

GEORGE, LEDA, AND A POURED CONCRETE BALCONY

A Study of Three Aspects of the Evolution of “Lady Oracle”

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ALTHOUGH MARGARET ATWOOD has stated that the problem with writing a novel is “sustaining your interest long enough to actually sit down and work it out” (Gibson 6), the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto has five boxes of manuscripts of *Lady Oracle*.^{*} Studying three different kinds of revisions Atwood made as she created *Lady Oracle* suggests that the organizing principle that unifies the novel is that each element in *Lady Oracle* is chosen to heighten the reader’s awareness of the interrelationships between fantasy and reality, art and life. A close examination of the effects of changing the audience of the novel from Joan’s husband to the reader, adding the character Leda Spratt, and revising the first paragraph of the initial draft reveals Atwood’s concern with our perceptions about fiction and reality.

In the early drafts of *Lady Oracle* Joan speaks not to the reader, as she does in the published novel, but to her husband George (later called Arthur) — in her mind — in a voice totally unheard:

I would have preferred to have maintained your illusions for you intact, and I could have done it by never telling you any of the real things about myself. Most of the time I never did, which may account for my need, my compulsion to tell them to you now, if only in fantasy. (early typed draft, 10)¹

In fantasizing her life story to George, Joan completely denies our existence as readers:

... I wonder how long I will continue to make these feeble jokes about myself, how long I will continue to apologize even though there is no longer any one to listen to me. (First Draft, 3)

Listening to Joan tell her life story to her husband is quite different from listening to her tell it to us. Not only is the reader a voyeur rather than a participant,

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but in a sense there is also no layer of reality to cling to: even the telling is sheer fantasy. This mode of narration denies all reality but that happening within one mind, taking the form beyond that of Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* in which Ramsay's writing an *apologia pro vita sua* to the headmaster ultimately invites us to judge in the place of the fictitious headmaster who fades from our notice as we become engrossed in Ramsay's autobiography. Atwood keeps George before us as Joan continually refers to "you" as she narrates. By choosing ultimately to eliminate George as the fantasy audience of Joan's narrative, Atwood allows the reader to enter the novel. The novel is no longer wholly Joan's fantasy; it begins in Joan's mind but reaches out, combining Joan's fantasies with the "reality" of her (fictional) life.

The form of narration Atwood ultimately uses in *Lady Oracle* has two literary counterparts: the autobiographical form used by celebrities (Joan is, after all, a celebrity who has had an extramarital affair with another celebrity, so her story and her willingness to reveal all fit the typical pattern² and the fictional spiritual autobiography used, for example, by Margaret Laurence in *The Stone Angel*. Partaking of two conventions yet failing to fulfil the expectations generated by either form, *Lady Oracle* calls into question generic expectations in such a way as to make us question not merely what is a novel,³ but also what is the relation of a novel which purports to be autobiography to autobiography — specifically, to a form of autobiography that often impresses readers as distinctly fictional. Juxtaposing a real form that seems fictional with a fictional form that seems real reminds us that the conventions of the fictional autobiography are shaped to allow us the lifelike experiences of being in one person's mind, aware of what she sees, looking at the outside from inside — the same conventions that obtain in the autobiography. In both cases we may question the validity of the perceptions: in reading autobiography we frequently wonder, "Did that really happen that way?" questioning whether the subject is being fully honest with us, and often separating ourselves from the speaking consciousness with responses like "How naive!" or "How callow!" that the speaker is presumably not trying to evoke; in reading fictional autobiography we experience the same detaching effects, but attribute them to the controlling hand of the author (Rader). Atwood insists we remember these effects of both conventions in Chapter 39 of the published novel when Joan describes telling her story to the reporter:

and the odd thing is that I didn't tell any lies. Well not very many. Some of the names and a few other things, but nothing major. (378)

Thus we are directly invited to question the truth of Joan's narrative — to think about the problem of how we respond to an autobiographical speaker, to question the veracity of a fiction the way we might question the veracity of a true life story, to think about how we separate fact from fiction, fiction from fact. We are

forced, then, to become aware of conventions, aware that either mode reflects conventions rather than things as they really are.

In the celebrity autobiography the speaker generally takes us through the difficulties of her rise to fame, ending on a positive note that suggests, "Now I'm a success and my troubles are behind me." A fictional autobiography conventionally progresses to an epiphany; in dual-time fictional autobiography like *The Stone Angel* and *Lady Oracle*, we expect that when the past and present times converge, the speaker will come to some significant realization about herself. Atwood has Joan call our attention to this convention: "I keep thinking I should learn something from all this, as my mother would have said" (379). The epiphany in *Lady Oracle*, however, is dubious enough that critics have argued about whether it is there or not;⁴ we are left to doubt whether Joan will act on her new sense of responsibility "to get Sam and Marlene out of jail" or continue to say, "Right now, though, it's easier just to stay here in Rome" (379). Joan has neither clearly overcome her problems nor made a discovery that will definitively alter her life.⁵ Our expectations of both forms, then, are only partially fulfilled, leaving us questioning our generic expectations, questioning what is art and how does it work.

In moving from having Joan speak to her husband to having Joan speak to us, Atwood changes the questions we must ask as we read: "Why does she want to tell her husband this?" becomes "Why does she want to tell the whole world this?" In speaking in fantasy to her husband only, Joan's speaking is a justification of herself for herself. In speaking to us all, her discourse becomes a very public self-justification, suggesting a more significant guilt needing confession than Joan's final admission: "It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (380). The trivialization of Joan's motive for public confession forces us to look beneath what she says for a true motive — or beyond that for Atwood's motive in having Joan confess. Joan's need to speak might stem from her need to emerge from inside her mountain of flesh, to unify her various personalities. Atwood's motive in having Joan confess could include Joan's and extend beyond it. Mitchell suggests Atwood is making a statement about "the tendency for human beings to disintegrate, to split apart, under the pressures of modern living" (52).

This splitting is reflected in the multiple settings, the flashback format, and the excerpts from Joan's costume gothics (Mitchell 52). The gothic excerpts are particularly significant in analyzing Atwood's purpose behind Joan's narrative because as the novel progresses, the plots of the gothics intertwine more and more with the story of Joan's life, insisting we compare the two modes of describing reality that they represent.⁶ For example, when Redmond first touches Charlotte in the gothic, violent, menacing descriptive words like "crept," "distorted," "savage," "pulled," "wildly," "seized," "humiliate," "strike," "importunate,"

and “fend off” contrast with formal words like “approached,” “disengaged,” “tendrils,” “sought,” “seeking,” and “not scruple”:

He approached her and disengaged a tendril of her hair; then his hand crept towards her throat, his lips sought hers, his features distorted and savage. Charlotte pulled away, seeking wildly for some object with which to defend herself. She seized a weighty copy of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*: if he attempted to humiliate her in this way again she would not scruple to strike him with it. He was not the first importunate nobleman she'd had to fend off, and it was not her fault she was young and pretty. (143)

The juxtaposition of violence and formality in the gothic passages parallels the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy in the autobiographical passages; the fantasy derives from the violence and formality of the gothic passages, calling our attention once again to the relationship of a literary convention — gothic romance — and life. Charlotte's choosing the weighty *Life of Johnson* as a weapon prefigures Joan's arming herself with and ultimately using the Cinzano bottle. The physical contact via hair recalls what Joan terms “my first sexual experience” (105), filled not with violence on the man's part and defensiveness on the woman's, but bland matter-of-factness expressed in common, everyday details like “mud puddle — it was April and had been raining” and “the knees of his pants dripping wet” made ludicrous by the romantic touch of his kneeling and the non-romantic image of Joan's “enormous stomach” (106). Rather than being angry and humiliated like Charlotte, Joan strokes his hair (reversing the action in the gothic) and unemotionally states, “My hand smelled of Brylcreem for days” (106), setting the scene as clearly in the ordinary world of North America in the 1950's as Boswell's *Life* — obviously not a paperback — sets Charlotte's scene in the romantic past in England. Charlotte's fending off importunate noblemen with designs on her virtue serves as a proleptic image of Joan's seduction by the Polish Count, which she describes as “not at all erotic. My ankle hurt, the pajamas turned me off, and he looked weird without his spectacles” (167). Unlike Charlotte, Joan is not frightened or hysterical, merely noting, “Also, it was painful” (167); the Count is “filled with remorse” (167) — formal, violently emotional words out of the gothic convention — but Joan merely puts her flannel gown back on, commenting “it was just as cold and damp in his flat as it had been in mine” (168).

The ironic parallels between the scene in the gothic and those in the autobiographical narrative serve to point up the relationships between Joan's fiction and Joan's “real” life, which again reminds us that Joan's “real” life is also a fiction, fabricated both by Joan — “This was the reason I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing” (167) — and by Atwood. Atwood's motives in creating a character who writes a fictional autobiography which is itself fictionalized — as well as a book with the same title as the fiction

Atwood herself creates⁷ — would seem to be to create an opportunity to make us question the relationship of fiction and reality.

ATWOOD'S MOVING, then, in revising her manuscripts, from having Joan speak to her husband to having Joan speak to the reader changes the effect of the novel, making us aware of the conventionality of two popular modern literary conventions, calling on us to question these conventions, even as the presence of the gothic conventions within the novel evokes further questions about how the three modes of writing set up modes of perceiving reality which emphasize certain aspects of life while subordinating or repressing others. As Atwood put it in an interview, " 'I think in an anti-gothic what you're doing is examining the perils of gothic thinking' " (Struthers 23).

Leda Sprott does not appear in the early drafts or the first typed draft of *Lady Oracle*. The scene in Chapter 10 of the published novel (in which Joan visits the Spiritualist Chapel) has no counterpart in these drafts; the scene in Chapter 19 in which Joan and Arthur are married by Leda Sprott under her new identity as Eunice P. Revele appears in the first typed draft but with an oriental couple, Dr. and Mrs. Wang, presiding over the ceremony instead of Leda and her former medium, Mr. Stewart. The wedding scene with the Wangs reads simply as a parody of the romantic wedding girls are taught to dream of; details of the room and ceremony achieve humour, just as they do in the comparable scene in the published version of the novel, by their distance from the romantic ideal. The scene reveals something about the fictions women live by and their relationship to reality; however, with Leda Sprott as presiding minister of the wedding chapel, the scene takes on added dimensions that force us to consider the relation of fiction itself to reality.

Consider Leda's name. Joan introduces her with a pun: "the Reverend Leda Sprott, the leader" (116). She is, however, not merely a leader for Joan, introducing her to Automatic Writing (an idea absent from the early drafts); as a character with a name from Greek mythology, she is both a channel between spiritual beings and humans like her mythological predecessor and a reminder that a supposedly "real" person in Joan's "real" life is connected with one of the best known fictions in Western Culture; Leda is an especially interesting mythological character because while we may consider her encounter with the swan as fiction, the Trojan war was not fiction. In the wedding scene Leda Sprott's new name, E. P. Revele, French for "she discloses," sets up an additional reverberation about art and reality which is reinforced by details and persons Joan recognizes from the past and by Leda's sermon which focuses on the image of a diary,

a form of autobiography: “ ‘Avoid deception and falsehood; treat your lives as a diary you are writing that your loved one will someday read’ ” (227).

Leda Sprott, as a returning character from Joan’s past, carries the potential of producing the *cognitio* or *agnorisis* that Frye sees as central to the comic and tragic modes (163, 192): she could unmask villains and reveal heroines or produce in Joan a recognition of who she is and her relation to the universe. The coincidence of her reappearance under a different name is the sort of event critics find “unreal” in novels, and yet this coincidence occurs not in the fantasy level of Atwood’s novel but in the supposedly real level. If Leda were to bring about the expected *cognitio* or *agnorisis*, the scene would fit the conventional pattern of comedy and/or tragedy. Failing to do so, Leda marks for us where literary conventions and “real life” diverge,⁸ and yet in telling Joan to try Automatic Writing, Leda does become a sort of spiritual mother to Joan, enabling her to discover a latent part of herself later in the novel.

Leda Sprott is not only a spiritual mother for Joan, she is also like a novelist—like Joan and Atwood. In the scene in the Spiritualist Chapel Leda creates characters and gives voice to their speech:

“There’s an old white-haired lady with light coming out from around her head, and she is saying, ‘Be careful going down stairs, especially on Thursday.’” (117)

Joan reacts to the ceremony as Coleridge describes reacting to literature: “I was willing to watch it all, with the same suspension of disbelief I granted to movies” (120). The Spiritualist, like the novelist, evokes people who are not present, making it seem as if they are, and brings messages from or through them. Thus Leda as Spiritualist leader also calls into question the relation between fiction and reality: is Leda’s performance faked?

Because of the effects generated by her name, her reappearance and the expectations it fosters, and her art and the questions it necessitates, the overall effect of adding Leda Sprott to the novel is to heighten our consciousness of questions about the interrelationships of fantasy and reality, art and life.

At the linguistic level, Atwood’s interest in counterpointing various conventional frameworks for describing reality is abundantly evident. The metamorphosis of the material in the first paragraph in the earliest handwritten manuscript into new contexts with new meaning in paragraphs 3, 8, 12, and 14 of the finished novel provides evidence of Atwood’s re-envisioning to create a stronger emphasis on the relationship of reality to the worlds we imagine.

The initial paragraph reads as follows in the manuscript, with four marginal additions described below:

Every afternoon from two o'clock [*sic*] to three I sit here on the balcony. It used to be from one to two, but that is the hour at which the old man who owns the land around this house and a granter of the land under the house comes to tend

his garden of artichokes, reaping the weeds with a tiny scythe, slicing off the ready heads. “Dey’re jost tissles,” Reno used to say in his New York accent. “Dey’re jost big tissles.” I was trying to get a tan then, and he would stare with his old-man eyes out from under his hat at my bare arms and shoulders. I’ve given it up now anyway.

Between the first two sentences an arrow pointing to the upper margin inserts more physical detail:

I sit in the middle; to my left is the area of broken glass, from a window that broke & has never been repaired; to right is a lizard, green with iridescent [*sic*] blue eyes, which will remain in the sun as long as I do not move.

An arrow from the left margin inserts before this:

It is not a romantic balcony; it is poured concrete, with a prosaic railing.

“Stare” is replaced by a margin note, “glare convertly.” And finally a line from after “shoulders” to the left margin inserts twenty-three words, including three inserts:

his white eyes going in and out from the shadow on his face like a snake’s tongue, his hands never stopping their motion.

Without the margin inserts, the paragraph is rather straightforward description; even with them it lacks the continual intermixing of realistic and romantic discourse that characterizes Joan’s narrative voice as we know it in the finished novel.

The emphasis on repeating actions at the same time each day in the first two sentences of the initial draft, reinforced by three similar statements in the ensuing two paragraphs (“at three oclock [*sic*] I get up out of the chair,” “I go inside and cry for three quarters [*sic*] of an hour,” and “I take fifteen minutes to recover”), suggests the routine humdrum of Joan’s everyday life in Terremoto. In contrast, the finished novel presents Joan’s life transcending temporal and spatial limitations, and changes in the language and contexts of the particles of this original paragraph reveal how Atwood transcended concrete description to create a unique voice for Joan that would underscore considerations of the interrelationships of fantasy and reality. Paragraph two of the finished novel begins with a transformation of the initial sentence of the original opening paragraph: “The day after I arrived in Terremoto I was sitting outside on the balcony” (3). Coming after the paragraph on how Joan planned her death, the humdrum quality of everyday life takes on new meaning: because the speaker/actor is someone resurrected from the dead, the very normality of words and action becomes extraordinary. Joan’s narration rushes from the facts into fantasy: “I had visions of myself as a Mediterranean splendor” (3), and back into the mundane reality of freckles and her lack of a swimsuit, producing a humorous effect on top of the miraculous, humdrum, and romantic effects of the passage.

Joan in this version is doing more than simply describing herself on a balcony; she is evoking a world for us through her own “idiosyncratic mode of regard” — to borrow Thomas Hardy’s phrase (225) — a mode that includes popular culture’s sultan commercials and jumbles together multiple conventional ways of describing reality.

The sentence describing the balcony as non-romantic in the initial version also appears in an altered form in the finished novel. Located ultimately in the middle of paragraph three, broken into two sentences and extended by a simile to contrast with and reinforce its context — Joan’s fantasy of romantic adventures possible on the right sort of balcony — this thought serves to enhance our sense of the romantic/realistic split in Joan’s mode of perception:

But this wasn’t a very romantic balcony. It had a geometric railing like those on middle-income apartment buildings of the fifties, and the floor was poured concrete, already beginning to erode. (4)

Adding “very” gives a new twist to the disclaimer, since “very” can either function as an intensifier or suggest that romance is possible if not likely here, foreshadowing all the romantic imaginings Joan will associate with this balcony in the ensuing chapters even as it implies that her fantasies are unlikely to be actual. The comparison to fifties apartment buildings heightens our awareness of the non-romantic aspects of this balcony and calls attention to the role of the past in shaping perceptions, reminding us early in the novel that we must be aware of how Joan’s past colours her perception of reality throughout her story. “Middle-income” hints at the role of social class in formulating a view of the world, significant later in understanding Joan’s perceptions of her mother, the Count, and Arthur. The detail of eroding concrete focuses on the reality of the balcony in contrast with the romantic images in the next sentence of a man “playing a lute and yearning” or “bearing a rose in his teeth or a stiletto in his sleeve” (4).

The details about the broken glass and the lizard in the initial version of paragraph one similarly, in being revised and placed in paragraph eight of the final version, undergo a metamorphosis that makes them more than sheer realistic visual details. The initial “area of broken glass” has become “a puddle of glass fragments” that “shimmered like water” (6). The mundane word “puddle” counterpoints the romantically connotative “shimmered,” while both are joined by the “water” comparison. The “iridescent blue eyes” of the lizard becomes more than a visual detail when Atwood sets the animal as Joan’s fellow sunbather (“it warmed its cool blood on the railing”), compelling us to contrast its eyes with Joan’s, which have just been described as crying, turning “the color and shape of cooked tomatoes” (6). Again Atwood’s final version compels consideration of romantic beauty in juxtaposition with unromantic reality.

The artichoke cutter who “glares covertly” at sunbathing Joan in the initial version of paragraph one slices off “the ready heads” of “weeds,” a natural

occupation. His New York accent and the details about his owning and granting the land make him seem ordinary although his eyes, moving “like a snake’s tongue,” seem slightly sinister. His reappearance in paragraph twelve of the finished novel is much more sinister, much more an outgrowth of Joan’s gothic imagination:

There, at the level of my ankles and only three feet away, floated a head, an old man’s head, topped by a ravelling straw hat. The whitish eyes stared at me with either alarm or disapproval. (8)

Unlike the details about land ownership in the initial conception, the details locating him spatially and describing his hat show Joan’s realistic mode of regard, while the floating head counterpoints it with an element from her romantic mode of perception. He is both normal and sinister; the suggestion of alternative interpretations of his stare heightens the dualistic mode of thinking, presaging her innumerable double impressions of men later in the novel.

The conversation with the old man moves us out of Joan’s dualistic mode of perception. In the final version Atwood lets Joan, rather than the old man, speak:

I’d recognized the old man. It was the same old man who used to come one or two afternoons a week to tend the artichokes on the arid terrace below the house, cutting the larger weeds with a pair of rusty shears and snipping off the leathery artichoke heads when they were ready. Unlike the other people in the town, he never said anything to me or returned a word of greeting. He gave me the creeps. (8)

The recognition and use of the words “same” and “used to” emphasize the multiple temporal perspective of Joan’s voice, reminding us to question her perceptions. Once again the gothic vision is added to the final version with the word “creeps” although at the same time, as a slang word, it evokes Joan’s everyday modern world.

WHAT BEGAN, THEN, as a fairly straightforward descriptive paragraph with some local colour became ultimately a series of distinct particles spaced throughout chapter one, metamorphosed and juxtaposed so as to heighten our perception of Joan’s multiple perspective in such a way as to work together with other elements in the novel to keep us asking questions about the relationship of the world we live in and the worlds we imagine.

Atwood’s changing the audience Joan speaks to, introducing the character of Leda Sprott, and reworking the first paragraph of the initial manuscript all have the effect of making us aware of questions about the relationships between art and life, fantasy and reality. The effect is not precisely the blurring of distinctions

between life and art that Godard posits (23), for we are aware that Joan's "real" life is Atwood's fiction.⁹ Nor is the effect of the novel exactly that of what Brown defines as "metafiction — that self-reflexive mode that calls attention to its own fictive nature and thus to its own surfaces" (40), for *Lady Oracle* makes us conscious of fictions, including itself, as modes of perceiving, each having inherent limitations as ways of describing reality. Ultimately the unifying principle of *Lady Oracle* is not "What is fiction?" but "What is reality — and how is it shaped by our fictions?"

NOTES

- ¹ Compare the published version: "The trouble was that I wanted to maintain his illusions for him intact, and it was easy to do, all it needed was a little restraint: I simply never told him anything important" (36-37).
Permission to quote from Atwood's manuscripts has been granted by Phoebe Larmore, agent for Margaret Atwood, 16 December 1985.
- ² Pecker suggests that it is the reporter, not Joan, speaking (194); he apparently hears the typical celebrity autobiography "as told to. . ."
- ³ Rule says *Lady Oracle* examines the "motive and craft of fiction" (49).
- ⁴ Davey notes that although Joan does not escape once again at the end, she may be staying to act out a fantasy from one of Paul's nurse novels (75). Pecker says she multiplies personalities rather than unifying them at the end (177). Godard feels Joan finds herself when she accepts the multiplicity of her being (16, 21). Grace doubts that Joan has progressed at the end (117). Atwood herself says Joan develops "¾ of an inch" (Struthers 25).
- ⁵ As Pecker notes, Atwood's novels parody search for identity novels (192).
- ⁶ Grace says that the novel satirizes both gothic and realist conventions; *Stalked by Love* becomes a parody of Joan's life and Joan's life a parody of the gothic (124-25). Grace's theory that "violent duality" is characteristic of Atwood's work influences my comparison in this paragraph as well as my discussion of details in the opening paragraph of the manuscript later.
- ⁷ Rosenberg notes Atwood "uses patterns of experience closely derived from her own life" but writes neither an autobiography (96) nor a *roman à clef* (111).
- ⁸ Hutcheon describes *Lady Oracle* as a novel
in which the novelist heroine reconciles the process/product or life/art opposition, first by her dual identity as Joan Foster/Delacourt, and then, by increasing merging of her fantasy world and her lived world experience. (21).
The climactic scene, however, in which the mysterious stalker (from *Stalked by Love*) reaches Joan in Terremoto does not indicate art and life merging but their failure to merge. Joan's using the Cinzano bottle against the reporter, while foreshadowed in the scene discussed from *Stalked by Love*, diverges from the typical gothic plot: Charlottes are eternal victims until rescued by a strong male; Joan rescues herself. Pecker's comment offers a more accurate assessment:
The disruption of traditional romance structures provides an implicit comment on the contemporary impossibility of ever finding the final sense of identity and completion or the ultimate vision of happiness which, as Joan well realizes, is usually offered by romance. (201)

⁹ Cude, for example, acknowledges that he hears Atwood speaking as Joan speaks: "Because my narrator cannot get the lesson," Atwood in effect addresses us: 'you, my readers, must' (154).

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