

CONTRARY RE-MEMBERINGS

The Creating Self and Feminism in “Cat’s Eye”

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TO EXAMINE CONCEPTS OF self, creativity, and feminism in Margaret Atwood’s seventh novel, *Cat’s Eye* (1988), is tempting but tricky: for *Cat’s Eye* is a *bildungsroman* portrait of the artist that incorporates transmuted autobiography; and its contrarily re-membering seer-narrator is Atwood’s most elaborate representation of the human self as complexly layered, with fluid and sometimes buried layers. This stratified, metamorphic concept of the self builds upon Atwood’s idea of the self, explicated in Sherrill Grace’s *Violent Duality* (1980), as a place where things happen, and that is changed by their happening in it;¹ and leaves *Cat’s Eye* free to play not only with feminist and literary concepts of the self, but also with other, pre-literary and non-literary concepts of the self, drawn from folklore and faith, physics and the life sciences, psychology and games, popular and visual art. Furthermore, *Cat’s Eye* represents — whether Atwood’s contrary seer-narrator admits it or not — what a feminist perspective can recognize as profoundly woman-centered and feminist-oriented re-memberings and visions: in its yearning, painful girlhood rites of passage and its crotchety, womanly coming to terms with aging; in its portrait of the artist, not as a young man, but as a fifty-year-old woman, and in the private iconography of her paintings; in its sometimes contrary or camouflaged extensions of Virginia Woolf’s concepts; in its story of tangled, failed, but haunting female friendship; and in its human and archetypal female evil, as well as in its human and envisioned female compassion.

Elaine Risley, the novel’s central character and narrator, is its cat’s eye seer: a self that sees, from early childhood on, in vivid right-brain images of shapes and colours;² a self that will in adulthood become the artist who paints the wild, almost-unseen eyes of cats in *Deadly Nightshade*, and, much later, the self-portrait she calls *Cat’s Eye*. During the contemporary time of the novel, Risley has returned to Toronto for her first retrospective show, at Sub-versions, an alternative women’s gallery on Toronto’s now semi-trendy, transitional Queen Street. The novel, *Cat’s Eye*, is her literal retrospective, her looking back and re-membering of her earlier selves, and of others’ selves, that she sees now as she tries to see time, looking down through a shape “like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another” (3).³

Risley's cat's eye is also the prized blue marble that her nine-year-old self, Elaine, sees as an alien's eye, unknown but nonetheless existing (62-63). When Elaine, who is herself an alien newcomer from a different, nomadic, scientific family, is belittled by three sly Toronto schoolgirl friends, she hides her cat's eye marble in her pocket, where it can sometimes secretly empower her, by letting her see people as *it* sees them, unfeelingly, as shapes, moving shadow, and "blocks of colour" only (141, 155). In fairy tale and folklore, this talismanic cat's eye marble draws its powers from both good and evil: from the Snow Queen's icy, heartless, rationalist grain of glass that lodges in Little Kay's eye (and heart), in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale (633-36); and from the Hispanic and Mediterranean traditions of the amulet against the evil eye, which like the evil eye itself is usually blue — blue eyes being a foreign, distrusted colour there.⁴ *Cat's Eye's* enthralling chief tormentor, Cordelia, has a northern version of the evil eye, with a still more unusual, changeable eye colour: "grey-green," "greenish," a "muted sea-green" (4, 70, 6).

It is Elaine's girlhood torments — and not the older self's escape, or happiness, or getting even — that decisively form and catalyze the creating self: for the desperate, outwardly powerless child begins to see, eidetically and iconically, in moments of fear, hatred, and shame. Years later, a new fear calls up these eidetic images, and they become the still lifes of 1940's household objects that form Risley's breakthrough series of paintings, exhibited on the earliest, east wall of her retrospective. The gallery's retrospective catalogue, which Risley tries not to endorse, perceives this series as "female symbolism, and the charismatic nature of domestic objects" (404): the catalogue's jargon is true, in an unintended sense. We readers know what the gallery's catalogue writer does not: Risley's wretched, terrified nine-year-old self had seen her mother's old silver toaster, glass coffee percolator, and wringer washing machine, exactly and eidetically, focussing on these objects to stretch out the time before and after school, when she could escape her three girlfriends' secret, whispered condemnation. Caving in under their malice, urged verbally towards a suicidal black nothingness, the nine-year-old Elaine had begun to see the toaster and wringer as ways to burn or flatten out her shamed and punished self.

Sixteen years later, adult fear calls up the forgotten childhood fears: the twenty-five-year-old painter's self,⁵ pregnant, unmarried, and terrified of the consequences, begins to paint, for the first time, not things seen but "things that aren't there" (337): toaster, percolator, and wringer appear as eidetic images, sharp, clear, detached from their context and suffused with an anxiety that she consciously perceives as theirs and not hers. We readers know what the twenty-five-year-old self does not know in words: the fear is hers: and perhaps the creative, image-seeing, inarticulate, right-brain self has been given these images precisely because the conscious, left-brain self could not face them, and they had no other way of surfacing.

Fear calls up fear, object object: as the creative breakthrough takes hold, shards of the buried, denied memories surface. The household icons are followed by other, transitional still lifes, first of the three sofas that we readers recognize as belonging to her childhood tormentors' mothers; and then of "a genie's bottle" bouquet of red-berried deadly nightshade, concealing the scarcely visible eyes of cats (337). Though the twenty-five-year-old painter is apparently cut off from conscious knowledge of what the nightshade means,⁶ we readers know that it grew by the bridge in the ravine, where Cordelia, Elaine's enthralling chief tormentor, told stories of poison and death; we also know that nightshade is the "dark word" — Risley thinks literally and visually — that covers the square of blackness that goes back in Risley's memory to things she can't remember: her ninth birthday party, and the deep, black hole in Cordelia's yard where Elaine "lost power" when the others buried her and left, pretending it was a game (107-08).

Then, without conscious warning, the bigotted, deadened Christian and bad-hearted ogress of Elaine's childhood, Mrs. Smeath, floats up "like a dead fish" (338), smugly accusing the pregnant painter, whose fear of judgment has called her up. Mrs. Smeath's image had been fixed eidetically, in the shame and hatred of fifteen years before, when the ten-year-old Elaine, coming up from the cellar where she played with Grace Smeath, the second-in-command of the tormentors, had heard Mrs. Smeath and her ex-missionary sister condemning Elaine and her family as heathens, and approving the other girls' persecutions: "It's God's punishment'" (180). The ten-year-old self was not a painter, but she was a visualizer, and an imitator of the few art forms she had seen: Elaine saw her own wave of shamed hatred as a white-stemmed, fat, fleshy burdock stalk; and she saw Mrs. Smeath grotesquely and fatally squeezed, as in a comic book, through the wringer of Elaine's mother's washing machine (180).

The twenty-five-year-old self is a painter, in command of the demanding media of egg tempera, which gives her the "luminous flatness" she wants, and had first seen in her father's scientific slides, then in Mrs. Smeath's church windows and Sunday School slides (36, 247, quoted 326). And, until she marries, the pregnant twenty-five-year-old self has the energy of shame and terror: her luminous, grotesque icons of Mrs. Smeath multiply "like bacteria" (338), becoming the anchor series of her first group show, and perhaps the major series of her retrospective.

The fifty-year-old self, re-viewing her work at the retrospective, is not the same as the mid-twenties self who painted the righteous Mrs. Smeath in shame and terror; now, forgetting those catalytic emotions, Risley sees instead her own merciless malice and vengeance. And, for the first time, Risley sees in, and through, the painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath the latter's defeat and uncertain charity: Risley sees now that Mrs. Smeath too was a "displaced person," transplanted from somewhere smaller, who yet took in what must have seemed to her an unbaptized, ragamuffin child of feckless, heathen parents (405).

As the narrator warned us, early on, “[t]here is never only one, of anyone” (6): the creative self may retrieve and make visible what the conscious, left-brain self has refused to see; an older self may screen or transform what a younger self has seen. Re-remembering in words, the fifty-year-old Risley tells us that her young-adult painting, *Falling Women*, depicts three women falling from a bridge, “their skirts opened into bells” (268), onto sharp rocks that are really dangerous men: interpreted thus, *Falling Women* depicts, in a gender-reversed Lorelei image, Elaine’s own romantic fall, and another young woman’s fall, for an older, dangerous man.

But the reader can see *Falling Women* as a screened, right-brain re-remembering of the ten-year-old Elaine’s almost fatal descent from that bridge — a descent that the late-twenties self who made the painting could not consciously recall: Elaine’s three girlhood tormentors had sent her off the bridge into the dark ravine, and, when she fell through the winter ice, had abandoned her to freeze. And the reader can also see how *Falling Women* connects to the painter’s dream of Cordelia, who, we readers know, had been the enthralling ringleader of the tormentors, falling and falling, “her skirt open like a bell” (360), from a bridge or cliff; that dream came after the late-twenties Elaine, who had become the stronger self of the two, refused to help Cordelia, who had fallen apart mentally and tried to kill herself, to escape from a private institution. The quite real heterosexual dangers of *Falling Women*, then, are surface strata, overlying the earlier, buried female dangers.⁷

ATWOOD SEES THE SELF as layers, like time itself; Risley sees her paintings as luminous slices saved from time. All of Risley’s five paintings from the previous year, which hang now on the west wall of her retrospective, were made after she had seen her “life entire” (398) in the talismanic cat’s eye marble of her childhood, retrieved by Risley and her dying mother from the family steamer trunk. Risley’s twelve-year-old self, who had put the cat’s eye there to put away childish things, had lost all conscious memory of her persecution by the other girls and her near-death. The late-forties self could not, before she found her long-lost marble, recall the bad time that her now-dying mother wanted to discuss; her conscious mind had only an image, rising through memory tremulous as “water breathed on,” of the three girls walking towards her, faces shadowed, over snow (395, 136-37).

Cat’s Eye, the retrospective’s title “self-portrait, of sorts” (407), shows this long-buried eidetic childhood image, now retrieved: the top half is Risley’s present face, aging, and behind her a convex pier-glass “like an eye” that shows, as in Johannes Van Eyck’s 1434 painting of *The Arnolfini Marriage* that Risley has told us of

(327), things otherwise unseen: the younger subject's hairdo, and the three small ill-willed girls of forty years ago who were her tormentors.

Seeing her life entire in the cat's eye marble, then, has enabled the forty-nine-year-old self to see back through time; all five of that year's paintings, hung on the west wall of the retrospective, look backwards or inwards in time, to re-member and re-create those lost and buried: her dead parents; her three muses, each aliens bearing alien gifts; her dead brother; the *Cat's Eye* self-portrait; and the Virgin of Lost Things.

The first, *Picoseconds*, of her parents, is mostly landscape, in a style reminiscent of 1920's and 1930's Canadian landscape paintings; her young parents are painted with snapshot realism, but in an altered light, in a small out-of-the-way corner, seen as if through a window in the landscape — as if through the re-membered window in the blackness that made them and the childhood seer seem far away, and unreal (68), or, in a later childhood dream, receding into the earth, as if into ice (167). Below the painted parents, like a burial platform, rendered in Egyptian tomb style, is a row of three of the white spherical logos that were set atop 1940's gas pumps — logos that may have been the child's first iconic symbols (23, 405-06). Both Risley's painting and the memories behind it strongly recall Edward Hopper's 1940 *Gas* station painting, in Burnett's *Colville* (152-53), with its altered, conflicting lights, its windows in the dark surrounding landscape, and its three round, luminous logos set like heads atop the row of gas pumps.

Three Muses is a triple portrait of the three adults who were kind to the alien child, and who were themselves aliens: Mrs. Finestein, the then-exotic Jewish neighbour; Mr. Banerji, the scientist from India; Miss Stuart, the teacher from Scotland. All appear as magis, presenting their gifts — an orange, a slide with spruce budworm eggs, a globe — to someone unseen, outside the picture, who must be the painter's childhood self. The gallery catalogue writer notes unhappily, in deconstructive gender-power phraseology, that not all these muses are female; Risley is amused. The reader may note that these three adult muses counterbalance, in Risley's re-membered childhood and in their placement as second picture here, the three malicious, hooded little peers of the fourth picture, which is the *Cat's Eye* self-portrait.

The third painting, *One Wing*, is a triptych for her brother Stephen; like the earlier *Pressure Cooker* six-frame painting of her mother, it is Risley's attempt to bring back the dead. And to let him fly, in his last moments, as he would have liked: for the brother, who falls slantwise against the clouds, an Icarus without a parachute, had been pushed from a plane and shot by hijackers. The side panels, of a cigarette-card style plane from World War Two, and a luna moth, are of other flying things treasured by Stephen's boyhood self — the self of his that Elaine had known, before he changed into a physicist whose language she could not understand. The form of *One Wing* strongly recalls several of Joyce Wieland's plane

crash paintings and constructions; the content — of other parts of the *Cat's Eye* novel as well as of *One Wing* — recalls the compassionate acceptance of multiple perspectives on suffering, the children “who did not specially want [suffering] to happen,” and of course the “boy falling out of the sky” in the Breughel's *Icarus* of W. H. Auden's “Musée des Beaux Arts.”⁸

The titles of Risley's first and fifth new paintings, *Picoseconds* and *Unified Field Theory*, come from her physicist brother's language, and are another way of reaching out to him. *Unified Field Theory*, the fifth new painting, portrays the dreamed or miraculous Virgin Mary, “Our Lady of Perpetual Help, . . . Perpetual Hell,” who had saved the freezing ten-year-old, by stepping down from the bridge, through the air, to give her the warmth and will to climb up the cold ravine and live (182, 189-90). Risley identifies her as “the Virgin of Lost Things” (408), found by the painter in a Mexican church over twenty years ago; at her heart the Virgin holds an oversized cat's eye marble. She is placed mid-air, slightly above the bridge, a Queen of Heaven with star lights in her black robe, and the lower half of the moon above her;⁹ behind and below the Virgin are her realms, sky and earth and under the earth, where the clear stream flows down from the dissolving dead people of the cemetery, as the eight-year-old Cordelia had said (75), and underneath the bridge.

The retrospective's west wall paintings, then, are one summing up, of what Risley has made of her time. Re-viewing her handiwork before the opening, the fifty-year-old painter sums up their human figures with compassion, the gallery catalogue with irritation, and the paintings themselves with a painter's appreciation for the fluid edge of time that she has made, or preserved from time; and, finally, with a painter's jealousy: why not burn or slash them all? For they have taken their energy from her, and she herself is only “what's left over” (409): in Atwood's concepts of self and creativity, the creating self is a place that — like the pregnancy-weakened mothers of gods in *Surfacing* (181) — is drained by what has taken place in it.

FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE, the *Cat's Eye* artist, and the *Cat's Eye* novel that portrays her, are deceptively yet profoundly woman-centered and feminist-oriented. Though the fifty-year-old Risley contrarily refuses to give feminist answers in interviews, distrusts women, and would of course much prefer a retrospective at the more prestigious male-oriented Art Gallery of Ontario, and more men to flirt with at her openings, Risley's own re-memberings, her intensely introspective paintings, and her solitary, inward rather than peer-oriented, jail-breaks and re-creations of herself as an artist, stress what are characteristically, but not exclusively, female experiences and female patterns of creativity.¹⁰ As it is, Risley's (bristly? grizzly?) resistance to feminist commentary can only partly

camouflage her pursuit of female icons and myths in Mrs. Smeath and the Virgin. For, although a chorus of reviewers has been misled on this point, Risley's life and art do engage and dramatize a number of salient feminist concepts — albeit at times covertly, ironically, or with radical extensions.¹¹

Risley's *Cat's Eye* self-portrait is an intra-gender, all-female version not only of the Van Eyck portrait she tells us she has studied, but of something she does not mention — Virginia Woolf's remark, in *A Room of One's Own* (94), about each gender's power to show the other the unseen spot at the back of the head. This self-mirroring *Cat's Eye* portrait, which sums up so much of Atwood's novel, is also a conversely all-female, peer (and pier-glass) version of Woolf's argument (35-36) that woman has served as man's reflecting, falsely enlarging mirror; and of Simone de Beauvoir's argument (xvi-xvii) that woman has been man's inessential, objectified "Other": for Risley's adult self has been haunted, consciously and below the layers of her conscious knowing, by the falsely belittling mirrorings of her younger self that the painting's hooded, pier-glass-reflected girls had made her see.

The scene in which the young painter Risley saw herself mirrored, "a great deal smaller than life-size," in Cordelia's sunglasses (303), when Cordelia was temporarily flourishing, and Elaine was the crestfallen one, similarly re-conceives Woolf's and de Beauvoir's arguments, by locating them not between the genders, but among women only. Comparison with two of Atwood's earlier novels makes plain how Atwood's generic concept of the human self's good and evil, tormenting and victimhood, has progressed from direct dramatizations of the earlier feminists' woman versus man mirrorings: for in *The Edible Woman* (1969) the succumbing Marian sees "myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (83) at the moment when her fiancé Peter gains power over her; and in *Bodily Harm* (1981) the despairing, drunken Rennie sees her own image as "two little faces, white and tiny, reflected back at her from his [Paul's] sunglasses" (99).

Risley's *Life Drawing* is a tableau that both criticizes and comically reverses the gendered game of reflector and Other: in it Josef and Jon, the two painters who were her first lover and her first husband, stand stark naked, their bodies luminous in Risley's "somewhat idealized" realism, with "wonderful bums" (365-66). Each man is painting his own culturally-oriented projection: the older, European Josef has created a mysteriously brooding Pre-Raphaelite face; the contemporary Canadian Jon has hot red, pink, and purple abstract expressionist-process swirls. Neither man's art depicts what we and Risley see: the female model who sits between them, flat-footed, mostly sheeted, hands folded, facing front, her head "a sphere of bluish glass" (366). This ironic, tentative, and somewhat schematic female seer's sphere-eye is presumably a glimpse of the childhood cat's eye sphere that was then still buried to the painter's consciousness.

"'Chloe liked Olivia,'" Woolf had said in *A Room of One's Own*, welcoming the women's novels that would tell the untold story of women's friendships, "those

unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone," without men's capricious or coloured illuminations of them, without men's "astonishing extremes of [their] beauty and horror" (quoted 86, 88, 86). *Cat's Eye* tells such an untold women's story — but extends Woolf's liberal feminist welcome to include *women's* capricious or coloured illuminations, *women's* projections of beauty and horror onto women.¹²

Better still, Woolf had urged, let women share an impersonal, undomestic interest: "Now if Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory," Woolf argued, their friendship will be "more varied and lasting," because less personal (86-88, quoted 88). Perhaps, Atwood's Elaine and Cordelia do share a laboratory together, in grade 11, after Cordelia has begun to fail and Elaine to excel; Elaine dissects the specimens for both of them. Cordelia fails the mid-year exam, and Elaine, excelling in the final Grade 13 exam — "I can draw anything" — finds her vocation: she is not going to be a biologist, but a painter (255).

Atwood's Elaine and Cordelia, then, are each other's mirroring, complementary, and sometimes darker Others; and the basic narrative structure of their now-told women's story is their counterpoised rise and fall. For the first half of the novel, the enthralling Cordelia projects what we later learn is her own shame and vulnerability onto Elaine, until the weaker one loses power, falls, and then regains herself. Midway in the novel, Elaine gets possession of the power that had been Cordelia's, in the ostensibly comic cemetery scene where Elaine pretends to be a vampire, and Cordelia becomes the uncertain one (232-33). From then on, Elaine is the stronger one: she uses her newly acquired "mean mouth" on Cordelia (234), overcomes her own later, lesser falls, rises from a failed marriage and a failed suicide attempt that in part reflects Cordelia's earlier attempt; while the once-enthralling Cordelia falls apart, failing school and chances, drifting, drinking, "let[ting] go her idea of herself" after her failed suicide attempt, and finally vanishing (358).

The possession, mutual vampirism, and complementary pairing of Elaine and Cordelia, that go back in the novel to Risley's re-memberings of their first times together, go back also to Atwood's own discussion in 1986 of these darker elements of the girlfriend novel in Joyce Carol Oates's *Solstice* (1985): "The apparently weaker, more conventional, more insecure one is Monica. . . . The dominating eccentric is Sheila, a painter (watch out for those artists) with black eyes, 'strong cheek bones' and a 'long straight nose,' who has dirty boots and who first appears riding up on a horse, just like the Gothic hero she at first resembles. What she appears to hold for Monica is 'a childlike offer of complicity, mutual recognition'" ("That Certain Thing" 39).

Atwood's *Cat's Eye* plays with pieces of this passage — and with Goddess, witchcraft, Edenic, and Shakespearean allusions — to re-create a girlhood version of the *Solstice* (soul's test?) pair: in the beginning, the strange, dominant Cordelia some-

how “creates a circle, takes [the apparently weaker, conventionally insecure Elaine] in,” by “confiding” in Elaine about the dog-poop-coloured fallen apple that has dirtied Elaine’s shoe (70). This strange Cordelia’s richer mother has artistic tastes, and paints still lifes; Cordelia’s exotically Shakespearean-named sisters spin “a web of conspiracy around [their] Mummie” (73); Cordelia herself fascinates the other girls by telling them, in jest or earnest, to break their eggshells “So the witches can’t put out to sea” (72).

“For we think back through our mothers, if we are women,” Virginia Woolf had argued in *A Room of One’s Own* (79): Risley’s Mrs. Smeath series, her *Three Witches* painting of the three sofas of her three tormentors’ mothers, and her Virgin paintings radically extend Woolf’s concept to include all Risley’s mothers, evil as well as good, visionary as well as real. Perhaps evil *more* than good, for it is the evil mother, Mrs. Smeath, and not the real, good mother, or the good, maternal Mrs. Finestein, who gets the more intensely powerful representations in Risley’s paintings and re-memberings. And it is Mrs. Smeath who becomes for the narrator what Virginia Woolf had called “Milton’s bogey,” shutting out the view (118): it is Mrs. Smeath, multiplied across one wall, who dominates the retrospective as no other figure does: “bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God” (404).

Mrs. Smeath *is* bigger than merely human life, as literary and feminist re-claimings of the untold stories of female gods and traditions make clear: for Mrs. Smeath’s Smith/Teeth name and image evoke not only Everywoman, but also the terrible, devouring Teeth Mother, the Kali Ma archetype, blood-worshipped, one with or accompanied by her moon (see, e.g., Barbara G. Walker’s very useful *Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* 488-94, especially 491; and 669-73). Mrs. Smeath’s kitchen is an ogress’s lair that “smells of marrow-fat and stewing bones”; her hands are red and knucky; the worn-thin knife in her right hand is “a crescent-moon sliver” that creates a potato-peel “long pale spiral” (96), the shape of Kali’s female serpent, signifying death and rebirth.¹³ Mrs. Smeath’s face is round, white, luminous, potato-like and moon-like, with a flat “hair crown” or “hairpin crown” (97, 352); in Risley’s *Rubber Plant: The Ascension*, she rises to heaven on her sofa, while a doily-shaped moon floats behind her (86).

“Her bad heart floats in her body like an eye, an evil eye, it sees me,” the condemned Elaine thinks, after overhearing Mrs. Smeath judge Elaine’s family heathen and her persecution deserved (180); two of Risley’s later paintings, *AN · EYE · FOR · AN · EYE* and *THE · KINGDOM · OF · GOD · IS · WITHIN · YOU* panel of *White Gift*, show Mrs. Smeath with her “wicked paring knife” and exposed reptilian heart (352). Mrs. Smeath’s concealed, evil witch’s eye is, of course, an almost wholly negative version of Elaine’s concealed, creative cat’s eye. Both versions go back, in female archetypes, to the all-seeing eye of the pre-Chris-

tian, and sometimes cat-headed, Egyptian Goddess of Justice, Maat, and to Neolithic “‘Eye Goddesses’” (Walker 294-95, 561-63).

Mrs. Smeath’s bad heart goes back in the *Cat’s Eye* text to the exposed, eye-like turtle heart “glistening dark red down there in its cave” (170), a life-in-death and obviously uterine image that the ten-year-old Elaine had seen at her father’s Zoology open house, shortly after seeing bottled, fetal human twins; she fainted in the turtle room. The red turtle heart also goes back, in the novel, to the section remembered just before it — to her parent’s exposed, blood-splotted mattress, the morning after her mother had lost a baby. In female archetypes, the bad, caved red heart goes back to Kali Ma as “the primal Deep, or menstrual Ocean of Blood at creation” that is the flux between universes — and between Elaine’s life and suicidal despair, her girlhood and womanhood (Walker 491).

Risley’s Virgin Mary paintings honour a female saviour who, like her Kali-imagined Mrs. Smeath, goes back to ancient female myths and goddesses suppressed by the Christian patriarchs (Walker 602-13). As a young mother, painting at night, Risley had tried to create a non-traditional, female iconography, one “more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history” (344). Her Mary is fierce, wild, lion-headed like the Egyptian Mother of the Gods as Sphinx (Walker 374-75), with a gnawed bone at her feet, and Christ as a cub in her lap. Her other Mary, “descending to the earth,” is a tired Everywoman, or Everymother, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*, carrying groceries (344). The fathers of the church had humanized Mary to discredit her worship; Risley creates a Mary in her own, human image that re-credits and re-claims female history. It is characteristic of Risley’s contrary, visual, let-the-right-brain-make-what-the-left-brain-denies creativity, and of her deeply scarred, contrary feminism, that these two heretical Virgins, with their Christ-like lion ferocity and female humanity, appear in the text immediately after Risley’s articulate, left-brain protest against her consciousness being raised by feminists: “Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister” (344).

The envisioned Mary who had saved the freezing Elaine had walked, not on water, but on “nothing . . . on air” down from the bridge, an alien greenish-yellow light in rays behind her head, her heart a partly revealed “glimpse of red” in her half-opened cloak (189). In the text, Mary’s good red heart mirrors Mrs. Smeath’s bad red heart; Mary’s saviour/godmother gift to Elaine is the ability to walk, with freezing feet, on snow, up the hill and, a few days later, the ability to walk away from Cordelia: “It’s like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does” (193). In female archetypes, Risley’s envisioned Mary, her Mexican peasant Virgin of Lost Things, and her *Unified Field Theory* Virgin are all three older images that reveal Mary as the composite of versions of the pre-Christian Great Goddess: moon-mother; God-Mother; creatrix of the universe; Queen of

Heaven, Earth, and Hell or underworld; goddess of life and death, water and earth (Walker 602-13).

In female archetypes, Cordelia's name, Risley tells us, is goddess-linked: "Heart of the moon, jewel of the sea"; failing, her powers in eclipse, Cordelia's face becomes "a blurred reflection of a moon" behind a window (263, 259). Elaine's own name, she does not tell us, goes back to the British Queen Elen or Elaine, the "Lily Maid" (lily-livered?) who was the Arthurian bride of Lancelot-Galahad, and whose "sexual-symbolic charm," that made Lancelot invincible, was a "pearl-bedewed sleeve of red silk" (Walker 272): this ancient woman's charm becomes, in *Cat's Eye*, the red plastic oval 1940's-style purse with a gold-coloured clasp, where Elaine hides the cat's eye marble that she had wanted to make herself invincible.¹⁴

RISLEY'S CONTRARY RESISTANCE to feminism, and her understandable and all-too-womanly distrust of women, then, should not block our seeing that *Cat's Eye* is structured not only as a reflector and Other struggle of female friendship, but also as a struggle against female evils, human and archetypal, and a quest for a female saviour. The ten-year-old Elaine had tried to pray to a Mary she had found on a Catholic Sunday School paper lying in the street, and, failing, had visualized a Virgin's heart that looked like her own red plastic purse (183-84). The young painter had searched for Mary's statues for years, but had not known what in her own life had been lost, when she finally found the primitive, uncrowned, Mexican peasant Virgin of Lost Things, and tried to pray to her. Only after Risley's dying human mother had unearthed the forgotten red purse, with the forgotten cat's eye marble in it, could Risley "see [her] life entire" (398), and paint the Virgin as Creatrix Mother Night, in *Unified Field Theory*, holding the omniscient cat's eye that is also her World Egg, embryo of the universe, at her heart (Walker 270).

Risley has been twice tested in the streets during the week of this novel: once a graceless, Smeath-like drunken old Catholic woman calls for Our Lady and love; once a darker, foreign, middle-Eastern young woman, who looks like a *Lady of Perpetual Help*, Risley's tired Virgin as Anywoman (151-53, 313-15), begs for money to feed her family. Each test scene brings back, or is brought back by, something that is the sea-green of Cordelia's eyes. Each test scene is framed in Risley's re-memberings of mothering: the first, in re-memberings of Risley's own mother, dead and alive, including the painting Risley made to try to bring her back, *Pressure Cooker* (150-51); the second test, which is preceded by re-memberings of Risley's own mothering, is followed by other sorts of mothering — the help that the young adult painter had given, and failed to give, to another woman hemorrhaging from a self-induced abortion. Each test Risley passes yet also fails: a partly

good Samaritan, she gives some help, some money, but in her heart she resentfully or guiltily holds back: she has been, yet partly failed to be, Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

The meaning of this fairy-tale structured quest could traditionally be called Christian — were it not that Atwood's woman-centered novel repeatedly depicts these values as belonging to the Mary-Goddess, not Christ. Risley's quest ends with the hero breaking through the win-lose bondage of reflector versus Other, removing the mote of vengeance that was in her own eyes, rejecting the traditionally masculine code of justice ("An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness"), and learning, in three stages, or stations, of her past, present, and future among women, to accept Mary's traditionally feminine code of "mercy" (*Cat's Eye* 405; Walker 607-08). Mercy first for her elder enemy, Mrs. Smeath, whose defeat and charity Risley (wisely?) sees with compassion, at the retrospective, when she learns to see through her old enemy's eyes and to find her own old hatred wanting in compassion.

Mercy second for her peer, Cordelia, who does not appear at the retrospective. Risley, who has drunk too much at the retrospective, mourning Cordelia for dead, finds her the next day in the Goddess's primal ravine, on the path by their old bridge. This revenant or image is the dangerous Cordelia, the wild, defiant child at the height of her powers; but Risley, who is now the older and the stronger, can finally see what at nine she could not see and in Grade Thirteen she had refused to see (252-53): Risley sees, compassionately, that the crippling loneliness and shame are not hers but the father-angering Cordelia's — and always were. Wisely, mercifully, Risley reaches out, comforting this Cordelia as the envisioned saviour Mary had once comforted her; but, as in witchcraft and vampire lore, "[t]he snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke" (419); the primal powers that let her Cordelia through are gone.

The *Cat's Eye* seeings end with Risley's third and future affirmation, "flying or being flown, westward" through the night (420), alongside two old women whose red mouths, raucous laughter, and hobbling gaits mark them as the crones that were hunted down in other, evil times, for witches. As they eye her "cunningly" — Atwood's female-rooted word is not a random choice — Risley sees them as they are: old, carefree, tough, "innocent and dirty" with their bathroom jokes, playing like children, but without the childhood pain (420). Old ladies, old women, old friends, they are what Cordelia's and her own innocent, tough-mouthed thirteen-year-old selves had stared at, in Risley's first-presented memories of Cordelia (4). Now the aging Risley sees these elder crones with compassionate identification, not as Others but as her kind, the future that she and her Cordelia will never have.

The night through which they fly is moonless, starlit. The stars are reflections, temporary, "shining out of the midst of nothing" (421) — like the rest of the universe. Yet something has come of nothing: Risley's fluid, layered, partly transparent self, her re-memberings, her luminous images born from the nothing of

despair, a despair that was Cordelia's and her own. The light is old and scant, but it is, the seer tells us, "enough to see by" (421).

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Atwood, "the self is a place in which things happen," High Barnett Tape, 1973, quoted in Grace (86, 106).
An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association des littératures Canadiennes et Québécoise/Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures, Laval University, 30 May 1989. Part of a different version was presented at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, Washington, D.C., 28 December 1989. I am again indebted to Roberta Rubenstein for a perceptive and exact critique, and to Carole L. Palmer for bibliographic help; and also to Ellen Stekert and Diana Brydon for their comments.
- ² See Edwards' germinal, practical, artist-oriented discussion of right-brain creativity and seeing (vi-vii, 25-43).
- ³ Compare Anaïs Nin speaking to Judy Chicago "about the 'transparency of the psyche' — the sense of being able to see through successive layers to the very core of reality" in Nin's and Virginia Woolf's work, in Chicago (176, 179). The *Cat's Eye* seer's image of overlaid transparencies also suggests Ian McHarg's transparent plastic overlays, used for regional planning, as described in McPhee (147-48); but Atwood's transparencies are liquid, "like water" (3).
- ⁴ Folklorist Ellen Stekert linked, in our 18 September 1989 telephone conversation, Elaine's blue cat's eye marble to the blue-eyed evil eye and the amulets against it.
- ⁵ Risley's breakthrough series can be dated in *Cat's Eye* (336-39): the paintings come in the first trimester of pregnancy; the child, Sarah, is over two years old when Risley will be thirty in a couple of years.
- ⁶ Because these two paintings, of the sofas and the nightshade, are briefly described, without any mention of Elaine's childhood memories, and because they come between the household objects and the Mrs. Smearth series, for which Elaine says she has no context and no connection, the implication is that the sofas and nightshade also arrive detached from memory (337-38). But the fact that the painter has named the three sofas painting *Three Witches* in the first, group show (348) must mean some knowledge of context — or an inconsistency in the novel.
- ⁷ Compare Atwood's 1986 comment on Mary McCarthy's *The Group*: "even in the 50's a substratum of women's friendships underlay all the surface heterosexual cheerleading" ("That Certain Thing" 38).
- ⁸ See especially Joyce Wieland's *Double Crash 1966*, Figure 22, p. [55]; *Cooling Room 1964*, Plate 15, p. [57]; *Cooling Room II 1964*, Plate 42, p. [132], in *Joyce Wieland* [57, 132]. Lines 7 and 20 of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" are quoted.
- ⁹ Risley's painting has the moon at the top of the sky behind the Virgin (408) — not, as in Jamie Bennet/Reactor's dustjacket cover illustration, below her feet.
- ¹⁰ The first two sentences of Margaret Avison's "Snow" that conclude Atwood's 1972 *Survival*, also sum up Risley's development of herself and her art: "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes. / The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And recreation" (lines 1-3). Compare also Susan J. Rosowski on the inner pattern of female creativity in Cather: "While to grow up male is to be dispossessed of childhood in adolescence and then of adolescence in adulthood, to grow up female concerns claiming that which is within, then giving it form" (61). Risley's detailed,

scientifically exact, surreal paintings and her explanations of them are strikingly akin to the scientific surrealism and private, female iconography of Remedios Varo's paintings, as explicated in Lauter.

Risley's concealed narrative line, and her use of private, household experience from family and childhood, are sometimes discussed as female characteristics, for many female painters use them; but these characteristics are very salient in certain male painters as well: compare, for example, Risley's *Falling Women* and Andrew Wyeth's *Winter 1946*; Wyeth's mysticism, and his use of charged objects to convey emotions, are particularly akin to Risley's (Corn 58-59). Compare also Risley's and Alex Colville's preoccupation with the individual, nature, gravity, seeing, and mortal time, in Burnett, *Colville*.

- ¹¹ This paper is indebted to Glover's perceptive tracing of the levels of meaning, imagery, and creative autobiography in *Cat's Eye*, which goes deep enough to recognize Risley's Virgin of Lost Things as "female lunar goddess, mother of all things" (14); and to James's succinct evaluation of *Cat's Eye*, which follows Atwood's "That Certain Thing," as perhaps "the finest addition to the Best Girlfriend genre yet" (16). See also Atwood's discussion, in Peri, of personality development and contemporary feminism.

Although *Cat's Eye* has generally been appreciatively reviewed, in Canada and the United States, as a realistic, or all-too-realistic, novel about girlhood, quite a number of reviewers have seen Risley, or the novel, as anti-feminist: McDermott notes an unfronted "undercurrent of misogyny" (35); Towers' less enthusiastic review finds Risley's criticism of feminists and women, which he quotes at length, interesting, intelligent, "direct and acerbic" (51); Robinson feels that Risley, "has missed out on both extremes of female experience, the deepest pain and the highest sisterhood" (778); and Yglesias concludes by suggesting that Atwood is either trying to choke off "her passionate negation of traditional femininity," or struggling to acknowledge and embrace "sisterhood, down to its most repellent characteristics" (4).

- ¹² Compare also the black American Toni Morrison's similarly titled 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*, where blacks are the foregrounded villains, as women are in Atwood's women-centered *Cat's Eye*.
- ¹³ Mrs. Smeath is constantly associated with both the potato and the moon; Risley reminds us that potatoes can be poisonous, and are related to the deadly nightshade that in her mind's eye fills in the black square of time where she lost power (108-09).
- ¹⁴ *Cat's Eye* translates the Arthurian saga among Elaine's men, also, but with less emphasis. Young Lancelot, who had as the ancient phallic god Lanceor descended into the Goddess's womb, defeats the aging solar god, Gawain, to win Elaine (Walker 337-38, 528-29). Jon, who becomes Elaine's first, young husband after impregnating her, defeats her first, aging lover, Josef, who had come, mysteriously, from the Old-World east. "You'd think the sun shines out of his ass!" the young painters (Jon's peers and perhaps Jon) say, jeeringly, of Josef (286).

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