

# THE ROMANCE OF PENELOPE

## *Audrey Thomas's Isobel Carpenter Trilogy*

*Robert Diotte*

**T**HE PROBLEM AND THE DANGER of reading an avowedly autobiographical novelist is the tendency to ignore the art, the transformation process mediating between the life of the writer and what we read, the life in the novels. Perhaps there is an assumption that the text can be best understood by documenting the actual biography and then studying the ways the fictional world differs or conforms. The structural relationships integral to the text may be seen as inherently unimportant in themselves.

Audrey Thomas has repeatedly called herself an autobiographical novelist. Yet the fictional world in her Isobel Carpenter trilogy, *Mrs. Blood*, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, and *Blown Figures*, has more substance to it than the correspondence of the writer's life to the novels would suggest. There is in the narrative progression through the three books a consistency of theme and focus. They tell the story of one woman's attempt to harmonize her dreams and the fascination romance has for her with her actual reality, her life as it has to be lived. We are given a woman character who embodies the romance of adventure but in a context of emotions more familiarly associated with horror than romance.

In the narrative process the trilogy whittles away at contemporary values in the form of the family, love and sexuality, to reveal an emotional and rational vacuum at their core. The values, the thinking, the behaviour of the central character, Isobel Carpenter, a woman whose years span the pre-second world war, war time and post war years continuing into the present, are the focal centre of the fictional world in the books. The meaningful part of the character, though, is her travels because it is her travels which lift her out of the main stream of the fiction of domestic romance and enable Thomas to make other kinds of statements about her romantic heroine.

An examination of the books begins with the strong centre of consciousness or perspective which is characteristic of them. This centre is either Isobel's own voice, the "I" of personal communication and dream-thought intelligence, or the more limited narration used in *Blown Figures* where the narration moves away from the

character infrequently while remaining in the third person. What happens is an erosion of the perimeters; contrary or other points of view simply fade or make their appearance in curt, fragmented tangents to the story. Other characters are reduced to shadows in what becomes a neuro-visceral landscape.

In the character of Isobel Carpenter, Thomas has given us a woman who is both the mother figure (for she has borne children, and the event which brings her into fictional consciousness is a miscarriage) and the wanderer, the questor involved in a journey which carries with it a promise of revelation. Penelope, then, incorporates aspects of Odysseus. She isn't really Odysseus since Isobel Carpenter can't claim directly the kind of involvement with her environment comparable to the warrior-king. She borrows attributes by inference from the heroic tradition and she holds them only in the context of archetypal situations.

But the kinds of technical arrangements Thomas has made deliberately subvert the historical, temporal context of the character. The books are episodic internally. The events, particularly in *Mrs. Blood*, continually move backwards and forwards in time. Hence the dominant structural techniques throughout the trilogy are juxtaposition and discontinuous narrative. The flashback, the dream, the substance of memory predominate in the trilogy, and Thomas' style, allusive and adaptable, tends towards the anecdotal. The character's past thus endures in the form of memory and achieves fantastic proportions from time to time in the mind of the central character. Time, in the trilogy as whole, has neither a narrative nor a logical basis, and the ruling fortune is a fatalism of purpose and event.

Both the character's anecdotal, digressing mind and the types of structural innovations within each of the books operate, moreover, to set up a distance between the reader and the narrative. The mind-talk, the "I" voice, usurps the action. This is particularly true in *Mrs. Blood*. There the Mrs. Blood-Mrs. Thing exchange in the titles draws attention to the psychological split in the character. The distance isolates the character, holding her away from the simple emotions of sympathy or empathy in the reader. In *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*, for instance, the technical innovations are pronounced and foregrounded on the characterization to remove the reader even more from the narrative action. *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is in that sense a very different book with the clean line of its narrative. But even in *Songs* the linear narrative is divided into two parts and shows the interface between the parts. And *Songs* needs *Mrs. Blood* to define the main character.

It is significant that none of the novels is identical in structure, unusual in an autobiographical writer. Important as well is the realization that the books support each other, fill each other out, refer to one another, each one necessary to complete the others. *Mrs. Blood* is a preface to *Blown Figures*; *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is an interlude between the two dramatically more intense books. In fact, only *Mrs. Blood*, the first of the trilogy to be published,<sup>1</sup> is even remotely capable of standing alone.

AS THE MOST SELF-CONTAINED OF THE NOVELS in the trilogy, *Mrs. Blood* is a tragedy and its structure is literary in those terms. While it isn't mechanical in any way, the tragedy is rigorously structured. Isobel's choices are clearly marked: Jason, her domestic harness, a teacher of art and her provider as well as the man who can't supply the depth of emotion she demands now that she is in labour; and Richard, the poet, the dreamer, a man whose possibilities Isobel never came close to although now she recalls him and wants him. The one represents a substantive reality, a husband and father of her children, while the other is the dramatic tension of the dream world, the source of true romance. We have here, then, the circumstances of the popular romance with the love triangle and the emotionally self-indulgent heroine.

But the narrative action already has the character in the flow of events that will make her a tragic figure. Her fatal flaw can be seen as the inability to control her dreams in the face of the reality around her. They eventually possess her. The dream tension of the Mrs. Blood-Mrs. Thing neural dialogue distorts the relationship Isobel has with Jason and mars the role she plays as mother.

Eating, blood, and sacrifice are important motifs in *Mrs. Blood* as they are in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. Eating suggests a kind of misplaced sensuality. The blood, female and sacrificial, the blood of the woman having problems with her pregnancy, is associated with the blood of the Christ on the cross through direct reference to Christianity. It is used in some richly exotic imagery involving flowers and cloth. The visual power in the colours which link disparate objects projects the beauty of the grotesque.

The book is set in Africa. What the African landscape contributes is its colours, its heat, feverish to the character who is having problems with her labour, and its cultural exaggerations to the western mind, exaggerations which simultaneously baffle and haunt the character's socialization. The landscape has its peculiar array of characters. The nurses who giggle among themselves and gossip in their own language, shutting out the curious Mrs. Blood, the man-servant Joseph (Isobel wondering if he has killed the family cat to serve it to them), the doctors with their eccentricities: these characters with their skin colour differences and their cultural differences parade in front of Mrs. Blood with the sense of her strangeness obvious in their manner.

The other whites, especially the wives of the other teachers living in the compound, alternately repulse and attract Isobel with her wonderful sense of propriety operating out of the physically defined apartness of her pregnancy. She doesn't want to be an object of their pity. She worries what the other women might be saying about her: if her children are properly dressed for school, for instance. She fantasizes the other women tending her grave, setting up committees and having Isobel become an object of ritualized devotion passed on from hand to hand until

the people looking after her grave no longer even know anything about her. The mind talk, never shut off, characterizes the inactivity of the patient and marks a degree of self-indulgence as unhealthy to the mind as her physical state is to the baby she carries.

Africa, then, a locale Isobel experiences as an exaggeration in terms of the physical environment, the heat and the colours, as well as the behaviour of the people living there, is the background for the kind of mental exaggerations of relationships and emotions that she herself creates. At times turning things grotesque, at times making rationalized trains of thought with a missing premise, her mind isolates Mrs. Blood-Mrs. Thing and creates a "wonderland" composed of memories and the extravagance around her.

The Isobel character comes to stand for self-indulgence, emotionally and physically: the romance of the ego feeding on itself. Sexually concupiscent, she wonders what has happened to the early relationship she had with Jason. She tries to talk about her emotions and tries to explain what happens to passions in a marriage. She relives relationships, always in triangles. The love Isobel has for Jason is frustrated early when they live with Jason's mother. Jason and Richard are two points in the triangle upsetting Isobel. And Thomas has set up a family of three children, a boy and a girl and an unborn third.

Sexuality, a physical dimension which defines being in relation to another being, has associations of interpersonal intimacies, the kind of basic frankness Isobel is looking for. It is her metaphor for the essential innocence in human behaviour. The child she carries was created out of such an innocence as was her love for Richard. Ironically, it was this same Richard, the hero in her romance, who questioned her own sexual innocence when he told her "lots of women wouldn't do what you did. You're very shy about everything but sex."

When we come to look at the nature of the tragedy in *Mrs. Blood*, then, we must consider the dynamics of sexuality and the changes to Isobel's own sexuality in the interval. Lying next to Jason she wants him but feels guilty because she is pregnant. Sexuality has become associated with guilt feelings in her mind. She remembers earlier relationships. But they are clouded with sentiment.

We can't say that the tragedy in the book is the miscarriage, although the sadness and the sympathy belonging to that event climax the novel. The tragic moment occurs after the miscarriage, with Isobel, high on medication, calling out for Richard and then asking Jason's forgiveness. The intense emotionalism of the character, her capacity to conjure up and project romantic involvements, has taken over the character. The medication she is under is the metaphor for the pathetic rationality which has lost the decisiveness in action.

With *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, Thomas retreats from the form of the tragic, even from the implications of Isobel's tragedy, to examine Isobel Carpenter growing up in New York state. The form is the Bildungsroman. Thomas has

nothing new to offer the form in this particular work. *Songs* has the quality of being a narrative bridge between *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*. *Songs* is the Bildungsroman that Isobel Carpenter, the aspiring writer, would want to write.

But Isobel wouldn't divide her novel into two parts, "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," a direct association with Blakean romanticism. The child forced to come to terms with the adult world of contradiction and repressed anxieties has Blakean overtones. As does the sexuality which was so strong a motif in *Mrs. Blood* and which emerges in the second part of *Songs* in two forms: one perverse, the incident in the asylum with the nurse bringing one of the female patients to orgasm manually; the second, lyric and ribald, occurring when Isobel has her first sexual experience with one of the male nurses. Nor would Isobel likely have the self-distance to include the passage from the Alice-in-Wonderland story as a postscript. The Alice story, the fairytale link to sophisticated innocence cloaked in sexual innuendo and rationalized violence, chews on the limbs of emotionalism in Isobel's "wonderland" where she is trying to rationalize the violence and the sensuality around her.

The characters in *Songs* behave in ways that suggest a kind of madness or disorder in their emotions. There is the mother with her rages inspired by trivial incidents, and the father, member of the Masonic league, a teacher, who sleeps in the back bedroom, an enigmatic person sexually to Isobel. The sexless dog is the symbol of atrophic sexuality between the mother and father.

Isobel, herself, is continually spurned by her classmates for reasons we are never told. She is embarrassed by her mother's intervention in her social life and attentive to the family's money instabilities. Eating is a clan fetish, a celebration of self-indulgence, misplaced sensuality and a reminder of the simple lack of communion in the family. Quarrels are expiated with offerings of food. Both mother and father cook. Food is the foundation of the domestic and social interaction for the individuals in the family setting. It is a symbol of their apartness.

Against the domestic characters, Thomas juxtaposes the mad figures of the asylum where Isobel goes to work: characters such as Eleanor La Duce, Beatrice, the male nurses, and Mrs. Reynolds. Isobel feeds the patients. Beatrice, the mad girl who could have been "seventeen or thirty," eats the roses Isobel brings her from the family garden as a gesture of "unselfish love" and an attempt to leap the inestimable distance between herself and the girl.

The sanity-madness juxtaposition isn't laboured. We have the domestic eccentricities of the family environment and the behavioural exaggerations of the mad people and their keepers in the asylum. One is as real fictionally as the other. Insanity is pictured as the state of ultimate isolation, the metaphor being the compartmentalization in the wards and the system of keys which is a vital part of the asylum structure.

Beatrice, the mad woman of no determined age, is not only incapable of com-

munication with Isobel, she is also hostile to the overtures Isobel makes. Isobel's parents, whatever their psychological quirks, at least haven't reached that level of impossibility. Yet the issue isn't that the parents aren't mad and Beatrice is. Thomas suggests that the parents are merely less mad than Beatrice.

What is missing in the book, absent by reason of an incompleteness, is a fixed centre of some health, the boundary between sanity and insanity. Isobel as a character is simply not capable of giving us the norm or locus to measure the rest of the character's and the writer's intention. Intention, then, is what is lacking.

Presumably the grandfather, Harry Goodenough, was meant to carry the writer's intentions. Extroverted, healthy, and vigorous, he has a catalogue of housekeepers to account for his sexuality. The father, obese, eats more than Harry even though Harry has more physical dynamism. With his sense of humour, his virile and fatherly affection for the two girls, "his girls," Isobel and her sister, his manual competence with the real world, his implied sexuality, Harry is the burgeoning father archetype.

But Isobel's mother sees his sexual behaviour as wrong. And, in the end, Isobel dismisses him when he sells his cottage, leaving him a much reduced figure in the shadow world of the book. He is simply not around in the climax to carry the values he might have embodied.

Moreover, *Songs*, for all its interest as a character study of Isobel as a girl, lacks any dramatic frame. The novel relies on the trilogy to fill it out. Thomas has sketched a character whose centre of balance is lodged deeply in a family she resents despite the fact she has internalized its values, thinking, and way of life. The asylum confuses the character's own grasp of reality. It is significant that she has her first sexual experience with John, one of the male nurses at the asylum.

*Songs* leaves us with the excerpt from the Alice story which synthesizes the Alice parallels and that sense of "wonderland" which Thomas has woven into the trilogy through the child-naive Isobel Carpenter.

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

The Alice-figure is the archetypal child-adult faced with contradictions and spurious choices, expressed here in a false premise; if you are here, you are already mad. Alice is an extension of a romantic possibility: to step through the looking glass and live inside the world of dreams, a world always tensed against the one that must be lived in its place. Isobel's relationship to Alice is one of emotional kinship.

In *Mrs. Blood* Isobel emanated in her behaviour and her thinking a good sense comparable to Alice's. As mother she satisfied our expectations of what a mother

should be and think. She worried about her children. She worried what the other women in the compound were thinking about her. She was concerned with her public image. These things, a part of her socialization, were important to her, culturally determined and fuel for her mind. In the end it is this good sense and education which makes her mad in the colourful wonderland of sensuality and violence she has created inside the socially conditioned rationality of her upbringing.

**I**N *Blown Figures* THAT RATIONALITY, which we as readers share, disintegrates in the person who embodies it: Isobel Carpenter. She isn't the carrier of meaning and value we were looking for. She has been an unreliable narrator. In fact, she isn't even allowed to narrate the final chapter in the trilogy.

The book is technically the most ambitious of the trilogy. The devices that Thomas experimented with in *Mrs. Blood* and to a lesser extent in *Songs* — things like parodies of newspaper articles, a Dear Dolly column, cartoons, dramatic fragments — assume a major role in *Blown Figures*. They operate thematically to enhance Isobel's journey into Africa and provide a multiplicity of points of view behind the character.

We have as well the voice of an "I" character taunting or berating Miss Miller from time to time.<sup>2</sup> The character may or may not be the narrator. The "I" seems to have a deeper relationship to the story than the surface connections suggest. But, in the end, the "I" voice becomes merely another unreliable voice in the novel.

The novel centres on the character's ultimate journey. Isobel is returning to Africa, the scene of her miscarriage. Harry Goodenough has died and the money she inherited from him is the means for her to go back. At stake is the character's obsession to return to the place where the circumstances of her life began to weigh her down. There are overtones of guilt over the child she has lost.

There is also the ominous note sounded by Jason when he said: "Isobel doesn't live . . . she exits." The pun is on *exists*. The phrase echoes throughout the journey. Isobel has left her children and her husband, abandoned her family, to travel by herself. Penelope, in a sense, has given up her archetypal role. She is travelling instead of remaining at home. While the form remains constant, a narrative involving the quest-agent and a journey into meaning, the archetype presents new associations.

Sexuality is introduced into the journey in the form of a Dutch boy and later a Delilah character. The Dutch boy, physically "sin," because he lisps the *th*-sound, naive, a boy-lover for Isobel, is a vehicle to heighten her own sensual awareness. His plans for making his fortune suggest a misguided spirit in terms of the

archetypal adventurer. He recedes in Isobel's consciousness after she leaves the boat until the sexual intimacy becomes a kind of onanistic reverie.

Delilah, the woman Isobel meets in Africa and travels with there, is the tail side of the coin. Unlike Isobel, Delilah will bed any man she fancies. Isobel rejects the advances of the African man who has helped her out of a money problem on the train. Delilah is trying to abort a pregnancy; Isobel has returned to Africa to do something about the guilt she has over a pregnancy that aborted itself.

The antithetical elements aren't life and death. They are life and life. Thomas gives us nothing to choose between Delilah's attitude to life and Isobel's. In fact, in the background to the basic conflict in attitudes between Isobel and Delilah is the slow moving, infinitely patient way of life of the Africans. Isobel helps Delilah when the conflict between them climaxes. And, finally, it is Isobel who undergoes the primitive ceremony of expiation in a manner that reveals some planning and some awareness of what is going on.

We have a situation very much similar to the one in *Songs*. There is no single voice or character to establish a stable centre from which the behaviour of the characters can be judged. Thomas is actively erasing the boundaries between health and sickness, sanity and insanity. But she is erasing them without giving us any indication why.

*Blown Figures* doesn't measure up to the epic vastness it promises in the first few pages. It misses the mark in several ways. The actual story is short to begin with. Inflating the text with the number of inserted pieces and self-contained pieces that Thomas has used is entertaining and thematically appropriate, but these pieces don't fill out the story at all in terms of the basic relationships between the characters. Moreover, they don't carry any of the values necessary to weigh the antitheses.

The problem is one of scope. The epic conventions set up in the early pages are satisfied only in the context of the rest of the trilogy. The narrative action is over too quickly. The climax is too brief. These things add up to a basic incompleteness in the book's conceptual realization.

Yet, as the ending for the trilogy, the novel does bring a conclusion to the story. It climaxes the consciousness that was working in the first two books. This isn't class consciousness in the strictest sense. What it is is a consciousness of a particular class characterized in the figure of Isobel Carpenter, who carries its values of individual consciousness alive in the social context, working out its own problems and basically capable of creating viable solutions.

A housewife who exemplifies the thinking and behaviour patterns of middle-class consciousness, the character finishes the saga of her romance with Africa in a ceremony surrounded with superstition and rites of belief rejected by the class she represents. There is a terror crystallized in the action. The events are charged with a horror because they are related to the negation of individual consciousness



and the freedom of that consciousness. The events are terrible in that they can come true. The ceremony Isobel undergoes to get rid of her guilt anxieties reminds us that we still have a capacity for participation in primitive rites.

Isobel Carpenter has travelled away from the sources of the class consciousness she embodies. She has left the family group; she is a woman travelling alone. She is calling on her resources as an individual and her capacity for decisiveness in action. These are admirable qualities to the culture she represents. She makes her way to Africa and there she gives herself up to the village priests and their rites.

The ending has to be a shock to the reader. Thomas has scraped away the key values of individual consciousness and responsibility of action. She hasn't substituted any values of her own. There is a slight admiration for the patience of the African. But the writer doesn't make much of this point. The shock derives its relevance from its roots in the emotional soil of terror. It becomes a qualified threat to consciousness, qualified by the context of the trilogy and the character of the heroine.

The terror has to be incorporated in the awareness of the reader. We are made aware of the irrational and the primitive as living elements in the minds of contemporary man. But something more important emerges in the overview. The romance of Penelope is a romance of the mind. It doesn't have its roots in action. It is a saga of personal emotions confronted by a reality of insensitive actions. In this context, value simply doesn't exist as an objective entity.

Showing an awareness of archetypal forms and the tradition of these forms, Thomas has given us a trilogy with a relatively unique strategy. The inter-dependence of the three novels ultimately defines a new approach to the epic with a heroine who neither has the stature of an epic hero nor participates in events that are commonly associated with epic consciousness.

Nonetheless, Isobel Carpenter's story becomes epic in proportion. The conventions are all there. It goes without saying that biography has only secondary interest in terms of the work Thomas has given us. The trilogy's relevance lies in its archetypal examination of the author's culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a conversation I had with her, Thomas said she had actually written *Songs My Mother Taught Me* prior to *Mrs. Blood*. *Songs* was later rewritten. The scenes in the asylum date from the rewrite.

<sup>2</sup> According to Thomas, the key to the identity of Miss Miller is in the work of C. G. Jung.