing in its inaccessibility, yet also gravitationally consuming in its absolute determination of her self-identification as surface, as "sand," as "snow." Conversely, at other points in the novel, Iris envisions bodily text as internally derived rather than externally transcribed, imagining blood as ink both actively summoned by women in violent and subversive acts of writing.[34] However, regardless of whether the text flows from the female body

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determinant attribute of identity. In her 1990 interview in *The Paris Review*, she explicitly rejects the notion that "'women' are a fixed quantity," asserting that "There is no single, simple, static 'women's point of view.'" However, previously in the same interview, Atwood qualifies this rejection with the contradictory caveat that "it's true that there are some thoughts and attitudes that are unlikely to be held by men on the one hand or women on the other." Likewise, in a more recent interview conducted with *The Rumpus* in 2013, Atwood remarked that "I would get reviewers saying things like, 'She has transcended being a woman.' And I'd be thinking, *How exactly do you do that?" This statement implies that, despite her clear stance against a permanent, specific definition of "woman," Atwood finds her gender an inextricably influential factor in her writing.*

[33] In addition to its critical figuration as a space that exists outside history or discursive documentation, and thus inherently aligns with sites of resistive silence that speak, the margins hold a special significance in Atwood's writing and her heroines' relationship with writing. For example, Offred, the protagonist of Atwood's 1985 dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale,* asserts that "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood 57).

[34] After Winifred repeats a speculative rumor that women used to abort pregnancies via roller coaster rides, Iris imagines the mid-air emission of blood from the womb as "those read streamers they used to toss from ocean liners at the moment of sailing, cascading down over the spectators below; or a series of lines, long thick lines of red,

or is forcibly imposed upon it, the construction of this text obstructs the vision of the "I" which inhabits this body, disrupting its ability to read and interpret both that which is written on and written by the self.

***The Blind Assassin* and the Silenced Sacrifice of Subjectivity**

The absence of any interpretative key to these encoded, written texts bars Iris from fully accessing or articulating the complex, composite self suspended in a liminal space beyond the inevitable fragmentation of the "I." If only she could read, perceive and attribute meaning to, these illegible bodily scripts, the disjointed excerpts of artifact, memory, and text, assembled and embedded within her narrative, might cohere into the unified, self-conscious presentation that eludes her younger self. As her written texts, photographs, and newspaper clippings accumulate into the revelation of Richard's habitual rape of Laura through the bodily inscription of bruises and the literal transcription of dates, Iris's story transforms from the allegorical love story between a blinded boy and a muted girl to a confessional, first person remembrance of her life:

> Because she learns to read the "code of bruises" with which Richard's bad touch marks Laura's body, and the code of dates in Laura's notebook with which Laura similarly records his abuse, Iris, like Laura, stops being…the tongueless victim of her character's science fiction story but the bride who speaks out in "the Robber bridegroom" fairytale. (Wilson 87)[35]

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scrolling out from the roller coaster and from the girls in it like paint thrown from a bucket. Like long scrawls of vermillion cloud. Like skywriting" (Atwood 399). Davies interprets this passage as an imagined narrative of women "who literally write with their bodies are effectively articulating the right to tell their own story and to express their own history" (64). Yet, this analysis fails to acknowledge the strange transitory nature of this writing which aggressively isolates the written word from subsequent, interpretative reading and thus renders the embodied self inaccessible to its own narrative gaze.

[35] "The Robber Bridegroom," a Grimm's fairytale, tells the story of a miller's daughter is urged by her rich, betrothed suitor to visit his house in the woods, where he and his band of robbers murder and eat women. With the help of an old woman in the cellar, the bride hides, witnesses the men chopping up a young woman's corpse, and escapes with the dead woman's finger as evidence. On the wedding day, the robber bridegroom urges his bride to tell a story. She then narrates the violent scene she witnessed and produces the finger, which sufficiently

This exposé, at once the conclusive crescendo of these collaged narratives and the incentive of their creation, *appears* to hold the key to decoding the residual imposed text of abuse and thus to unlocking the invisible gate between forcibly silenced object and speaking subject. However, between the passage from embedded allegory to the autobiographical confession lies an unaddressed obstruction, the outer frame of *The Blind Assassin*, an assumed autobiographical account of an illicit affair intentionally attributed to Laura's authorship via pseudonym, yet written by Iris. The problematic existence of this middle text suggests that, in fact, Iris initially obtained subjectivity through meticulous replication of the very discursive structures which imprisoned her as a silenced object, rendering Laura tongueless by papering over her life with a falsely ascribed voice that presumes to speak for her.

This silencing of Laura through the infiltrating insertion of Iris's autobiography into the alleged authorship of her dead sister constitutes Iris' central crime, despite previous critical preoccupation with her role as "the blind assassin" throughout the novel.[36] In addition to the lingering specter of Iris's complicity through her blind failure to perceive Laura's abuse prior to her suicide, Iris's internalized repetition of a subjectivity structured upon the suppression of another poses the greatest hindrance to her own guilty conscience but also proves the central blindness, the critical impairment of Iris's self-perception, that assassinates Laura a second time. After Richard and Winifred spin tales maligning Laura's sanity and inform Iris that Laura has been sent to BellaVista, a "mental institution" ultimately revealed to be clinic for forced

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substantiates her story and thus condemns the robber bridegroom and his band of men to a death sentence. Wilson suggests that *The Blind Assassin* parallels this fairytale, as Iris eventually uncovers Laura's abuse at the hands of her husband, and through narrating the tale as the blackmail, prior to the beginning of the confessional narrative that we read, remains ambiguously responsible for Richard Griffin's suicide.

[36] For sources which discuss the complex question of blame, intention, and suicide through the metaphor of "the blind assassin" in the novel, see Nathalie Cooke's "*The Blind Assassin (2000)*," Christina Ricciardi's "*The Blind Assassin*: Myth, History, and Narration," Sharon Wilson's "Fairy Tales, Myths, and Magic Photographs in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*," and Madeline Davies' "Margaret Atwood's female bodies."

abortions, Iris imagines her sister's imprisonment in a fiction created and imposed on her by nameless others:

> I tortured myself with visions of her, imprisoned, struggling, trapped in a painful fantasy of her own making, or trapped in the another fantasy, equally painful, which was not hers at all but those of people around her. And when did the one become the other? Where was the threshold, between the inner and the outer one? We each move unthinkingly through this gateway everyday, we use the passwords of grammar-- *I say, you say, he and she say, it, on the other hand, does not say*-- paying for the privilege of sanity with common coin, with meanings we've agreed upon. (Atwood 537)

Although rooted in the brutal, physical reality of Laura's tragedy and its silencing through slanderous statements denying her sanity, Iris's extended reflection on Laura's assumed mental instability, when removed from its original narrative context, closely mirrors the linguistic violence that Iris enacts on Laura through the erasure of her life and her voice. Iris quite literally constructs a "fantasy," the fictive account of her actual affair with a man named Alex, and imprisons Laura's restless memory within its confines. Rather than employing the cracked code of concealed violence written on Laura's body as the key to her escape, Iris "use[s] the passwords of grammar," of dominant discourse, to pass through the "gateway" between silenced object as the "*it…[that] does not say*" into speaking subject. In blurring the boundary between internally conceived delusions and externally imposed fictions, Iris re-creates the very colored contours that she writes to extricate herself from: the maiden muted for sacrifice, the silent price paid "for the privilege" of the utterance of "*I say*."

In addition to assuming the mantle of the silent sacrifice in *The Blind Assassin*, Laura, as presumed author, as remembrance, as restless ghost, transforms from human girl to mythological

symbol through death, the passage of time, and external conjecture. Visiting the memorial erected at the site of Laura's grave, Iris simultaneously comments on Laura's fabled status and echoes her own act of erasure through her description of the statue's visage, remarking that "The face looks deaf: it has the vacant, posed imperviousness of all well-brought-up girls of the time. A tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on" (Atwood 57). Invoking the image of the blank page "to be written on," the body encoded with bruised markings, Iris's sketch positions Laura as a site for recurrent acts of textual abuse, at Iris's own authorial hands, as well as those of the reading public. The external interpretative gaze of a mass, voyeuristic readership imbues the pseudonym, Laura Chase, with a mistaken autobiographical correlation that ultimately supplants the actual events of her life: "Her actuality was taken for granted. They wanted real bodies, to fit into the bodies conjured up for them by words" (Atwood 49). As the textual body becomes the textiles that encases the "real body," ironically constructed from words rather than flesh and blood, the person, Laura Chase, metamorphoses into myth. "Laura herself…had no thought of playing the doomed romantic heroine" (Atwood 509), the product of imposed ideals and projected expectations rather than the ever-evolving process of the subjective identity; "She became that only later, in the frame of her own outcome and thus in the minds of her admirers" (Atwood 509). The persistent preservation of Laura's memory through the mythic tragedy of her suicidal accident and through her equally legendary literary legacy maps the nonsensical brutality of her life onto a neat narrative of ill-fated love and a clearly contoured conventional character type, "the doomed romantic heroine." Even as Iris attempts to re-formulate the record by writing out the actuality of Laura's life, she inevitably reiterates the simplification and aestheticization of Laura as the tongueless Philomela, the captured Persephone, the doomed heroine, albeit one victimized by violent abuse rather than star-crossed love: "Laura has been

singled out, by you, by me. In a painting she'd be gathering wildflowers, though in real life she rarely did anything of the kind. The earth-faced god crouches behind her in the forest shade. Only we can see him. Only we know he will pounce" (Atwood 509).[37] By implicating the reader, as well as herself as the author, Iris acknowledges the distorting power of retrospect, temporal distance and its accompanying increasing personal detachment, to distill the chaotic present into a cohesive portrait signifying a simple interpretative equation of sign to signifier. Despite Iris's renewed attempts to revise the past through more accurate prose, Laura's reality remains inaccessible, untranslatable, and only conveyable through another tired trope which more precisely reflects the nature of her tragedy.

The layered injustices imposed upon Laura's asphyxiated actuality, in life, in death, and in remembrance, pervade Iris's portrayal of the protagonist within *The Blind Assassin*, an ambivalent shifting montage of Laura, as initially presumed by the reader, and of Iris, the actual author of the autobiographical fiction presented in these pages.[38] Fusing the projection of both the self and the other it creates as a vehicle for its expression, this unnamed third person protagonist echoes the disembodiment through the violently encrypted bodily inscription experienced by both sisters: "She feels…flat and without substance. Blank paper, on which-- just discernible-- there's the colorless imprint of a signature not hers" (Atwood 498). The previously and subsequently recurrent image of the vacant page imprinted with an invisible yet discernible alien trace overlays this narrative moment with the combined textual appropriations enacted upon Laura. The fading marks of physical abuse, the forged signature of Iris's misattributed

[37]"With her forcedly curbed tongue Laura may recall Philomela who was raped by King Tereus-- the husband of her sister Procne-- and whose tongue was cut out by him in order to silence her (Metamorphoses, VI: 412-676). And as a Core (a Proshepine) figure, Laura is recalled by Iris years later" (Ricciardi 215).

[38] As Nathalie Cooke notes in her Critical Companion essay, "The Blind Assassin (2000), "At the moment when Atwood's readers realize that the unnamed woman of this novel within the novel is actually Iris rather than Laura…some confusion arises between two sisters" (Cooke 146). However, this ambiguity of collapsed identity seems to reside not only in the fluctuating perceptions of the reader, but also within Iris's initial text as well, whether as the residue of guilty conscience or as a byproduct of the coincidental conflation of the sisters' experiences.

novel, and the watermark of the dominant discourses which confine and define the formulation of her material reality resonate simultaneously in harmonized echoes of Iris's imprisoned shame, Laura's shameful imprisonment, and their mutual, interchangeable inexpressibility. Trapped within bodies they cannot read, entombed within a conception of normality that doesn't correlate with their knowledge of the world, "she" navigates the imprinted space of daily life through a necessary performance of ignorance and impaired vision:

> On some days-- clear warm days especially-- she feels buried alive. The sky is a dome of blue rock, the sun a round hole in it through which the light of the real day shines mockingly…only she knows. If she were to voice this knowledge, they'd shut her away forever. Her only chance is to go on as if everything is proceeding normally. (Atwood 498)

As solidity begins to function as constructed optical illusion, the "round hole" of vacancy and absence paradoxically becomes the conduit for the substance of material reality, "through which the light of the real day shines." Reversing the paradigm of presence and absence, the written text and the blank page, this third person delineates vacancy as both the erasure resulting from imprint and the resistance of that which evades the interpretation of an external gaze that presumes omniscience. Through the self-distancing and self-illuminating third person ventriloquism of her initial text, Iris effectively maps out the trajectory of a textually imposed, oppressive, and oftentimes violent normativity and its reversal, which figures textual absence as a space of resistance.

Yet, as a product of erasure, a mutual site of violence and its opposition, muffled silence and opaque signification, absence institutes a fraught resistance, derivative from the conditions of its necessity. Likewise, the embedded text, *The Blind Assassin,* constitutes Iris' first,

"ineffectual" attempt at confession and cathartic self-writing, establishing an equally troubled site which merges the alluring resistive potential of subjectivity with the inevitable consequence of its derivation from the resisted discourse, its replication of the muted object.[39] Iris's revelation of this consequential culpability, her admission that "As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it…I wrote it myself" (Atwood 626), proves the gravitational compulsion behind Iris's retrospective glance and the culminating purpose of her revisionist project. Rather than rendering Laura the object through which she attains subjective expression, Iris re-vises, turns her vision backwards, to construct a self beyond subjectivity, a voice that requires no involuntary echo. Instead of gazing outwards for an external object of reflection, Iris transforms herself into an object through retrospect. In lieu of writing at the expense of another, she reads her temporally distant self as an Other, converting the familiar likeness into the strange through a re-visional past tense. Through this lens of the past self read through vantage point of its future, the presumed knowledge of the scrutinized first person subject translates into uninformed assumption:

> I thought I could live like a mouse in the castle of the tigers, by creeping around out of sight inside the walls… 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. (Atwood 403)

As Iris's retrospective perspective sparks a chain of reaction stemming from her original statement, uttered in the acquired acuity of hindsight, each successive amendment illuminates the past in the light of what was not known *then* through shedding layers of the attained *now*. The past tense, an inherently amending grammatical construction, operates here explicitly through its

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[39] "As for the book itself, it remained unmentionable-- pushed back out of sight…The uninvited guest at this odd feast, it fluttered at the edges of the stage like an ineffectual moth" (Atwood 50).

relationship with the futurity of the present, as “might” repeatedly reveals the unknown possibility that came to pass. This capacity for revising thus enables Iris to re-envision her relationship to writing through reading the self who previously wrote: “I didn’t think of what I was doing as writing-- just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought of myself as recording. A bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall” (Atwood 626). By distinguishing between “writing” and “writing down,” as well as blurring the distinction between remembrance, fiction, and truth, Iris grapples with the limitations that inevitably qualify her initial assumptions of objectivity. As the framed distance constructed through the past tense labels these suppositions obsolete, “the bodiless hand” that records of its own accord, that scrawls without silencing, yields to the “I” that actively creates and confines, that accepts accountability for all that is cast into the shadow of egocentric truth.

As the retrospective reader of her previously written constructions of the past events which ensnare her past selves and their layered guilts, Iris, the authorial narrator of the present, glimpses a composite self which is continuously revised through her self-reading encounter with this previous text. The older woman who confronts the startling spectacle of her unfamiliarly aged face in the mirror and simultaneously recognizes a submerged youth in her reflection, Iris meta-fictionally scrutinizes her own self transcribed into text through *The Blind Assassin* and is consequently “both drawn intramurally and pulled extramurally, into and through the looking glass [of the text]” (Hutcheon 144). As Hutcheon further elucidates in her explanation of meta-fictional practices of author as both reader and critic, “Without sacrificing his I-Thou amateur relation to the text, the reader also encapsulates an I-It distanced rapport” (144). Thus, as a writer self-consciously aware of her own process of creation as a production of identity predicated upon a re-reading of previous textual endeavors, Iris retains her tenuous position of subjectivity

precisely through the "I-It distanced rapport" which converts her past self into the object of her own narrative gaze. Thus, Iris's resistive solution to self-configuration is not a subjectivity which constructs itself on the base of a silenced object, but rather a metafictional triumvirate which figures self as the speaking perspective as well as the observer and the observed. The "I" that declares selfhood-- encompassing both the "I" that writes in the past and speaks from the present-- and the gazing narrative eye that renders the past self an object of its own "I" collide in the mediating space created by conscious acts of revision.

On the Other Hand: Laura and Collaborative Subjectivity

This encounter between the reading eye, the "I" who wrote, and the "I" that narrates the currently unfolding collision between them proves an unsettling one. Requiring a sudden recognition of the disparity between self-perception and self-knowledge, this triangulated encounter pivots on a confrontation with past fallibility. By illuminating absences in previous self-written, self-writing texts as presences, this confrontation reveals the partial blindness of the present self that gazes:

> I look back on what I've written, and I know it's wrong, not because of what I've set down, but because of what I've omitted. What isn't there has a presence, like the absence of light. You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn't necessarily get you the truth. Two and two equals the voice outside the window. Two and two equals the wind. The living bird is not its labeled bones. (Atwood 484)

Revealing the process of construction which silences by omission and erases through ventriloquization, this patchwork expansion of truth beyond the scope of an established sum

endeavors to create a space for the speaking self without obscuring the other by disrupting the equation one plus another amounts to one. Iris, in her retrospective re-envisioning of truth as an evasive unattainability, pursues a different type of culminating calculation in "the voice outside the window," the disembodied collaborative authorship of 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 that she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers" (Atwood 626). Just as "the living bird [of truth] is not its labeled bones," the hand that writes the narrative, the fist that clutches the pen and grasps after a re-formed subjectivity, "is more than the sum of its fingers." This startling image of collaborative self-writing, an unnamable, and thus somewhat incomprehensible, expansion beyond the already radical possibility of a subject-subject, rather than a subject-object, relationship, positions Laura as a partner in the construction of a communal narrative, even as it places truth outside the containing capacity of the written word.

As Iris unfurls her outermost, first person account of Laura's and her own intertwined lives, reality ceases to be an ego-centric certainty, but rather develops into an inescapably ego-centric *uncertainty*. A compilation of what has been recorded, what has been written out through its absence, and what is re-formulated through fictional reconstruction of these absences, this new narrative remains consciously scripted by an autobiographical author who both casts herself as the protagonist and directs the performance. Emphasizing this continually intentional construction, Iris analytically remarks on her writing process, "I collected enough fragments of the past to make a reconstruction of it... I didn't want realism anyway: I wanted things to be highly coloured, simple in outline, without ambiguity" (Atwood 83). Her novel rejection of "realism," her denial of the direct correlation between reality and its representation, constitutes

an acknowledgement of the constraints of the individual perspective which transmutes life into an inherently limited, subjective fiction.

Iris's retrospective autobiographical account "thus… ironically eras[es] an objective reality as it is posited, and create[s] verbal 'photographs' all the more magical for calling attention to their subjective 'tints'" (Wilson 89), much like Laura's tinted portraits.[40] Translating narrative judgments into visual, rather than textual, representations, Laura's authorial hand tinges the black and white realism of family photographs "the colours they *ought* to have been" (Atwood 237) and thus populates her fragmented, silent yet no longer voiceless, account with "citizens of an odd half-country, lurid yet muted, where realism was beside the point" (Atwood 236). Laura's photographic narrative not only parallels and augments Iris's "highly colored, simple in outline, without ambiguity" prose, operating through its selective, intentional presentation of "what you want to remember" (Atwood 269) as truth, but also serves as the transcendent threshold which bridges the two sisters' lives.[41] As carefully wrought and encoded signs, these tinted and re-framed "photographs function…as messages, in a language spoken largely by Laura to her sister" (Cooke 141), the non-discursive instrument of communication which wordlessly conveys Laura's subjective landscape and thus enables her narrative collaboration with Iris from beyond the grave. This mental topography influentially molds the structure of Iris's autobiographical confession, "a left-handed book" collaboratively penned by

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[40] Wilson specifically situates this argument within her discussion of Atwood's magical realism and the intertextual tapestry she constructs through her inclusion of fairy tale lore and mythology. However, her correlation between text and photography, subjectivity and photographic tint, informed my argument about Laura's authorial contributions through her portrait-coloring throughout the novel and proves valuable and applicable to the model of collaborative subjectivity that I propose in this chapter.

[41] In addition to tinting photographs as coded allegories that communicate her perceptions of people, Laura also mutilates photographs, particularly the recurrent picture of the picnic, by cutting and re-framing them. After altering the original photo, Laura produces two new, edited versions: one for herself, which displays herself and Alex at the picnic and removes Iris, one for Iris, which eliminates Laura from the frame instead. When Iris inquires why Laura modified the photo, she replies "Because it's what you want to remember" (Atwood 269). Just as Iris initially equates her subjectively tinted remembrance with truth, Laura manipulates her photographs to reflect and select the desired image.

two left-handed authors: "Laura was my left-hand, and I was hers… That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it" (Atwood 627). Explicitly mirroring the language descriptively aligned with Laura's set of scissored photographs, the dual authorial hand exists partially within the narrative frame and partially beyond it, an absence invisible to the external eye, yet ever-present to the narrative gaze: "The photo has been cut…In the lower left corner, there's a hand, scissored off at the wrist…It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (Atwood 631). Although Iris ultimately renders the ego-centric uncertain, and to some extent unknowable, by its transference onto the "hand of the other one," the resurfaced language of record, of "set[ting] things down" rather than of actively constructing and arranging them, reveals a tenacious slippage into assumptive privileging of the subjective as absolute truth, a tendency with both resistive and replicative possibilities.

Due to this slippage, critical readings have often asserted that, despite her attempts to redress the silencing violences inflicted on Laura, literally and textually, as well as her subsequent assertions of collaborative subjectivity, "Iris wrests control of Laura's story" (Cooke 151) throughout all narrative layers of the novel.[42] However, Iris's outermost narrative situates Laura, the protagonist constructed through a textual and interceding subjectivity, as an indecipherable site of resistance and obscurity, an absence which reveals the evasive impossibility of interpretations, authorial and otherwise. Within a meta-fictional novel which construes everything as text, Laura becomes the blankness into which articulation disappears, the

[42] Cooke locates her argument within the reader's confused, constantly revised and revisited perceptions of Laura as mediated through Iris's constructions, asserting that "Atwood's readers come to know Laura both as she is described in Iris's reminiscences and as she seems to describe herself in what initially appears to be her semiautobiographical *The Blind Assassin*…Laura is the heroine of the story Iris scripts" (Cooke 146). While, as I have previously acknowledged, Iris's retrospective narrative remains within the confines of the very discourses that it attempts to extricate itself from, Laura's collaboration through the narrative presence of her subjectively tinted and re-framed photographs troubles this simplified relation of constructing author and textual object.

silence that discourse cannot attach itself to: "It was like talking to a sheet of white blotting paper: the words went out of my mouth and disappeared behind her face as if into a wall of falling snow" (Atwood 244).[43] Implicitly illuminating the existence of an inaccessible inner life without attempting to articulate it through authorial ventriloquization and projected ego-centric subjectivity, Iris re-constructs snow, a previous image of erasure through bodily violence, as an emblem of a complex, detached interiority which actively resists its repeated erasure through discursive formulation. As Iris's limited perception of Laura conceptually shifts from textual product as protagonist to disembodied participant in the constructive process as collaborating spirit, Laura's status as unknowable presence magnifies itself, emerging as an explicit acknowledgment of Iris's persistent and inevitable projection:

> I no longer knew how Laura would have answered these questions. She had become…as unknown as the inside of your own glove is unknown when your hand is inside it. She was with me all the time, but I couldn't look at her. I could only feel the shape of her presence: a hollow shape, filled with my own imaginings. (Atwood 539)

Highlighting the negative space of absent knowledge, the "hollow shape" of a narrative creation contoured by reality, yet shaded by the "imaginings" of an external ego, Iris negates her own project of reclaimative reconstruction through ego-centric, subjective confession and instead positions Laura's voice, as it exists beyond the sum of authorial subject and constructed object, solely in the realm of visual, rather than textual communication. As Iris's vision of self, even in its re-visionary narrative gaze, inherently constitutes a blindness that must be filled with Laura's insight, Laura's tongueless muteness, her tinting hand, must be augmented by Iris's living

[43] Subsequently, Iris also describes Laura's face as "smooth and white as a porcelain plate, the expression sealed inside it" (Atwood 521). Within this outer narrative, Laura ceases to be a silenced entrance into reflexive self-understanding but instead becomes an impenetrable barrier to Iris's attempts at articulation.

speech. "This is how the girl who couldn't speak and the [woman] who couldn't see" collaboratively constructed a narrative of absence together.[44]

In her acknowledgment of Laura's ultimate unknowability as a presence accessible only through preserved absence, the authorial, narrating Iris effectively negotiates the paradoxical impossibility of a narrative that seeks to shatter discursive silence through discourse itself. As Luce Irigaray notes in her foundational feminist essay, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine," although the conflation of absence with feminine identity emerges from a complicated and problematic theoretical tradition dictated solely by male subjectivities, the articulation of a feminine identity by means of the very linguistic structures employed to negate it proves an equally problematic presence: "Drawing its *strength* from the same model, from the model of the same: the subject. In whose sight everything *outside* remains forever a condition making possible the image and the reproduction of the self" (Irigaray 136).[45] Rather than replicate and re-objectivize the feminine through emphasizing the subject, "the image" of the self, Irigaray instead attributes significant meaning and expression to the negative

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[44] A blind assassin and a sacrificial maiden, whose tongue has been cut out, form the central romance within the science-fiction allegory embedded into Iris's original narrative, *The Blind Assasin*. This particular sentence is syntactically transposed from its original: "This is how the girl who couldn't speak and the man who couldn't see fell in love" (Atwood 312). Many critics have mapped the symbolism of this innermost narrative onto its surrounding layers in various ways, aligning both Iris and Laura with the tongueless maiden, and fulfilling the literal heteronormative romance by correlating the assassin with Alex. As previously mentioned in footnote 13, the myth of the blind assassin has also been explored in relation to Iris's implicit role in the suspicious deaths of surrounding characters, as well as in relation to portrayals of violence in the novel broadly.

[45] In *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, Bouson states that "Atwood's characters are subject to the terrors of disintegration anxiety: to the 'fear of being nothing'; the discovery of the 'blank lady' within; the anxiety that the 'core' self has been 'invaded'" (11). This fear of femininity as an absence beneath a performed multiplicity echoes the recurrent Freudian figuration of woman as "a dark continent," a vacancy to be occupied by imposed male subjectivities. Because of this established history of the subject as inherently masculine, Irigaray argues that woman should not strive for subjecthood, by "subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse-- by being 'female.' Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself 'as' as masculine subject" (Irigaray 133) and thus perpetuating the endless cycle of masculine subject and feminine object.

space which contours this image, the object which learns to “speak” and “see” from its vantage of obscurity.[46]

Similarly, Iris’s accentuation of Laura’s hollowness here functions entirely differently from the imposition of the text written on the blank face of a constructed monument. Instead of emerging as the product of a process of erasure, blankness becomes a subversive space where the self of the muted object utters its silence from in-between the insufficiency of existing syntaxes of expression. Beyond the replicative subjectivities constructed through the narrative agency of Bronte and Rhy’s protagonists, Atwood decomposes the very notion of composition as an ethical means of ascribing and inscribing identity. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Iris encounters this blankness which conveys the insufficiency of articulation: “Today my brain dealt me a sudden blank: a whiteout, as if by snow. It wasn’t someone’s name that disappeared-- in any case that’s usual-- but a word, which turned itself upside down and emptied itself of meaning like a cardboard cup blown over” (Atwood 598). Iris re-envisions the image of snow for the third time, as it evolves through connotations of erasure, resistance, and ultimately the inability of text to translate the object’s speech into discourse. By both articulating and performing the complex self as well as its violently erased and defiantly preserved absence, Iris manages to transcend her original quest for narrative agency, locating the “I” in the shadow of itself in order “to sing the songs…which were about absence and silence…songs about the impossibility of singing” (Atwood 36).

[46] Instead of advocating for attaining agency through inserting themselves into the discourse of the speaking subject, Irigaray asks “What if the ‘object’ started to speak? Which also means beginning to ‘see’” (Irigaray 135). This correlation between speech and sight, as previously mentioned, proves particularly generative in the context of Atwood’s novel.

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