

SIBYLS

Echoes of French Feminism in “The Diviners” and “Lady Oracle”

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THE DIVINERS” by Margaret Laurence and *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood recount narratives about fictional writers, who each play the part of a metaphorical sibyl, for whom writing is a visionary experience. Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* and Joan Delacourt in *Lady Oracle* practise a psychographic stylistics, whose oracular overtones recall the writing strategies of French feminism, both the *parler-femme* of Luce Irigaray (*This Sex* 222) and the *écriture féminine* of Hélène Cixous (*The Newly* 168). While neither Laurence nor Atwood can in any way be said to advocate explicitly the theories of French feminism, theories largely advocated by female writers in Quebec, the experience of the protagonists in both texts does, nevertheless, invite a French feminist interpretation. Laurence and Atwood do not use their texts to stage the formalistic revolution of Irigaray and Cixous, but thematize this revolution while preserving formalistic traditions. Laurence and Atwood establish in content what Irigaray and Cixous establish in form so that French feminism in the two novels amounts to an intertextual trace that awaits definition, divination.

The Diviners and *Lady Oracle* describe writing as a cathartic process, in which the female writer renovates her life by accessing the unconscious, what Julia Kristeva might call the “semiotic” (*Revolution* 27), the nonthetic, prelinguistic realm of experience normally suppressed by the “symbolic” (27), the thetic, phallogocentric realm of language: the *écrivaine*, as oracle or diviner, voices feminine experiences relegated by patriarchy to the margins of discourse. Elaine Showalter points out that French feminism is “sibylline” (“Wilderness” 338) and argues: “[t]he problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language” (341). Showalter describes an artistic dilemma that certainly faces both Morag and Joan, two women for whom writing becomes a “medium” in both senses of the term, both an encoded method of communication and a conduit through which voices “unincorporated” in discourse may speak. Both Atwood and Laurence may use such protagonists in

order to allude vicariously to the obstacles that they themselves have faced as female writers in a patriarchal culture.

Atwood points out that “[t]he woman writer . . . exists in a society that, though it may turn certain individual writers into revered cult objects, has little respect for writing as a profession, and not much respect for woman either” (“On Being” 204), while Laurence points out that she experiences a “growing awareness of the . . . powerlessness of women, the tendency of women to accept [a] male definition of ourselves” (“Ivory Tower” 109). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that, throughout history, patriarchy has perpetuated a phallogocentric myth of creativity, in which literary production is a male prerogative, and they respond by arguing that “women . . . must escape just those male texts which [. . .] deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them” (*Madwoman* 13). Gilbert and Gubar present a manifesto consistent in part with the preconceptions of French feminists, who believe that western culture perpetuates a phallogocentric standard of subjectivity — a standard to which Cixous responds by arguing that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (“The Laugh” 875). Irigaray suggests that women must practise a *parler-femme* that reproduces a voluptuous surrender to the fluid polyvalency of lesbian sexuality (*This Sex* 209); similarly, Cixous suggests that women must develop an *écriture féminine* that makes women receptive to a maternal agency outside the patriarchal sociolect (*The Newly* 93). Both women valorize feminine solidarity.

French feminism proposes that the *écrivaine* can elude patriarchal discourse through a process that, according to Cixous, proceeds from a sublimation of the ego, followed by an attentiveness to the erotic rhythms of the unconscious (Conley 146). Cixous remarks that “[w]hat is going to write itself comes from long before me, *me* [. . .] being nothing but the bodily medium which [. . .] transcribes that which is dictated to me” (Conley 146). Cixous does not take personal credit for her *écriture*, but admits her debt to some oneiric voice outside herself:

I am a dreamer. . . . I owe everything, almost everything to dream. . . . I owe everything to somebody else, and in my innocence of times past, I felt guilty because when I started to write under pressure, under dictation, under the influence of the dream, which made me terribly ashamed. I was not the one who was writing.
(Conley 154-55)

Cixous asserts that the source of this oneiric voice is an idealized mother, “something [. . .] repairing and feeding, a force that [. . .] runs codes ragged” (*The Newly* 93). Cixous suggests that the *écrivaine* assumes the role of spokesperson for this maternal voice in order to become a sibyl, a woman similar to the Delphic Oracle, someone revered by the Ancient Greeks for her discursive insights normally inaccessible to men.

Catherine Clément observes that, historically, the sibyl has often been accused of either madness or sorcery in order to defuse her threat to phallogocentric power: “the sorceress engenders without a father” (*The Newly* 56), but “the history of the sorceress . . . often ends in confinement or death” (8). Showalter observes too that, “[i]n ecstatic religions, women more frequently than men speak in tongues, a phenomenon attributed by anthropologists to their relative inarticulateness in formal religious discourse” (340); however, Showalter also observes that “unintelligible female ‘languages’ are scarcely cause for rejoicing; indeed, it was because witches were suspected of esoteric knowledge [. . .] that they were burned” (340). Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, suggest that such “terrible sorceress-goddesses” (34) are necessary opponents to patriarchy: after all, the demand for feminine self-abnegation implies that a woman can only hope to inspire subversive discourses vicariously, perhaps by playing the passive role of muse for a male artist; however, a woman cannot hope to express these subversive impulses independently without disrupting the patriarchal establishment.

“THE DIVINERS” and *Lady Oracle* foreground this theme of engendered power by featuring sibylline women who become their own muses. Both texts suggest an intimate relationship between female writers and female visionaries. Just as Morag has an abiding interest in “garbage-telling” and water divination, so also does Joan remain fascinated with occult spiritualism and automatic writing. Morag’s bestselling fiction represents a ritual of divination, while Joan’s bestselling poetry represents an experiment in psychography. Even the names of the characters establish a connection with mystical insight. Joan believes that her mother has named her not after Joan Crawford, the movie-star, but after Joan of Arc (337), the martyred prophetess, “accused of witchcraft, . . . roped to the stake” (337), and burned so that “only her heart remained” (337). Similarly, Morag sees herself sharing the name of Piper Gunn’s wife, another legendary, sibylline woman endowed not only with the “faith of saints” (52), but also with “*the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction*” (52). Moreover, both texts suggest that the protagonists have privileged access to the supernatural. Leda Sprott, the spiritualist in Atwood’s text, emphasizes that Joan is endowed with some practical talent for the occult and encourages Joan to participate in automatic writing: “You have great gifts. . . . Great powers. You should develop them” (111). Similarly, Royland, the water-diviner in Laurence’s text, draws an apt parallel between Morag and Joan of Arc (98), since Morag seems to commune with the spirit of a dead woman, Catherine Parr Traill, a woman whom Morag not only invokes as “Saint Catherine” (171), the “ghost” (405), “a

lady of my acquaintance, who happens not to inhabit this vale of tears any more” (98), but also commands as though with sorcerous language: “Speak, oh lady of blessed memory” (96) or “[F]arewell, sweet saint — henceforth, I summon you not” (406). Just as Joan of Arc communes with the Virgin, so also do Morag and Joan learn to commune with apparently transcendental, maternalistic forces.

While the reader cannot be absolutely certain that either Joan or Morag produces subversive texts that conform strictly to the stylistic conventions of either *parler-femme* or *écriture féminine*, the protagonists do describe a creative process that bears the sibylline overtones of French feminist writing, for both protagonists believe that their work originates in some inexpressible agency beyond their conscious control. Within *Lady Oracle*, for example, automatic writing is portrayed as a surrender to spiritual possession, to “the feeling of [. . .] being taken over” (112). Joan remarks:

When I would emerge from the trance . . . there would usually be a word, sometimes several words, occasionally even a sentence, on the notepad in front of me, though twice there was nothing but a scribble. I would stare at these words trying to make sense of them. . . . At first the sentences centred around the same figure, the same woman. After a while, I could almost see her: she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me. (224)

The Diviners also endows creative writing with mystical overtones so that Morag’s “divinations” call to mind Joan’s “experiments”:

Morag is working on another story. . . . She does not know where it came from. It comes into your head and when you write it down, it surprises you, because you never knew what was going to happen until you put it down. (87)

She had been working through the day, the words not having to be dredged up out of the caves of the mind, but rushing out in a spate so that her hand could not keep up with them. Odd feeling. Someone else dictating the words. Untrue, of course, but that was how it felt, the characters speaking. Not Morag’s concern. Possession or self-hypnosis — it made no difference. Just let it keep on coming. (404)

When Joan remembers her past or writes stories with her eyes closed in order to “drift off into the world of shadows” (219), her experience recalls the professed need of Cixous to write “with eyes closed” (Conley 146). Literary scenes produced by Joan at such moments develop spontaneously with the same clarity as Morag’s “mental cinemas” so that both women seem to retreat into a trance when they write. The texts not only reinforce this motif of the visionary, but also stress that the protagonists must confront the underprivileged status of female writers.

Both Joan and Morag have to contend with gendered disadvantages when trying to establish their literary vocation; they must at first overcome a variety of patriarchal obstacles, particularly the lack of male support. Joan, for example, must

initially write within the shadow of the sexist Polish Count, who prefers to be called Paul — after the misogynist saint (151) — and who believes that “the mystery of man is the mind . . . whereas that of the woman is of the body” (166). Moreover, Joan must later write clandestinely, trying to fulfill adequately her role as good wife to Arthur, while indulging the literary aspirations of her “true” self. Joan believes that divulging her profession to Arthur must result in his disrespect for her intelligence (31-32). Similarly, Morag writes her first book amid domestic distractions normally reserved for a woman economically dependent upon a man. Morag’s husband Brooke, like the Polish Count, encourages his female companion to assume the roles of both domestic supporter and childish lover. Brooke actually persuades Morag to quit university in order to marry him, and ultimately his power over her manifests itself not only in her own sense of claustrophobia, but also in his repeated words of solace, a male demand in fact for feminine silence: “Hush, love” (217). Within both texts, the female writer must transcend an inferiority complex, induced in part by the dismissive attitudes of males who subscribe, sometimes unwittingly, to the social expectations of patriarchy: the female writer must in effect operate in an environment where, according to Aunt Lou, “the tongue is the enemy of the neck” (37) — at least for women.

Both Morag and Joan have to face the contradiction between their own creative desires and patrisocial expectations. Joan, for example, remarks that “behind my compassionate smile was a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying *What about me? What about me?* When is it my turn?” (90). Joan has “learned to stifle these voices, to be calm and receptive” (90), to indulge in what Gilbert and Gubar might call the “feminine schizophrenia of authorship” (17): the female protagonist cannot easily reconcile the tension between her life as the housewife Joan and her life as the writer Louise. Joan recognizes that sybil-line figures operate at a disadvantage in their social context for “[w]hen you started hearing voices you were in trouble, especially if you believed them” (337). Morag also learns a similar lesson in repressive silence, particularly when she is publically chastised at school for using “bad” language (35) and concludes: “Hang onto your shit and never let them know you are scared” (34). Moreover, Morag’s first tentative efforts at poetry are not encouraged by her Sunday School teacher (80) because the writing of poetry does not suit the teacher’s preconceived notion of Morag’s gender role. Morag, like Joan, cannot be entirely certain that her talents are valuable, especially when judged according to a patriarchal standard of utility:

Royland knew he had been a true diviner. There were the wells, proof positive. Water. Real wet water. There to be felt and tasted. Morag’s magic tricks were of a different order. She would never know whether they actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn’t given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. (452)

What is important is simply the literary act of expression, an act that becomes a political gesture of the sort normally denied to the female.

INTERESTINGLY, HOWEVER, the development of Morag's sibylline ability is strongly influenced by Royland and Christie, two adoptive fathers who not only act as spiritual mentors, but also appear to undermine the argument that the social attitudes of men are largely to blame for the literary woes of women. The predominance of male visionaries in the text may result from the fact that such characters are either marginalized by patriarchal society or have willingly surrendered their investment in its agenda. Kristeva believes that, although *écriture féminine* is often regarded as exclusively female, men too can access the semiotic, particularly when they oppose the patriarchal structures of the symbolic (218), perhaps by deliberately sharing the underprivileged position of women. Cixous concurs:

Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. It's rare, but you can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen. ("Castration" 52)

Cixous remarks that male poets are among the "closest allies of women" because they "let their femininity traverse them" (Conley 152). Male writers can in effect assume "sibylline" roles as prophets, depending upon their ability to disengage from patriarchal conventions.

Within *The Diviners*, Christie can therefore play the part of a mad shaman, "summoning up the ghosts of those who had never been and yet would always be" (244), doing so by virtue of his status as a town pariah, a shellshock victim who has foresworn his status as a war hero (40), only to be ostracized by the patriarchal community. Similarly, Royland can play not only the part a charismatic preacher retired from an ecstatic religion, but also the part of a water-diviner, from whom "Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance . . . something which would explain everything" (4). Royland confesses that his experience as a preacher of a patriarchal religion leads to the misuse of his oracular talents, misuse that results in both sexual abstinence and domestic violence (240): "I thought . . . that I had the Revealed Word. God was talking to me, sure as hell, and probably to no one else. At meetings I used to give 'em fire and brimstone" (240). Royland acquires his peaceful wisdom only after he uses his oracular talents to search for water, a traditional symbol of the feminine: "Seemed better to find water than to —" / "Raise fire" (241). Other male "diviners" include not only Jules Tonnerre, the Métis singer who calls himself a "shaman" (273), but also the historical figure of Louis Riel, the "Prophet" (146) who represents a male version of Joan of Arc — a male martyr who not only leads a politically disenfranchised people, but also "has the sight" (146) and "can see through walls [. . .] and see

inside a man's head and see what people are thinking in there" (147). Such mystical insight seems to arise from patrisocial alienation.

Within *Lady Oracle*, Joan's sybilline talents are influenced almost exclusively by two adoptive mothers, Aunt Lou and Leda Sprott — women who, like Christie and Royland, act as spiritual guides, cultivating Joan's opposition to the prescribed codes of feminine behaviour. Joan's father is the only male accorded any mystical insight in *Lady Oracle*; he, too, is attributed with the prophetic talents typical of gifted "fathers" in *The Diviners*:

He was a conjuror of spirits, a shaman with the voice of a dry, detached old opera commentator in a tuxedo. Or that's how I imagined him sounding, when I thought up the conversation I would have liked to have had with him but never did. I wanted him to tell me the truth about life, which my mother would not tell me and which he must have known something about, as he was a doctor and had been in the war, he'd killed people and raised the dead. (74)

Joan's father, like Christie, has endured military horrors and quietly resents being implicated in the violent agenda of a patriarchal order — an order championed, ironically enough, by a woman, Joan's mother, who takes macabre delight in her husband's wartime exploits, saying with thrilled admiration during a party: "There's nothing *wrong* with it. . . . I think it's great. . . . It took real courage" (72-73). Joan's mother displays a callousness that illustrates the degree to which women can be willingly subjected to the ideological terms of a masculine discourse. Such women conform to what Irigaray calls *la mascarade* (220), a false femininity that allows a woman to experience desire only insofar as it is prescribed by the desires of men.

Joan's father, however, exerts almost no explicit influence upon the artistic sensibilities of Joan, even though he bears some resemblance to Christie. Joan's father protests against the patriarchal discourse by refusing to participate in it, by resorting to silence, and this retreat prevents him from communicating meaningfully with his daughter. Joan in fact draws a striking parallel between phallogentric militancy and everyday language by suggesting that the two are inextricably linked: "[w]ords were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could say *I give in*" (53). Joan dramatizes what Jacques Derrida calls "the unity of violence and writing" (*Grammatology* 106) — the notion that social inequity is perpetuated through the very structures of discursive practice: in short, language is used primarily to oppress. Joan reveals that language is inherently phallogentric since it merely establishes relationships of power between a victim and victimizer — a fact that manifests itself most obviously in the attempts made by the sexist Fraser Buchanan to blackmail Joan (292-93), to assert power over her by threatening to speak. Joan tries in vain to escape such constraints assigned to her in advance by the various men in her life. Even her role

as a female poet is orchestrated for her by her male publishers, who appreciate her feminist work not for reasons of literary merit, but for reasons of economic gain (227). Joan is forced to become what Irigaray might call *indifférente* (220), undifferentiated, in that Joan has no right to engender her own unique, creative identity, but must first submit to masculine definitions of it in order for her writing to be published.

Both Morag and Joan doubt the value of their oracular ability because they realize that writing is not an adequate vehicle for conveying the truth: language can only accommodate correspondences between differences. Atwood and Laurence in effect demonstrate that fact and fiction are indistinguishable in appearance and may well resemble each other in substance, for the apprehension of history, of memory, can only occur through the filter of discourse. French feminism tries to establish an unmediated connection with personal heritage by trying to circumvent both the male prescriptions of language and the male definitions of truth. Joan remarks that “every myth is a version of the truth” (90), an idea which reflects Atwood’s own mythopoeic thematics, while Morag states that “myths are my truth now” (356), for she recognizes the disparity between different accounts of the same event, particularly when she compares the myths of Piper Gunn to the legends of Rider Tonnerre, only to discover that both stories are equally valid representations of the same history. Morag notes: “[a] popular misconception is that we can’t change the past — everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revisiting it” (60). Joan demonstrates this thesis herself, rewriting her own past for the benefit of other people in the present. Joan lies to her husband Arthur about her life as a fat teenager, dreaming up stories about a fictional “Aunt Deirdre” in order to prevent disaster (89); eventually, these fictions become so numerous and complex that Joan must fake a suicide in order to simplify her polyvalent identity (295). Atwood and Laurence imply that, to the visionary, truth becomes ambiguous: truth is not reality, but the interpretation of reality at any given moment. Atwood and Laurence remain aware of the degree to which subjects are produced, spoken for, by the discursive system within which they operate, and the tentative attempts made by both Joan and Morag to rewrite their histories as women parallel the attempts of both Irigaray and Cixous to revise their own identities, to rewrite the feminine roles historically forced upon women. Atwood and Laurence participate in a similar project of feminist rewriting by revising the terms of reference for genres that have traditionally highlighted both the strength of man and the frailty of woman. The two writers adapt masculine genres to feminist purposes.

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI points out, for example, that Atwood performs a feminist parody of the gothic (“Fantasy” 197). Traditionally, the gothic uses a sublime setting to depict a *defenseless* woman who evades the savage traps

of glamorous villains so that she can eventually marry an urbane gentleman. Atwood's feminist revision, however, uses a banal setting to depict a *defensive* woman who evades the domestic traps of mundane gentlemen so that she can eventually secure her psychosexual independence. Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Joan's *Lady Oracle* are in fact similar in that they both represent what Joan calls "one of [the] standard Costume Gothics, but a Gothic gone wrong" (234) — "upside down somehow" (234). Lucy M. Freibert also points out that Atwood performs a feminist parody of the picaresque ("Picaro" 23). Traditionally, the picaresque features a male libertine, whose psychosexual liberation implicates him in episodic imbroglios that usually require him to dupe women in order to escape. Atwood's feminist revision, however, features a female libertine, whose sense of psychosexual oppression implicates her in episodic imbroglios that usually require her to dupe men in order to escape. Both the gothic and the picaresque have traditionally reified masculine stereotypes of feminine behaviour, but the feminist satire renders these stereotypes absurd through a carnivalesque inversion of gendered conventions. Atwood uses the rules of masculine genres to satirize the rules of masculine genres. She adapts a patriarchal tradition to a feminist critique of the same patriarchal tradition.

Neither Rosowski nor Freibert, however, takes into account the ways in which this parody represents what Linda Hutcheon calls an "authorized transgression" (*A Theory* 101) that "inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence" (75). Atwood apparently risks sustaining the ideologies of the genres that she seeks to critique, and this complicity threatens to become especially problematic when she satirizes the automatic writing of her protagonist. Atwood appears to argue for the creative liberty of her protagonist while using comedic episodes to suggest that the writing style of her protagonist, a writing style championed by sibylline feminists, remains patently absurd as a serious form of creative expression. Joan's hermetic poetry is "reminiscent — of a mixture of Kahlil Gibran and Rod McKuen" (227), a pastiche of kitsch mysticism, whose style makes her a "successful bad writer" (240), a writer whose success stems largely from clever marketing rather than from artistic merit. Joan soon condemns her book, saying: "I should have taken it to a psychiatrist instead of a publisher" (234). Atwood, however, goes on to undercut this satire of automatic writing by placing all negative, aesthetic judgements in the mouth of her male characters: a publisher (227), an interviewer (239), a lover (240), and a blackmailer (291). Atwood maintains ambivalence, appearing to satirize poetic strategies of sibylline feminists, while appearing to criticize masculine standards of aesthetic value.

Laurence performs a similar set of feminist revisions, but does so without risking any inadvertent mockery of her own feminist position. Gayle Greene points out that Laurence performs a feminist parody of the *Künstlerroman* ("The Uses"

178-79). Traditionally, the *Künstlerroman* features a sensitive male, whose artistic development often involves a quest for a father as a part of the quest for the self. Laurence's feminist revision, however, features a sensitive female, whose artistic development involves, strangely enough, a quest not for a mother, as might be expected in a feminist revision, but for a father. Laurence, however, reforms this patriarchal quest by making its processes take precedence over its results. Greene suggests that the closure of the telic, a masculine end, is supposedly replaced with the aperture of the atelic, a feminine endlessness: "Laurence [...] suggests an alternative to Joyce's 'artificer' and her adaptation of epic quest and 'fortunate fall' redefines 'paradise' as a process, the 'the doing of the thing' . . . rather than something tangibly and finally won" (178-79). Barbara Godard also points out that Laurence performs a feminist parody of the Prospero myth ("Revolt" 210). Godard argues that, traditionally, the myth features a woman (Miranda) oppressed by a paternal creator (Prospero) who later suspends his power over her so that she might trade his paternal oppression for the marital oppression of another male (Francisco). Laurence's feminist revision, however, features a woman (Morag) who counteracts the oppression of a paternal creator (Brooke) so that she herself can take his place as a feminine creator who democratizes power and so mitigates the necessity to marry the other male (Jules). Both Morag and Joan suffer from an anxiety of influence, but whereas Joan escapes the heritage of her mother, Morag escapes the heritage of her spouse.

Laurence, like Atwood, must deploy the generic strategies being criticized in order to adapt them to her feminist purposes, and thus Laurence too risks maintaining the structures of the dominant genres that she wishes to subvert. Laurence, however, remains less ironic in tone than Atwood and appears to provide a less ambiguous, but nevertheless more conservative, revision of patriarchal genres. Moreover, Laurence appears to be more serious than Atwood about the stylistic possibilities of automatic writing, and thus Laurence does not undercut the aesthetic legitimacy of the writing style used by her protagonist. Laurence, however, cannot be said to conform more closely than Atwood to the preconceptions of French feminism by virtue of this seriousness. Godard observes that Laurence falls short of such a radical feminism because "*The Diviners* thematizes . . . a revolution in language but fails to stage that revolution" since "the sentence withstands the upheaval and exerts all the forces of its line to maintain coherence" ("Supplement" 54), a coherence that has been traditionally aligned with phallogocentric rationality. Laurence, like Atwood, maintains a referential mandate, the stubborn imperative of nominative grammar. Both writers do indeed participate in a project of revision, but their feminist adaptations of masculine narratives are macrosyntactic, not microsyntactic. Both writers question traditional forms of narrative structure; however, neither writer questions traditional forms of grammatical structure;

consequently, the two writers do not indulge in the linguistic deconstruction characteristic of French feminists, many of whom insist upon a complete break with conventional forms of syntax, punctuation, spelling, and diction.

FRENCH FEMINISM perceives grammar, with its referential bias, as an ideological apparatus that confines subjects to patriarchal codes. Irigaray strives to “alter the syntax of discursive logic, based on the requirements of . . . masculine sameness, in order to express . . . feminine difference” (222). Similarly, Cixous writes that “[t]he logic of communication requires an economy . . . of signs” (*The Newly* 92) in which “[t]he orator is asked to unwind a thin thread, dry and taut” (93), whereas the *écrivaine* assumes that “[t]o write is always to make allowances for [. . .] uselessness while slashing the exchange value that keeps the spoken word on its track” (92-93). Atwood and Laurence do indeed challenge the realist tradition of coherent narrativity, a tradition associated with the standard of phallogocentric rationality. Both writers make use of interruptive flashbacks and intertextual digression, heteroglossic juxtaposition and metafictional reflexiveness — literary techniques available, to be sure, to all contemporary writers of either sex. Such strategies of narrative fragmentation do unsettle the coherence of an architectonic structure, but nevertheless sustain the coherence of each narrative fragment. The ideological project of the sentence, the smallest unit of propositional expression, escapes interrogation.

Atwood and Laurence may revise patriarchal genres, but they do not necessarily revise the potentially patriarchal means by which they interrogate such genres. Just as French feminism at times risks the inadvertent reification of the Pauline dichotomy between mind and body in inverting the terms of value without questioning the fundamental structure of this hierarchical opposition, so also do Atwood and Laurence risk the inadvertent reification of the very aesthetic ideologies that they question. Such a formalistic critique is not intended, however, to provide a procrustean assessment of the two writers, since to evaluate them according to the standards of French feminism, a theory in which neither writer is formally schooled, is to criticize the writers for failing to produce texts that the writers may have never intended to produce; instead, such a formalistic critique demonstrates the limits to which echoes of French feminism can be said to manifest themselves in the two texts. Both writers express the issues of such a feminism at the level of content rather than at the level of form, doing so in a way more thematic than schematic. Atwood and Laurence in fact disavow any restrictive loyalty to a predefined school of feminist ideology, for, as Atwood emphasizes, “writers, if they are honest, don’t want to be wrongly identified as the children of a movement that did not give birth to them” (“On Being” 192) — a point that Laurence asserts when she writes: “I have not taken an active or direct part in the women’s movement . . . simply because

my work resides in my fiction, which must always feel easy with paradox and accommodate contradictions" ("Ivory Tower" 258). Clément points out that "the role of the sorceress . . . is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time" (5), and indeed both Atwood and Laurence maintain an ideological tension in which any radical feminism is subverted to the point of being rendered aesthetically ambivalent.

Ultimately, Atwood and Laurence portray the female writer as a metaphorical sibyl, either an oracle or a diviner, a woman who can establish direct connections with the unconscious realm of personal heritage. Both writers deploy mystical imagery to strengthen the notion that the art of feminine writing is really a process of personal revelation, a process by which the artist may experience a kind of magical transformation of identity. This vision of feminine writing is consistent in tone with the sibylline preconceptions of both *parler-femme* and *écriture féminine*, writing strategies that encourage women to occupy a revolutionary role, to undermine traditional textuality by surrendering to an oneiric voice aligned with the unconscious. French feminists encourage women to rebel against phallogocentric discourse since it does not adequately represent the desires of women, but discourages women from expressing themselves by devaluing their writing. While unschooled in any formal sense by this feminist perspective, both Atwood and Laurence are profoundly aware of the way in which language recruits subjects into a particular, ideological project. The two writers see that women, more than men, must face ideological obstacles when trying to cultivate literary talent: to both writers, the role of the sibyl in a patriarchal system is often fraught with the dangerous possibility of masculine reproach.

Both Atwood and Laurence argue that women who can be their own muse upset the phallogocentric distribution of creative authority, and indeed the protagonists of both texts must contend with this ideological difficulty when trying to express themselves: they must resist a socialized exhortation to irrelevant silence, to feminine muteness. French feminism wishes to recontextualize the feminine voice, demonstrating that in the end both men and women can share discourse as autonomous equals. Royland, in *The Diviners*, makes an especially relevant comment about the nature of such oracular talents:

It's something I don't understand, the divining [. . .] and it's not something that everybody can do, but the thing I don't usually let on about it is that quite a few people can learn to do it. You don't have to have the mark of God between your eyebrows. Or if you do, quite a few people have it. (451-52)

Sibylline experience is in the end not inherently engendered, but can be acquired by anyone, man or woman, who has the creative will to overturn the patriarchal demands of literature, and the hope that both sexes might be given equal opportunities to express such talent appears to be essential to the thinking of both writers.

Atwood in "Witches" in fact stresses that, while "[w]e still think of a powerful woman as an anomaly, a potentially dangerous anomaly" (331) the act of "[p]olitical witch-hunting has become a worldwide epidemic" (332) that no longer distinguishes between the sexes, not only because both sexes can write subversively, but also because the act of "writing itself is uncanny: . . . it is spell-making" (331), untameable, what Morag describes as "Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle" (5), a potentially turbulent force that not only authorizes power, but also simultaneously resists it.

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THE FAMILY GOLDMINER

Deborah Eibel

We always made great sacrifices,
So that the family goldminer
Could travel.

Whenever he left home,
To return to the gold rush,
Everything stopped —
Weddings, doctoral dissertations,
Shopping trips, concerts.
How could life go on
Without the family goldminer?

We were always complaining.
How long does a gold rush
Have to last?
Does any one ever stay
Until the very end?

We should all stay together,
While the family goldminer
Is away.

But gold rushes always inspired us.
We always urged
The family goldminer
To go back
To the gold rush.