

Representing the Other Body

Frame Narratives in Margaret
Atwood's "Giving Birth"
and Alice Munro's "Meneseteung"

When I think of the framed depiction of women's bodies, I cannot help thinking of the nineteenth-century nude, those women depicted by Ingres, Bonnard, Courbet, and Manet in their baths, their beds, their dressing rooms. Those paintings might be said to represent an iconography of what Simone de Beauvoir identified as early as 1952 in *The Second Sex* as the woman as "other" in a culture where the masculine was the same, the norm. Additionally, paintings like Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* emphasize the extent to which the body that is the object of the male gaze is, in this iconography, reified and abstract. Zola, trying to justify Manet's inclusion of the nude woman among the clothed men, the unlikeliness of the whole scene, wrote "Thus, surely the nude woman of *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* is there only to furnish the artist an occasion to paint a bit of flesh" (Brooks 133).

Further, the poses of these representations suggest an oxymoronic knowing unself-consciousness: for how can a woman be both self-absorbed in her own toilet and yet be posing for the man who paints her? Thus we might see her as self-divided or doubled, depending on whether we attend to the painting's frame: she is alone and subject to her own self-absorption in the context of her representation within the frame that contains her. Yet before the frame separates her from the context of the artist's studio, she is certainly not alone, but rather object of the male artist's gaze. Thus the framed female body typically might be said to represent female otherness, to embody woman as both object and subject. Such a status renders her both self-divided and doubled, in contrast to the unified, singular male of

whose gaze she is the object. Subject of her representation, she is the object of the desire to know and understand, but is finally unknowable and incomprehensible. In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks writes about the traditional connection between the desire to know the body and narrative, as well as about “the inherently unsatisfiable desire resulting from the drive to know”:

The body in the field of vision—more precisely, in that field of vision which is so central to realist narrative—inevitably relates to scopophilia, the erotic investment of the gaze which is traditionally defined as masculine, its object the female body. . . . As the fictions most consciously concerned with the epistemology of observation demonstrate, scopophilia is inextricably linked with epistemophilia, the erotic investment in the desire to know . . . [Yet] another body never is wholly knowable; it is an imaginary object that returns us to questions about the meaning of difference. (122)

Both Margaret Atwood’s story “Giving Birth,” from her 1977 collection *Dancing Girls*, and Alice Munro’s story “Meneseung,” first published in the *New Yorker* in January 1988 and subsequently collected in *Friend of my Youth* in 1990, contain framed representations of women. Yet unlike the nineteenth-century nudes and the objects of scopophilia that Brooks describes, the bodies depicted in the stories of Atwood and Munro are not those that are traditionally the object of the male gaze, almost suggesting an effort on the authors’ part to de-romanticize and de-reify the female body. In “Giving Birth,” the protagonist is a woman in labor; in “Meneseung,” she is a nineteenth-century “poetess” awaiting the onset of menses. In yet another way they are unlike those nudes: their enclosure is not effected by a picture frame, which we might see as a supplement to or reification of their representation, but by a frame narrative, the kind of frame that Derrida describes as “not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside. . . . [I]ts transcendent exteriority touches, plays with, brushes, rubs, or presses against the limit” (Derrida 20-21). In these two stories, the frame and the framed bodies interact in a way that subversively calls attention to the margin and the marginal. Such a strategy, as Molly Hite notes, questions our tendency to ignore frames and to view them as means of cutting off, and hence making an object of, that which is framed: “To call attention to the margin is to render it no longer marginal and consequently to collapse the centre in a general unsettling of oppositional hierarchies” (*Other Side* 121-22). As a consequence, both the nature of the body represented and the authors’ ways of framing that representation challenge the iconography of those nineteenth-century nudes as well as articulating

the nature of self-division and otherness that their framing entails.

The narrators of both stories (who are, not coincidentally, both writers) evince ambiguous relationships to their respective protagonists that, in evoking both similarities and differences, correspondences and discordances between themselves and the women they represent, recall another aspect of painting, the *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach 33).¹ A further similarity in the structure of these two stories is the author's use of a second *mise en abyme* that depicts what Atwood's narrator terms "the other woman" whose experience of her body, related to yet different from that of the protagonist, highly colors the protagonist's own interpretation of and reaction to her body and its distinctively female experiences. First explored by André Gide in 1893, the "mirror in the text" reflects both what is and what is not represented in the narrative or in the representation between the frames. One thinks here of *The Arnolfini Marriage*, with its convex mirror that depicts the backs of the husband and wife as well as the painter and the wedding guests, all of whom are outside the space that van Eyck is ostensibly representing, but all of whom are represented nevertheless. The mirror thus presents a different version of what is represented within the frame (the backs of the couple) as well as what is beyond (the wedding guests and painter) the field of representation.² Velásquez's *Ladies in Waiting* provides another familiar example; the King and Queen appear in a mirror on the wall of the salon. In both paintings, the mirrors—the convex mirror in *The Arnolfini Marriage* and the badly silvered one in *Ladies in Waiting*—distort as well as reflect. Hence, Dällenbach concludes that the *mise en abyme* reflects and distorts, articulates differences and similarities, concordances and discordances between the field of representation and the mirror in the text.

Inevitably, we see played out in the doubled, mirroring structure used by Munro and Atwood three major and interrelated concerns identified as central to women's writing. The first is woman's often multiple and contradictory reactions to the experiences of her body perhaps first theoretically articulated by de Beauvoir, and then differently focused by Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (for an illustration of the interrelatedness of these issues, note how Irigaray floats from the issue of a woman's pleasure to that of language):

the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined—in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. . . . "She" is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated,

capricious . . . not to mention her language, in which “she” sets off in all directions leaving “him” unable to discern the coherence of any meaning.
(28-29; ellipses in original)

The second concern central to our explorations of women’s writing is the project of “writing the body” easily summed up by Cixous’s injunction, in “Laugh of the Medusa,” that because so much of our experience is mediated by a variety of social discourses, including literary texts, woman must “write the body,” re-create it as—or in—discourse for other women, change and challenge the representations that shape our perceptions and experiences of ourselves. There is some consensus about the characteristics of literature that writes the body: Cixous describes discourse that overflows, exceeds, that “jams sociality” (344), that “does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible” and that expresses “the wonder of being several” (345). Certainly, “writing the body celebrates women as sexual subjects not objects of male desire” (Dallery 58). Writing the body involves, in addition, the recognition that the body, as it is now represented, is the equivalent of a text; that, like a text, it is constructed of and by the discourses in circulation around it. That equivalence is humorously acknowledged by Cixous when she threatens to show men women’s “sexts” (342).

The third concern addressed by feminist criticism is the belief that women must or should write differently from men (whether they are “writing bodies” or not). Yet this belief is fraught with problems and contradictions. On one hand, Irigaray believes that a civilization that was capable of expressing women’s desire “would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language . . . Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s (*This Sex* 25; ellipses in original). On the other hand, the practice of an “un-masculinized” language produces

. . . the “other” language of witches advocated by some women—a language of the body, singsong, visceral cries, etc.—(silence even, which supposedly can be heard, what was the point of asking for your turn to speak then?), this language of the body, this cry-language, is that enough to fight oppression? If one should not hesitate to cry out one’s guts against the words that leave you out in the cold, there is no good reason to reject as “masculine and oppressive” a certain form of conceptual discourse and thus give men the exclusive control over discourse.
(Marks and Courtivron 221).

Finally, belief in a female style or language is not born out, Nancy K. Miller argues, by examinations of style on the sentence level, except in the case of

individual authors whose individual styles do not provide an adequate basis for generalization about a female one (37). Thorne, Krameræe and Henley similarly found that “few expected sex differences have been firmly substantiated by empirical studies of actual speech” (640).

Hite, discussing Irigaray’s metaphor of the speculum (another mirror; the reverse of van Eyck’s), writes: “If there can be no clearly delineated Other language, no direct route to the articulation of difference, it followed that difference must use the language of the Same—if rather differently. That is, representation must be skewed or oblique, a perverse mimesis employing the sort of concave mirror that is the primary image of the speculum for Irigaray, the mirror that inverts the image as a condition of reflecting it. Mimesis as mimicry; representation with a difference” (*Other Side* 144). Might not that “mirror in the text,” Lucien Dällenbach’s phrase for the *mise en abyme*, be these narrative structures that frame, multiply, and problematize the bodies they represent? What I propose here is that narrative structure—the use of the doubled *mise en abyme* along with the various interrelationships that this device creates—constitutes another language.³

It is no coincidence, then, that Atwood’s story opens with just such a reference to the problems of using the available language to represent women’s experience, as the narrator questions the appropriateness of the phrase “giving birth” for the experience that she is about to describe. The story’s very first sentence ‘overflows’ boundaries by interrogating the title in a gesture that already problematizes the relationship between the inside and the outside of the text, given that we assume that it is authors who give texts their titles, but narrators who tell stories: “But who gives it? And to whom is it given? Certainly it doesn’t feel like giving, which implies a flow, a gentle handling over, no coercion. But there is scant gentleness here, it’s too strenuous, the belly like a knotted fist, squeezing, the heavy trudge of the heart, every muscle in the body tight and moving” (228).⁴ The narrator, nevertheless, resolves to “go ahead as if there were no problem about language” (229), even though language will often fail her or her protagonist, Jeannie, in this depiction of childbirth, late seventies style with the pre-natal classes and breathing exercises, the emphasis on breastfeeding, the eschewing of painkillers that arose out of the belief that “pain” in childbirth is caused by the wrong attitude. While Atwood’s depiction of childbirth has a curious kind of historical and cultural accuracy, what is most significant about its representation is the disconnection of Jeannie from the experiencing body.

When Jeannie's labor pains begin to intensify, the narrator reports: "At the moment she can't remember why she wanted to have a baby in the first place. That decision was made by someone else, whose motives are now unclear" (239). When yet another strong contraction begins, Jeannie's options seem to be escape or dissociation from her body: "she slips back into the dark place, which is not hell, which is more like being inside, trying to get out. *Out*, she says or thinks. . . . When there is no pain, she feels nothing, when there is pain, she feels nothing because there is no *she*" (241). Frequently, this disconnection is related to the inadequacy of a language that has no words for "the events of the body" (239), for the kind of pain or "whatever it is" (240) that she is experiencing. The fact that there is no *she* is accounted for by the "disappearance of language" (241).⁵

But Jeannie's disconnection from her body is mainly projected onto "the other woman," a pregnant figure that Jeannie may actually have seen a couple of times, but who is "not real in the usual sense" (235). Jeannie may feel that the decision to have a baby "was made by someone else whose motives are now unclear," and that the language for her experience is inadequate. But "the other woman's" pregnancy has even less to do with her own volition; and the language for what is about to happen to her is even more non-existent:

She, like Jeannie, is going to the hospital. She too is pregnant. She is not going to the hospital to give birth, however, because the word, the words, are too alien to her experience, the experience she is about to have, to be used about it at all. . . . She is a woman who did not wish to become pregnant, *who did not choose to divide herself like this*, who did not choose any of these ordeals, these initiations. It would be no use telling her that everything is going to be fine. The word in English for unwanted intercourse is rape, but there is no word in the language for what is about to happen to this woman. (234; italics mine)

Placing the "other woman" in a *mise en abyme* allows Atwood to depict what is paradoxically contained in yet absent from Jeannie's own experience. Consider again *The Arnolfini Marriage* (with its pregnant woman), and the convex mirror (the obverse of Irigaray's concave mirror) that depicts what is just outside the represented plane: the wedding guests, the painter, the couple's backs. Yet of course, the picture does represent these others in their distorted, mirrored forms; they are there and not there; they are simultaneously outside the space the artist represents, yet are inserted into that representation. Similarly, the other woman, who is real and "not real in the usual sense," shadows Jeannie throughout her experience of giving birth, representing the "other" side of childbirth. It is the "other woman" who screams

from pain. It is the “other woman” who doesn’t want to have a baby—perhaps, Jeannie hypothesizes, because she’s been raped, because she has ten other children, because she’s poor and starving. It is the “other woman” whose childbirth is fraught with complications (238). In other words, Jeannie can project the anxieties that she doesn’t want fully to claim onto the other woman. Such a projection expresses Jeannie’s disconnection from her body’s potential experience and her fears. Thus, “the other woman,” who occupies a miniature, distorted place in Jeannie’s narrative of giving birth, allows Jeannie to construct the saving fiction that it is “other women” who are [more] disconnected from the experiences of their bodies, and that these disconnections are caused by external circumstances (like rape or poverty), not by some inherent disconnection between [the female] body and mind.

As the recipient of these projections, the other woman also functions as a talisman. The morning after her daughter’s birth, Jeannie hears footsteps in the hallway: “She thinks it must be the other woman, in her brown and maroon checked coat, carrying her paper bag, leaving the hospital now that her job is done. She has seen Jeannie safely through, she must go now to hunt through the streets of the city for her next case” (245). In some uncomfortable way, then, she seems both to protect and represent all those women whose experience of childbirth does not involve choice, supportive husbands, natural childbirth, healthy and desired babies, and she thus symbolizes all of the possible ways in which women can be alienated from the experience of giving birth.

But just as this figure plays the “other woman” to Jeannie, so does Jeannie play the other woman for the narrator, who wants both to claim and disclaim identity with Jeannie, though, in the telling of the story of Jeannie’s childbirth, the gap between the two is slowly closed. The first sentences after the preamble about the inadequacy of language deny any equivalence between the narrator and Jeannie: “This story about giving birth is not about me. In order to convince you of that I should tell you what I did this morning, before I sat down at this desk” (229). Yet her proof is not particularly convincing; in fact, one is all but directed to wonder how this description of a morning with a child proves that she is *not* some one who gave birth.

Once Jeannie’s story properly begins, the narrator makes use of several techniques that keep to the fore her ambiguous relationship to Jeannie. On one hand, Jeannie’s story is told in the present tense, a kind of Atwoodian anti-convention that theoretically makes the narrative immediate, but that

also has the paradoxical effect of suggesting that the story is a construction, is “made up,” since, according to narrative conventions, “real” stories can only be told after the events have occurred. Because the frame narrative uses past tense, and the *mise en abyme* makes use of the present, the naturalness of the frame and the artificiality of Jeannie’s story are emphasized. Second, the psycho-narration is not entirely consonant: the narrator frequently makes judgments about Jeannie’s behavior that distance her from Jeannie yet indicate the narrator’s privileged knowledge.⁶ As Jeannie waits for her labor to become more strenuous, for example, the narrator comments: “But—and this is the part of Jeannie that goes with the talisman hidden in her bag, not with the part that longs to build kitchen cabinets and smoke hams—she is, secretly, hoping for a mystery. Something more than this, something else, a vision” (239). What kind of person takes a Turkish glass talisman into a modern hospital? What kind of woman expects that childbirth will bring mysteries with it? the narrator seems to ask.

At the same time, this narrator attempts to reassure the reader that she really wants to shrink any distinction between herself and Jeannie. In a parenthetical note that interrupts the story of Jeannie’s childbirth, the narrator remarks: “(By this time you may be thinking that I’ve invented Jeannie in order to distance myself from these experiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am, in fact, trying to bring myself closer to something that time has already made distant. As for Jeannie, my intention is simple: I am bringing her back to life)” (232). But why the reader should suspect the narrator of creating distance is unclear. Does the narrator sense that the culture text tends to separate women from the experience of their bodies? Or that the culture text teaches women to separate themselves from their bodies, particularly with respect to childbirth? (Shirley Neuman’s survey of mothers in autobiographical literature certainly reveals the rarity with which mothers are presented as subjects in their own right, as mothers, experiencing motherhood.) Or is she suggesting that our lack of language about childbirth makes memory difficult? Or are women encouraged to pretend these intimate, immediate events happened to someone other than our “proper” public selves, to bracket off in a kind of emotional *mise en abyme* the experience that is there and not there, because it is not nameable—and therefore not to be spoken of?

In the narrator’s second parenthetical remark on her relationship to Jeannie, she is more forthcoming about their precise relationship: “(It was

to me, after all, that the birth was given, Jeannie gave it, I am the result. What would she make of me? Would she be pleased?)” (244). Jeannie, a number of readers agree, is a previous incarnation of the narrator who is using the narrative to recapture an experience not easily remembered, partly because she has been so transformed by childbirth and motherhood that her earlier self is not readily recalled (Davey 142; Rosenberg 125), partly because there is no language to facilitate memory. Thus, she narrates, literally, “to know.” There are no real words for this identity, this similar difference, this different similarity. There is only the *mise en abyme* with its inherent distortions and paradoxes regarding what is within the frame and what is not, what is outside the sphere of representation, yet represented. Hence, the narrative structure articulates a relationship for which we have no ready language; it is the narrative structure with the complex inter-relationships between the narrator, Jeannie, and the other women that gives this new meaning to the phrase “giving birth” that was questioned at the story’s outset.

The relationship between the narrator of “Meneseteung” and Almeda Joynt Roth bears some resemblance to the parallel relationship in “Giving Birth” in that the narrator establishes a distance from and a sympathy with the sensibilities of her protagonist. But her representation of Almeda is mediated by a number of framing devices, almost amounting to frames within frames, areas of differing degrees of narratorial authority or omniscience. In section I of the story, Munro’s narrator might be seen as self-consciously engaged in “writing the body,” since Meda is presented as a text to be read and interpreted. In this frame, which extends nearly to the end of section III, the narrator ostensibly constructs her protagonist out of textual evidence: Meda’s book of poems with its autobiographical preface; the poems themselves; gossip commentary in the local paper, the *Vidette*. Such a construction of Meda reminds us “that woman’s body is always mediated by language; the human body is a text, a sign, not just a piece of fleshy matter” (Dallery 54), particularly given that the narrator’s goal is eventually an intense exploration of that body’s experience of a menstrual period.

The narrator establishes her identity as a kind of researcher, and as such her narrative pretends to a kind of historical authority.⁷ This authority is at its strongest when she cites documents like the *Vidette*, or when, based on the *Vidette*’s accounts of life in this western Ontario town, she can make generalizations about the mores and values of the town’s citizens.⁸ Her authority is increased even further by her knowing, twentieth-century com-

mentary upon the values of the time, upon the town's fear that, should a "man and woman of almost any age [be] alone together within four walls, it is assumed that anything may happen. Spontaneous combustion, instant fornication, an attack of passion" (59). Her authority similarly appears in her critique of the doctor who "believes that [Almeda's] troubles [with her health] would clear up if she got married. He believes this in spite of the fact that most of his nerve medicine is prescribed for married women" (62). But this authority only serves to highlight those moments when she admits to uncertainty, as when she attempts her initial description of Almeda—though note here the fluctuation from twentieth-century analysis of the roles and habits of women to the questions about Meda's life:

Almeda Roth has a bit of money, which her father left her, and she has her house. She is not too old to have a couple of children. She is a good enough house-keeper, with the tendency toward fancy iced cakes and decorated tarts that is seen fairly often in old maids. (Honourable mention at the Fall Fair.) There is nothing wrong with her looks, and naturally she is in better shape than most married women of her age, not having been loaded down with work and children. But why was she passed over in her earlier, more marriageable years, in a place that needs women to be partnered and fruitful? She was a rather gloomy girl—that may have been the trouble. The deaths of her brother and sister, and then of her mother, who lost her reason, in fact, a year before she died, and lay in her bed talking nonsense—those weighed on her, so she was not likely company. And all that reading and poetry—it seemed more of a drawback, a barrier, an obsession, in the young girl than in the middle-aged women, who needed something, after all, to fill her time. Anyway, it's five years since her book was published, so perhaps she has got over that. Perhaps it was the proud, bookish father encouraging her? (58-59)⁹

The narrator uses, then, a whole host of narrative devices to suggest her inability to have any intimate knowledge of Almeda's consciousness. She does so by establishing herself as a researcher who is constructing Almeda from texts, or by reminding us that she is a twentieth-century person who can comment on the social mores of Almeda's time, or by framing questions about aspects of Almeda's and Jarvis Poulter's lives and personalities that she cannot construct from the "evidence" that remains. Like Atwood, she further reminds us of this distance through her jarring use of the present-tense of the verb "to be" in such statements as "The population [of this town west of Kingston] *is* younger than it *is* now, than it will ever be again" (54; italics mine). Or: "the grand barns that *are* to dominate the countryside for the next hundred years *are* just beginning to be built" (61; italics mine).

But these frames, these claims to authority and admitted lapses of

authority all serve the same purpose: they foreground the impossibility of the narrator's entry into Almeda's consciousness, given that we conventionally expect some consistency in a narrator's knowledge and presentation of a character's inner states. Or, to put it another way, the limits that the narrator places on her knowledge highlight those anomalous moments when she exceeds those limits. Thus, if the narrator does present Almeda's thoughts, she's clearly "making it up." So it is interesting that the narrator most simply and confidently enters Meda's consciousness when she describes Meda's experience of her body: her physical reaction to Jarvis's heavy clothing and masculine smell, her thoughts and feelings on the hot afternoon when, under the influence of laudanum and the flow of menses, she sits in the dining room and plans the poem from which the story takes its title.

Unlike "Giving Birth," which places the question of language in the outer frame, "Meneseteung" places that question at its centre. Here, "Almeda in her observations cannot escape words" in her attempt to articulate the complex relationship between body and mind, body and society. Her thoughts about the heat, her menstrual period, the woman found beaten and unconscious at the bottom of her garden, the effect of the laudanum on her frame of mind are expressed in language that recalls in style and content Cixous' descriptions of writing the body:

Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her. Poems, even. Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn't that the idea—one very great poem that will contain everything. . . . Stars and flowers and birds and trees and angels in the snow and dead children at twilight—that is not the half of it. You have to get in the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvie Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower. Almeda is a long way now from human sympathies or fears or cozy household considerations. She doesn't think about what could be done for that woman or about keeping Jarvis Poulter's dinner warm and hanging his long underwear on the line. The basin of grape juice has overflowed and is running over her kitchen floor, staining the boards of the floor, and the stain will never come out. . . . She doesn't leave the room until dusk, when she goes out to the privy again and discovers that she is bleeding, her flow has started. (69-71)¹⁰

Munro has violated a near taboo against the representation of menstruation in literature,¹¹ and perhaps is engaging with Cixous's poetically expressed connection between women's bodies and their language by connecting Meda's period with her creativity. In some ways, Munro challenges Cixous, whose good mother "writes in white ink"—which of course privileges the

bodily experience of motherhood (Cixous 339). Cixous' metaphor would certainly be questionable in the case of Almeda Roth, given that the majority of nineteenth-century women who were able to create writing careers for themselves had no children. In addition, that metaphor, besides excluding women who choose not to be mothers, potentially renders a woman's creativity invisible: white ink is not visible on white paper. Meda's creativity instead is linked to her menstruation, to the impossibility—this month anyway—of motherhood, to her rejection of convention and conventional roles for women, to her aesthetic critique of her mother's "bunchy and foolish . . . crocheted roses . . . [that] don't look much like real flowers," to her refusal of Jarvis Poulter's significant invitation, to her rejection of the cozy domesticity of grape jelly which, we are told in the framed narrative, she never makes. In Munro's story, poems come out of embracing the experience of body and rejecting society's constraints, and in this sense, is very much like the writing of the body that Cixous envisioned. Furthermore, through the metonymic connection between the experience of menses and the conception of Almeda's poem, "Meneseteung," body has literally become—flowed into—text.

But this scene does not depict the experience or thought of the diegetically historical Almeda Roth; rather, it represents the narrator's invention or imaginative leap—a fact emphasized by the narrator's admission in the last sentences of the story: "I may have got it wrong" (73). This assertion reminds the reader that the story's central, intense scene, along with the metonymy that connects Almeda's menstrual period with her creativity is a "fiction." That the narrator does not know precisely why Almeda never married, but feels comfortable "inventing" this intimate experience of the body speaks to the nature of the relationship between the narrator and Meda, and the extent to which this narrator can "imagine" the experience of another body. Yet the narrator, by constructing the *mise en abyme*, as well as by purposefully emphasizing the aporia, suggests that half the point of her representation is an exploration of the relationship between the two of them.

Yet the narrator fails to explore Meda's relationship to "the other woman" who is beaten and raped¹² at the bottom of Meda's garden on the hot summer night before the onset of her period, in a scene which comprises this story's inner *mise en abyme*. What little we do know suggests that Meda's relationship to the other woman remains distant. We are told, for instance, that her dreams have transformed "something foul and sorrowful" into an

inert and unoffending “wheelbarrow” (64); or that “[i]f she had touched the woman, if she had forced herself to touch her, she would not have made such a mistake” as calling on the help of Jarvis Poulter (66). Beyond that, there is much that we do not know about Meda’s reaction to the other woman except for the helpless panic that sends her to Jarvis Poulter’s house for help and advice. Why does she taste “bile at the back of her throat” (66)? Is it a reaction to the prostrate, half clothed female body at her feet, or a reaction to Jarvis Poulter’s gesture, to the fact that he “nudges at the leg with the toe of his boot, just as you’d nudge a dog or a sow” (66)? Why does she feel she will retch? Is it because of the body that “weaves and stumbles down the street”? Or is it caused by Jarvis Poulter’s tone of “harsh joviality” (67)? If the narrator can present us with Almeda’s reaction to her period, she can also fill in these gaps. But Almeda’s reaction to the ambiguous, disturbing, destructive and violent sexuality of the other woman she finds at the foot of her garden is never articulated—beyond the important fact that it must be included now in the view of her world she presents in her poetry.

The final frame returns us to the narrator’s original relationship to her protagonist, presenting Almeda Roth as a historical figure whose tombstone the narrator eventually found, as well as someone whose experience and consciousness she has partly invented: “I may have got it wrong. I don’t know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don’t know if she ever made grape jelly” (73). In the context of this re-established frame that reminds us of the limits of the narrator’s authority—and inevitably of her willingness to burst those limits when she chooses—we can only conclude that the narrator has chosen to facilitate our view of Almeda’s experience of her own body, and has blocked (or cannot help blocking) Meda’s experience of “the other woman.”

The similar narrative construction of these two quite different stories, then, reveals something about women writers’ representation of bodies. The respective narrators’ representation of the bodies of their protagonists is variously problematized by the construction of a “frame” around the represented body, and by psychological or temporal disconnections between the narrator and the protagonist made manifest in that frame. The narrator of “Giving Birth” does this simply by affirming that she is not Jeannie; while the narrator of “Meneseitung” accomplishes this distancing by appearing in the guise of a twentieth-century writer doing research on a figure who lived in the past. Yet each narrator can, nevertheless, relate to her protagonist,

and can claim some identity with her, either by attempting to define that identity or by intense, imaginative engagement in an experience that is, given the limits of the frame narrator's knowledge, theoretically unknowable. Despite the ambiguous, qualified, and problematic relationship between the frame narrator and the protagonist in the primary *mise en abyme*, then, the potential for identification is foregrounded. Munro and Atwood, rather than defining woman "by an act of marginalization, by a thrusting of 'women' to a position outside the order of the Same" (Hite *Other Side* 159), have used their frame narrators to redefine the margins and then to proceed to place women's bodies firmly at the centre. Those women, moreover, are not defined by their relationships to men (*pace* A, the good childbirth coach) or to the male gaze but rather by their own inward gaze, their intense engagement with their experience of childbirth or menstruation.

The inner *mise en abyme*, in contrast, highlights the distance between the story's protagonist (and her experience of her body) and "the other woman" (and her experience of her body), even while the possibility of identification is admitted and rejected. The relationship between the protagonist and the other woman is rather like that between the young women in Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bérgere* and her reflection: regardless of where one stands to observe that painting, a viewer cannot get the woman and reflection to cohere spatially, in spite of the fact that they belong to the same figure. Similarly, each protagonist senses the possibility of becoming [like] the other woman, but it is a possibility which each of them finally seeks to avoid. The other woman—who is largely silent, in contrast to the frame narrator whose profession is words—is frightening because she is (seen as) the helpless object of various typical abuses—rape, poverty, violence, and it is perhaps precisely the protagonists' fear of her and her experience that makes her 'Other.' Or, to put it another way, while the other woman may be socially marginal, her position within the centre of these frames renders her—and her experience—central. In spite of the admitted difficulties the narrators have representing her experience, she is "Other" only by virtue of being, in some ways, the "Same." In the context of the doubled frame, and in spite of her silence, the other woman is not marginal but central.

NOTES

- 1 I am here entering the fiction of these stories that conventionally equates the authoritative narrator with the author. Thus when I refer to the “narrators’ protagonists,” I am not mistaking the implied author for the narrator (something which several readings of Atwood’s story tend to do) but am addressing the conventionalized situation the stories establish.
- 2 It is possible that Atwood was thinking of this painting when she wrote the story, given that the narrator’s life in “Giving Birth” is compared to Dutch genre painting and Atwood uses the image of this mirror in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.
- 3 I intend to argue elsewhere that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the prototype of this narrative structure; like these two stories, *Frankenstein* makes use of a double frame that asserts numerous (and well-documented) similarities between Victor Frankenstein and his interlocutor, Robert Walton, thus recalling the painterly *mise en abyme*. Also similar is the “other body” of Frankenstein’s monster, whose experience comprises the innermost narrative.
- 4 Conventionally, the implied author is “heard” only in devices like titles and epigraphs; otherwise we “hear” only the narrator. For the narrator to respond to the title blurs this distinction. See Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, Chapter 5.
- 5 Once Jeannie’s baby is born, this inadequacy is once again posed as the mother contemplates her daughter: “Birth isn’t something that has been given to her, nor has she taken it. It was just something that has happened so they could greet each other like this” (243).
- 6 See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds*. Psychonarration (for which Cohn provides no succinct definition) is the presentation of a character’s consciousness that utilizes (largely) the narrator’s style, diction, and viewpoint. One of its trademarks is a predominance of verbs of consciousness—“she thought” or “she felt.” Psychonarration always implies some degree of superiority on the part of the narrator, who generally remains more “knowing” than the character. Nevertheless, psychonarration can be consonant or dissonant, depending upon whether the narrator shares or critiques the thoughts or perspective of the character.
- 7 The influence of Susan Lanser’s exploration of the issues of authority in *Fictions of Authority* permeates my discussion of this issue in Munro’s story.
- 8 She frequently engages in a kind of social psychonarration, in which her voice merges with the values of the townsfolk, as in this description of a hot summer day:
 One day a man goes through the streets ringing a cowbell and calling, “Repent! Repent!” It’s not a stranger this time, it’s a young man who works at the butcher shop. Take him home, wrap him in cold wet cloths, giving him some nerve medicine, keep him in bed, pray for his wits. If he doesn’t recover, he must go to the asylum. (55)
- 9 There is a passage that similarly asks questions about Jarvis Poulter: “This is the *Vidette*, full of shy jokes, innuendo, plain accusation that no newspaper would get away with today. It’s Jarvis Poulter they’re talking about—though in other passages he is spoken of with great respect, as a civil magistrate, an employer, a churchman. He is close, that’s all. An eccentric, to a degree. All of which may be a result of his single condition, his widower’s life. . . . This is a decent citizen, prosperous: tall—slightly paunchy?—man in a dark suite with polished boots. A beard? Black hair streaked with gray. A severe and self-possessed air, and a large pale wart among the bushy hairs of one eyebrow?” (57).
- 10 See Pam Houston’s essay, “A Hopeful Sign: The Making of Metonymic Meaning in Munro’s ‘Meneseutung,’” page 85, for a discussion of the metonymic connections between the story’s title, Almeda’s menstrual flow, and the grape juice.

- 11 Doris Lessing was quite aware of breaking this taboo in *The Golden Notebook*, in which Anna, who has resolved to write an uncensored day in her journal suddenly finds herself faced with the unrepresentable: her period. She resolves to write anyway, to break the taboo, but is aware of the extent to which her experience of her period may distort her representation.
- 12 The word "rape" may be only partially appropriate, since the other woman's reaction to what happens to her remains unclear, filtered as it is through Meda's sleepy consciousness. The narrator describes the sounds Meda hears almost oxymoronically, and certainly equivocally, as "a long, vibrating, choking sound of pain and self-abasement, self-abandonment, which could come from either or both of them" (64).

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