"ONLY THE VAGUE OUTLINE OF MY ORIGINAL SHAPE REMAINS":

THE MISCARRIAGE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

IN THE NOVELS OF AUDREY THOMAS

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Abstract

This thesis contends that there has often been a critical tendency to understate the challenges to the genre of autobiography that occur in Audrey Thomas's three novels: Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Blood, and Blown Figures. Chapter one qualifies autobiography in terms of its reliance on the liberal humanist subject as both author and protagonist. In the context of poststructuralist criticism, the author cannot be the unified, unique, original locus of truth that the liberal humanist subject is posited to be. Thus, as the subject collapses the foundation of autobiography collapses. Chapter two is a detailed analysis illustrating that the three novels stylistically and thematically deny the existence of the liberal humanist subject, thereby exemplifying the poststructuralist challenge to autobiography. The Canadian canon's reliance on mimetic literature--of which pure autobiography would be the prime example--is offered as an explanation for critics' understatement of the texts' denial.

Resume

L'objet de cette thèse est de montrer qu'il y a souvent eu une tendance à sous-estimer les difficultés du genre autobiographique tel qu'on le rencontre dans les trois romans de Audrey Thomas: *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, *Mrs Blood*, and *Blown Figures*. Le Chapitre Premier définit l'autobiographie en rapport avec le sujet libéral humaniste à la fois auteur et protagoniste. Dans le contexte de la critique post-structuraliste, l'auteur ne peut pas être l'entière, l'unique, le seule source de vérité que le sujet libéral humaniste est sensé être. Ainsi quand le sujet disparaît, la raison de l'autobiographie disparaît. Le Chapitre Deux est une analyse détaillée démontrant que les trois nouvelles nient stylistiquement et thématiquement l'existence du sujet libéral humaniste, illustrant ainsi les difficultés du post-structuralisme dans le genre autobiographique. La dépendance de la litterature canadienne envers le genre réaliste--dont l'autobiographie dans son sens le plus pure est l'exemple type--est proposé comme une explication au fait que les critiques sous-estiment la négation du genre autobiographique présente dans ces nouvelles.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

The French Challenge

to Author(ity), Subject, and Autobiography

"Now Audrey Thomas writes of and as herself, without apology or artifice," writes A.F. Bellette (65). Anne Archer claims that "the marked similarities among her female protagonists . . . as well as the clearly autobiographical elements suggest that Thomas'[sic] one story concerns the growth of the author herself" (215); and Eleanor Wachtel asserts of Thomas: "While receptive and interested in people, she's conscious of being vulnerable to trespass and thus self-protective. . . . Underlying reserve is a natural quality in the autobiographical writer" (3). In "Thomas and Her Rag-Bag," Pauline Butling speaks of a shift in content to an autobiographical base" (195); in "Portraits of the Artist: Three Novels by Audrey Thomas," Anthony Boxill tells us that two of her novels "have introduced us to an aspect of Audrey Thomas'[sic] personality" (116); and John Hofsess tells us assertively that: "For Thomas, there is no sharp division between her work and her life; indeed, she would find such a dichotomy psychologically suspect, if not logically absurd. Her work is the result of how she has lived, and in turn it directs us back to the living, not to some literary lotus land" (14). The focus of these examples is obvious: many critics, for one reason or another, consider, or claim to consider, Audrey Thomas to be an autobiographical writer. But why?

Audrey Thomas herself has admitted to writing autobiographically. In this interview with George Bowering, "Songs and Wisdom," the following exchange occurs:

> GB: Another thing I like about your work is that I get a strong sense that they are really, really autobiographical. Even if I didn't know you I would . . ..
>
> AT: Oh, yeah, well, I really don't know anyone as well as I know myself. I find it very presumptuous to write about other people. (14)

It is clear to anyone who has read the novels of Audrey Thomas and is familiar with the biography of the person labelled with the proper name Audrey Thomas, that there are correspondences, simple parallels of generic events--such as marriage, motherhood, lost love, miscarriage, travel, island living, to name a few--between the "lives" of Thomas's narrators and that of Audrey Thomas. These similarities, however, are not sufficient reason to label Thomas's novels autobiographical, since it seems there is some transformation that occurs in the translation of "life" to text, a fact that will be made evident in future discussions. Thomas, somewhat contradictorily, suggests in the same interview that life becomes fictionalized, reconstructed, distorted in its translation to text; this suggestion occurs immediately after the passage quoted above:

> GB: You really use people that you know, though. I have the advantage of knowing who some of the people are.
>
> AT: I'll tell you something George. All those people are still my friends, so there must be some sense that I use them not in some Machiavellian way. They always say that they like what I've written.

> And not one of the people from real life that I've actually used in a story or a novel has ceased to be my friend. (14)

The same life distorting process, of course, would apply not only to her subjects, but to Audrey Thomas herself were she to be, as many critics claim, represented in the novels.

But who is Audrey Thomas? According to Michael Sprinkler, this type of question "conceals an intricate web of related problems about the concept of the author (and of authority itself), about the ways in which texts are constituted, and about notions of consciousness, of self, of personality, and of individuality as categories applicable to authors of texts" (322). Distinct personal identity has become, in modern culture, "a sign, a cipher, an image no longer clearly and positively identifiable as 'this one person'" (Sprinkler, 322). "Poststructuralism has challenged the notion of authors as autonomous beings who produce texts," we are told by G. Thomas Couser in his introduction to Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography (VIII). Given this perspective, and recalling the distortion inherent in the translation of life to text suggested by Thomas, we must recognize that "autobiography," or even the accurate labelling of a novelist as "autobiographical," is a problematic endeavour.

Although it is not in this sense that the critics use the description, at the fictional level Thomas's **narrators are writing autobiographically**. This permits the texts to be more than simple reporting of a fictional life: James Olney writes that "autobiography is a self-reflexive, a self-critical act, and consequently the criticism of autobiography exists **within** the literature" (25). I intend to argue that this is true of Thomas's texts of autobiographical fiction, for they are texts about texts--texts about writing, texts about themselves, texts about the notion of subject: self-critical and

"self" critical--"permeated by the problems inherent in the concepts of author and self" (Sprinkler 326). Thomas's texts argue against autobiographical interpretation by promoting and exemplifying the idea that autobiography is fiction: as the narrator of Mrs Blood says, once captured from memory by language "only the vague outline of my original shape remains" (148). To borrow a term from Wolfgang Iser, Thomas's texts "intend" that the notions of author(ity), subject, and autobiography be denied: these texts "obliterate the authority of the subject by exposing it as a deception" (Sprinkler 334).

It is in the context of this poststructuralist critique of author, subject, and autobiography that I will attempt to discover what is meant when a text is called "autobiographical." What assumptions underlie definitions and interpretations of self (autos)' of life (bios)? What significance is imparted to the act of writing? "What is the significance and effect of transforming life, or a life, into a text?" (Olney 6). By illustrating how Thomas's texts (specifically, Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Blood, and Blown Figures) assert, problematize, but ultimately deny, both stylistically and thematically, the authority of the subject I hope to show that Thomas's meta-theme is that an autobiography defined in terms of a liberal human notion of subject is not possible.[1] I hope to do this because: "A reader who at first mistakes fiction for autobiography, or vice versa, feels cheated. One wants to know whether the book is one or the other: it makes a difference in how the book is to be read and in the type of pleasure the reader receives" (Mandel 53).

Before proceeding to a detailed illustration of the **texts'** denial of valid autobiographical interpretation, it seems necessary to explain in greater depth the **poststructuralist challenge** to autobiography. This explanation is best preceded by an

historical examination, along the lines of that performed by Donald E. Pease, of the enigmatic notion of "author." This process is meant to arrive at some justifiable assumptions about autobiography, ultimately, that it relies on a liberal human notion of subject.

The term "author," Pease informs us, is a derivative of the word "aucteur," derived in turn from the Latin verbs for to act or perform, to tie, and to grow, and from the Greek noun for authority. "Aucteur" is a medieval term "which denoted a writer whose words commanded respect and belief" (Pease 106). Initially, the aucteurs achieved authority by having "established the founding rules and principles" of the various disciplines with which they came to be associated: Aristotle in dialectic, Ptolemy in astronomy, and Constantine in medicine, serve as examples (106). The monarch of their culture correlated his actions, sanctioned by divine right, with the precedents created by the aucteurs, thus, promoting the aucteurs' works as divinely inspired. Pease writes:

> Over the centuries the continued authority of these founding figures derived from medieval scribes' ability to interpret, explain, and in most cases resolve historical problems by restating these problems in terms sanctioned by aucteurs. Such restatements commanded authority because they organized otherwise accidental events into an established context capable of making them meaningful. (106)

The relationship between the "established context" and events in a person's everyday life was an allegorical one. The interpretation made the event impersonal, solidifying it only in the realm of the established authority of the aucteur, illuminating it in the light of sacred custom, not individual biography.

The discovery of the New World, inhabited by unfamiliar peoples in an unfamiliar environment, challenged the authority of the auctеurs and their sanctioned works. Because of the discovery of things in the New World that could not be explained by appeal to the auctеurs' established allegorical codes, explorers described the discoveries in their own terms, creating new words or appropriating those of the New World cultures. This situation created "new cultural agents . . . 'authors,' writers whose claim to cultural authority did not depend on their adherence to cultural precedents but on a faculty of verbal inventiveness" (Pease 107). The "dissociation between worlds" highlighted "the inadequacy of allegory as the source of cultural knowledge," and the authors were free to claim originality and authority for themselves (107).

An effect of the emergence of the author was the parallel emergence of "the autonomous subject." Pease writes that, "Unlike the medieval auctеur who based his authority on divine revelation, an author himself claimed authority for his words and based his individuality on the stories he composed" (107). Having delegitimized the auctеurs' depersonalizing allegorical context, the author asserted his individuality and autonomy:

> Whereas medieval allegory subsumed a culture's persons and their actions--no matter how various or qualified--within its unchanging typologies, what was new asserted its difference from, rather than its correspondence with, these cultural typologies. By inventing new words to describe things in the New World, authors declared their right to be represented on their own terms rather than in the words of the

> ancient books. And their writings produced readers who also learned how to define themselves in their own terms. (Pease 107-8)

As the New World explorers encountered alien phenomena, they recognized "their own capacity to be other" (109). Within a political context, the authors' newly asserted autonomy suggested the possibility of reform: his readers, sharing his political context, experienced recognition of the possibility for autonomy in their own lives. Georges Gusdorf tells us that:

> This conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythm everywhere in the community . . . with its climactic moments originally fixed by the gods being repeated from age to age. (29-30)

Author-subjects helped humanity emerge "from the mythic framework of traditional teachings" and forced it into "the perilous domain of history" (Gusdorf 30). Aware that "the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future," a person " . . . has become more aware of differences than of similarities; given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events and of men, he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in the world" (Gusdorf 30).

Throughout the mutual perpetuation of the author-subject/political subject we see the prominence of several characteristics. There is a stress placed on such traits as originality or inventiveness, individuality and uniqueness, autonomy or self-

determination, and especially authority--the author/subject is considered the "locus of genuine truth" at this point (Barthes, "Work"78). These traits point to what has come to be known as the liberal humanist subject, of which the "author" is considered the literary example.

It is useful to compile, at this point, a description of "the liberal humanist subject," and quite simple to see that the auteur-to-author figure (pre-French Challenge) is considered such a subject. Linda Hutcheon, in The Canadian Postmodern uses another critic's definition of liberalism, claiming:

> Dennis Lee has succinctly defined liberalism as teaching that 'men inhabit an objective and value-free universe, which we know and refashion through calculating reason. The cosmos consists of objective phenomena, together with the perceiving objects who discover the laws of their regularities' (Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology [Toronto: Anansi, 1977], p. 50). (XII)

And Chris Weedon describes discourses, which

> presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she is. The nature of this essence varies between different forms of humanist discourse. It may be the unified national consciousness of liberal political philosophy, the essence of womanhood at the heart of much radical feminist discourse or the true human nature, alienated by capitalism, which is the focus of humanist Marxism. (32-3)

Weedon also explains that "the humanist tradition suggests that modes of scientific thinking common to different individuals, or the artistic perception which is

the special gift of the few, give access to the **true** reality" (8). Hutcheon's description of "those humanist 'universal' notions of originality and uniqueness" (120), and the "unexamined humanist notions such as centred identity, coherent subjectivity, and aesthetic originality" (161-2), adds reinforcement to our picture of the (pre-French Challenge) author as a liberal humanist subject, the belief in which, we shall see, Audrey Thomas thoroughly undermines along the lines of French theory. Now that we have established that the author is assumed to be a liberal humanist subject, I shall demonstrate that this type of author is absolutely required for autobiography.

To proceed with greater clarity, however, we must tangle with the definition of autobiography, an imbroglio with no single, simple resolution. James Olney claims that "This is one of the paradoxes of [autobiography]: everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they are, are in agreement" (Moment, 7). "Autobiography, like the life it mirrors," says Olney, "refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts: it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other" (24-5). That "[c]ritics of autobiography still preside over an unfederated domain" (Howarth 84) is further supported by Jean Starobinski's claim that, "it is essential to avoid speaking of an autobiographical 'style' or even an autobiographical 'form,' because there is no such generic style or form" (73). Because of the generic turmoil, each critic "feels compelled to begin with a new definition of the genre"(Howarth 84).[2] Some of these definitions include Howarth's "an autobiography is a **self-portrait**" (85), "[a] biography of a person written by himself" (Starobinski 73), and one from Philippe Lejeune's le pacte autobiographique as quoted by James Olney: "'A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing

his individual life and especially the history of his personality'" (18). Although these "definitions" may be functional within the context of each critic's particular essay, they are far from definitive. Even Lejeune's definition, Olney explains, is complicated by "the intelligent point that one should not think of a specific genre as an isolated or an isolable thing but should think in terms of an organic system of genres within which transformations and interpenetrations are forever occurring" (18).

This "interpenetration of genres" is a matter of great confusion within the attempt to limit what exactly is "autobiographical." Starobinski claims that the general conditions of autobiographical writing "ensure that the identity of the narrator and the hero of the narration [presumably one and the same] will be revealed in the work" (73). What ensures great confusion and debate is the manner in which the hero/narrator's identity is revealed. Is it through verifiable content? lies? omission? style? form? theme? images? or any other possible indicator? We cannot help noticing that these indicators occur in part in every text, regardless of if it says "non-fiction" or "autobiography" or what have you, on the spine.

Jean Starobinski, for instance, argues that the style of a work is that which reveals the author/narrator/hero's identity, even while complicating the "truth" of the history being related:

> Style is currently associated with the act of writing. It is seen as resulting from the margin of liberty offered to the "author" after he has satisfied the requirements of language and literary convention and of the use he has put them to. The self-referential value of the style thus refers back to the moment of writing, to the contemporary "me." But this contemporary self-reference may appear as an obstacle to the accurate

> grasp and transcription of past events. . . . No matter how doubtful the facts related, the text will at least present an "authentic" image of the man "who held the pen." (74-5)

If style provides "an 'authentic' image of the man 'who held the pen,'" then, it could be argued, all writing provides an image of its author. All writing, regardless of its contents or claims, tells us of its author: if this were true, then all writing by definition would be autobiographical

James Olney helps explain this extreme, although seemingly sound, position. As Olney explains it, the negative side of the position supports what I will argue later, that autobiography does not exist, as it is classically understood, as a form unto itself Furthermore, if one takes the positive side of this position, claiming that, in fact, it is fine and true that all writing is autobiographical, one still must contend with the challenges that I will soon present to the genre, be it a sub-set or the only set. Olney writes

> [I]f autobiography fails to entice the critic into the folly [in his opinion] of doubting or denying its very existence, then there arises the opposite temptation (or perhaps it is the same temptation in a different guise) to argue not only that autobiography exists but that it **alone** exists--that all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else. (4)

The clause, "that aspires to be literature," attempts to limit the extremity of Olney's statement; however, he essentially limits the clause's effect when discussing a statement by Nietzsche. Nietzsche wrote, in Beyond Good and Evil, "'Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its

maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography'" (Olney 4-5). Olney expands this statement, asserting that:

> [M]uch the same could be claimed--indeed has been claimed-about psychology and history, lyric poetry and even literary critics. . . . Where does this leave us? It leaves us at least with the perception that what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another. (5)

So it is clear that at best only a very hazy, potentially self-annihilating definition can be found for autobiography. In the following chapters I will be attempting to illustrate that Audrey Thomas's novels overwhelmingly do not meet, indeed challenge the possible existence of, even a conglomeration of the most stable aspects of definitions of autobiography. While what autobiography is is an unanswerable question, an undeniable fact is that it absolutely requires belief in the liberal humanist notion of the author/subject.

We find evidence in the works of autobiography theorists and critics of the qualities of the liberal humanist author/subject when they describe the duties and expectations assigned to the autobiographer. Special emphasis seems to be given to the notions of originality and uniqueness of a unified self who is capable of knowing and expressing the authoritative truth about himself or herself and the world in which he or she lives. It is only with this notion in mind that a reader can believe he or she might learn from the (once) living writer, about a real person's real knowledge of the real truth. Roland Barthes explains that "[T]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the **author**

'confiding' in us" ("Death," 143). Supposedly, to understand the disguised truth in a text one must understand the writer as a person. In the case of autobiography, the need for understanding the writer seems one and the same with understanding the text, for autobiography is supposedly the undisguised truth about the writer, given by a single, first-hand, and therefore authoritative, point of view. Thomas Couser, in the introduction to Altered Egos, explains the essence of autobiography as the pure expression of individuality:

> In English the pronoun that signifies the self is triply singular: in number, in capitalization, and in being the sole single-letter pronoun. Typographically identical with the Roman numeral I and phonemically with the word eye, it puns on the notion of a single point of view. These fortuitous features of our linguistic system reinforce our sense of the privileged status of the self, and the language seems to encourage us to conceive of the first person as unique, integral, and independent--like the pronoun that represents it. Autobiography is the literary form, and democracy the political form, most congruent with this idea of a unique and autonomous self. (13)

Autobiography arose, arguably, as a result of the emergence of the notions of author and subject. Paul John Eakin, for instance, interprets Karl Weintraub as arguing that "the emergence of autobiography towards the end of the eighteenth century is directly the function of the rise of a new mode of self-conception as unique and unrepeatable individuality" (34). Eakin himself, while arguing that structure is more significant to autobiography than content or style, bases the significance of these factors on their ability to express "individual uniqueness" (33). Jean Starobinski also

asserts that "style is the act of an individual" (73) and that this style expresses the true representation of the autobiographer. Thomas Couser explains that autobiography's "authority has traditionally been grounded in a verifiable relationship between a text and an extratextual referent (the writer's self, or life)" (VII). Autobiography might even be considered "the extreme case of authorized biography: the self-biographer has unique access to, and knowledge of, the book's subject" (Couser 21). According to Couser, academic criticism of autobiography has (at least) two assumptions (which I will expand below):

> The first of these assumptions is that autobiography is nonfictional, since it records the experience of a historical person, not an invented "character." The second assumption is that the author is present in the text, that a pre-existent unique personality can be conveyed through--or despite--literary mediation. (15)

With this conclusive statement we are assured that autobiography requires the liberal humanist subject (and equivalent author figure) and we are directed towards exploring the significance of autobiographical practice.

Autobiography is thought to embody self-hood (Couser 14). The belief that "autobiography directly delivers its author's self" is one of the assumptions held by readers and critics alike:

> [A]utobiography is presented as a medium through which readers can make contact with, and internalize the values of [its author]. . . . [A]utobiography directly delivers the author's self. . . . [A]utobiography [is considered] as an especially, even essentially, authoritative kind of writing--if not because it is written from a privileged standpoint (the

> author is identical with his subject), then because it is historical and thus can offer **practical** lessons or models. (Couser 14-5)

Autobiography's "grounding in a verifiable relationship between the text and an extratextual referent" (Couser 15) gives autobiography "authority" beyond that of most literary forms. Autobiography makes "empirically verifiable assumptions that have, or claim to have, the authority of truth" (Couser 15).

As we have seen, autobiography as a genre represents the rise of an era of individual autonomy. Furthermore, autobiography in specific occurrences represents its author's theme and "truth" (as discussed above), but also it presents its author's contemporary context: "[H]is theme is personal but also representative of an era" (Howarth 87). James Olney discusses Georges Gusdorf's prior influence, Wilhelm Dilthey, "in whose historiography and hermeneutics (or in what he called, more generally, the "human studies") autobiography occupied a central place as the key to understanding the curve of history, every sort of cultural manifestation, and the very shape and essence of human culture itself" (8). By some accounts, specific occurrences of autobiography can represent an entire culture:

> [A]utobiography--the story of a distinctive culture written in individual characters and from within--offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer. . . . [T]his special quality of autobiography--that is, that autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and vision of a people, which is the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people--is one of the reasons why autobiography has

> lately become such a popular, even fashionable, study in the academic world. . . . (Olney 13)

So we arrive at autobiography's significance: its **true** presentation of reality, of personal experience, allows the reader or critic to appropriate the authority of that experience, to use the presented "truths" to support their own agendas.

It is now important to explore the challenges to autobiography as raised by such French theorists and critics as Roland Barthes, Jaques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. These challenges, which are obvious in the novels of Audrey Thomas, focus primarily on problems inherent to the liberal humanist notion of the subject. For our purposes here, these closely related challenges can be grouped into two categories: the critique of unified self, and the critique of expression of self (or of "truth" for that matter). Combined, these challenges expose the fraud of the "extratextual referent" that is the source of autobiography's authority.

Elizabeth Bruss summarizes the attributes of this extratextual reference in autobiography as follows:

> The author claims individual responsibility for the creation and arrangement of his text. . . The individual who is exemplified in the organization of the text is purported to share the identity of an individual to whom reference is made via the subject matter of the text. . . The existence of this individual, independent of the text itself, is assumed to be susceptible to appropriate public verification procedures. [A] claim is made for the truth value of what the autobiography reports--no matter how difficult that truth value might be to ascertain,

> whether the report treats of private experiences or publicly observable occasions. (Bruss 10-11)

Presumably, it is this understanding of autobiography against which Couser finds himself turning when he writes in his Preface:

> [M]y understanding of autobiography . . . and of the relation between selves, events, and texts has changed substantially in response to structuralist and poststructuralist theory. The new theory has particularly unsettling implications for autobiography, whose authority has traditionally been grounded in a verifiable relationship between a text and an extratextual referent (the writer's self, or life). The trend in recent criticism has been to undermine the apparent correspondence between the textual and the extratextual and to deny any hard distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Poststructuralism has challenged the notion of authors as autonomous beings who produce texts; instead it suggests that the idea of a unique self may be a delusion, that "individuals" are perhaps nothing more than intersections of cultural codes and sign systems. Authors and their authority are mere language effects. (VII)

Essentially, autobiography is "bound up with the values of validity, authority, and authenticity" (Couser 22) and assumes the autonomy of the self; essentially, poststructuralism attacks the self: first by denying the possibility of having and/or knowing one's unified self, and secondly, in a closely related challenge, by denying any ability to express the self, to make it present through writing.

The critique of the subject (or self as unified, and knowable being) is carried out in various fields, Couser informs us, beginning with psychology. Social psychologists, for instance, suggest that selfhood is not a pre-existing identity, but one socially constructed:

> "The construction of the self is not . . . carried out by individuals in isolation, but requires complicity, negotiation, and collusion--terms that all refer to relationships and not to single individuals." Thus the so-called individual is not individual. The self is not an essence, but a socially created construction--a cultural artefact fashioned collaboratively and publicly out of ready made materials, like a quilt patched together at a quilting bee. (16)

The unity that liberal humanists assume, is neither autonomous nor self-invented, nor original: it is stitched together from separate pieces.

Furthermore, these pieces are not homogeneous: some may radically differ from others, some may clash violently. Thomas's narrators, as we shall see, perform in many separate, often conflicting roles. While Thomas's critics are quick to point out the performances of these various roles as a difficulty facing the still unified narrator, they almost always fail to acknowledge the fact that a life made up of varied roles is by definition, disunified. As Couser explains in Altered Egos self is contextually variable:

> Probably most of us present different sides of ourselves in different contexts, depending on the demands of the situation, our personal goals and intentions, and so forth. For the present it remains to be seen whether various configurations of personality characteristics are

> sufficiently different from each other to constitute different selves in any meaningful sense. (16)

Even if we allow, for the benefit of the critics' point of view, that separate roles have yet to be scientifically distinguished as separate subjects, we find that the "unity" of these roles, their symbiotic melding so to speak, is based on whimsy , imagination, and other unscientific , imprecise, inaccurate, unaccountable thought processes that make up memory For if the separate selves are linked, it is by the continuity of consciousness:

> For most of us, our contextual selves are united by a continuously running autobiographical record: Just as we awaken in the morning knowing that we are the same person who went to sleep the night before, we are aware of the activities of our different selves. . . . In the final analysis, our personal histories provide for the continuity that is the essence of selfhood. (Couser 17)

The self, then, although it may be an integrated whole rather than a repertoire of roles, is not discovered in consistency of behaviour: "Personal history is not the product of prior selfhood. Rather, selfhood is the product of an internal autobiography; identity hangs by a narrative thread" (Couser 17).

Memory, however, "is itself a text under continuous revision" says Couser who supports this assertion by quoting the following summary of recent research on memory:

> Events we witness do not always, or even usually, remain unchanged in memory; we fill in missing details by inference, or alter them in accordance with questions we are asked or suggestions made to us, and

> have no way of achieving the original--and are not even aware that anything had happened to it. . . . [A]ll of us continually revise our memories of our lives to harmonize with the events that have happened or are happening to us; we are unable to distinguish between what really happened and what we now think happened, since original memory no longer exists. (Couser 17)

The narrative that supposedly unifies the conflicting roles of self is not static, not stable, and certainly not reliable; so this circular attempt to support unity of self, this claim that a unified self not only exists but is self-knowable, fails. Self, if it exists as something described by a single term is diverse, varied, multiple.

The attack on the liberal humanist concept of self as a non-contingent, unified essence is continued at a more severe level in the study of literature than in the social sciences. This angle of attack theorizes that language itself, not an essence, is the generative event in the construction, knowledge, and expression of the self. "It is not a question of language endowing a hitherto mute self with the capacity for self-expression," Paul John Eakin tells us, "but quite possibly, of language constituting the self in its very makeup" (Eakin 37). The very fact of language determines that self must be something other than original and singular; and, in fact, this critique of self-expression intensifies the critique of self-knowledge since one must express one's self to one's self in order to know it. Inherently, language prohibits this self-knowledge by inhibiting true expression. Furthermore, self--especially a self that is unknowable to itself--cannot be expressed truly to others, to a reader of autobiography for instance.

Within poststructuralist theory the subject is a text: the subject exists only in language. "Vico, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche all contend that the self is constituted by

a discourse that it never completely masters," writes Sprinkler (342). And Freud, according to Sprinkler,

> discovers that the self is always already in existence, that each dream, each slip of the tongue or lapse of memory, each flash of wit illuminates a prior discourse, a text elaborated long ago that governs all moments of textual making. But what he also discovers is that this master text, the unconscious, is perpetually changing--that each dream, each slip of the tongue, each witticism alters in some small way the configurations of the unconscious. . . . Freud's theory of the unconscious rests on the concept of repetition conceived as the production of difference in the generation of a text. (Sprinkler 342)

Michel Foucault, in "What is an Author?", asks "How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse?" and answers, "In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a **variable** and complex **function of discourse** [empasis added]" (159). Because the self is a text,

> [I]t is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but **me** since language is something I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction. Not only can I never be present to you, but I can never be fully present to myself either. I still need to use signs when I look into my mind or

> search my soul, and this means that I will never experience any "full Communion" with myself. It is not that I can have a pure, unblemished meaning, intention, or experience which then gets distorted and refracted by the flawed medium of language: because language is the very air I breathe, I can never have a pure, unblemished meaning or experience at all. (Eagleton 129-30)

This statement is the necessary conclusion drawn from a connected series of semiotic theory by various French critics, which I shall now summarily trace.

For my purposes, the germ of this theory begins with the work of Roland Barthes for his catalogue of the qualities of texts as found in "From Work to Text." Barthes's essay explains the epistemological shift from the liberal humanist notion of a "work" to the (post)structuralist "text." Barthes writes that, "the combined activity of Marxism, Freudianism, and structuralism requires, in the case of literature, the realization of the scriptor's, the reader's, and the observer's (the critic's) relationship" (74). He tells us that:

> the work is concrete (occupying a portion of book space in a library for example); the Text, on the other hand, is a methodological field. This opposition recalls the distinction proposed by Lacan between "reality" and the "real": the one is displayed, the other demonstrated. . . . While the work is held in the hand, the text is held only in language: it exists only as discourse. . . In other words, **the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production.** (74-5)

As I will explain shortly, this production takes place in the act of reading, but it is a production without final product; therefore, autobiographical texts can provide no

solid image of a true subject. While a work may provide a final signified, a clear indisputable meaning (supposedly), the text "practises the infinite deferral of the signified: the Text is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier" ("Work" 76). The deferral of the signified is "infinite" because:

> . . . [T]he signifier's infinitude does not refer back to some idea of the ineffable (of an unnameable signified) but to the idea of play. The engendering of the perpetual signifier within the field of the text should not be identified with an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic process of deepening, but rather with a serial movement of distortions, overlappings, and variations. (Barthes, "Work" 76)

According to Barthes a text is "like language":

> . . [I]t is structured but decentered, without closure. . . . it achieves plurality of meaning, an **irreducible** plurality. . . . The Text's plurality does not depend on the ambiguity of its contents, but rather on what could be called **the stereographic plurality** of the signifiers that weave it (etymologically the text is a cloth: textus, from which text derives, means "woven"). ("Work" 76-7)

Not only is a text multiple because of the "play" inherent in each **word** that makes it up, but the text is multiple because of the interplay of texts--the "intertext"--that makes it up. Texts, like life itself, are "completely woven with quotations, references, and echoes."--each an irreducible text in itself--part of a "cultural language" that traverses "the text from one end to another in a vast stereophony" (Barthes, "Work" 77). A text is "itself the intertext of another text," part of the intertextual--the "familiar" text of Language: "anonymous, irrecoverable and yet **already read**" (77). Because of the

very nature of language, a text can neither be original, nor individual. And, as Eagleton summarized above, the self, or the subject or the author--the extratextual referent that is necessarily unified, and knowable for autobiography to exist--and which exists in language, is lost in the play inherent in language; it is irreducible, unoriginal, and as otherwise complex as any text.

In the very closely related attack on autobiography, via a further attack on the liberal humanist subject (an attack I called the critique of the expression of self), we find that not only is self lost in language, but more to the point for autobiography, the self (however it is constituted) fails to come through in writing. Even if the self were whole and known to itself, it is impossible for the self to be **known** to another **through writing** because that expressing self, the supposed origin of the written text, can never arrive at the end of writing with any resemblance to that unique wholeness; it can never maintain any sense of originating intention. In the Critical Survey of Literary Theory we are told that:

> Lacan called this discrepancy between person and expression the realm of the Symbolic. One cannot mean anything personally but must always express oneself through language, which Lacan called the other because it always implicates the hearer in a dialogue. The Symbolic in Lacan is opposed to the Imaginary, a realm of personal wholeness and unity. (846)

In the conflict between these two realms, the realm of self-knowledge and the realm of its attempted expression, it becomes impossible to define what one "is." Once writing, the author, if he exists, must dissolve in the intertext of language:

> Every text is an articulation of the relations between texts, a product of intertextuality, a weaving together of what has already been produced elsewhere in discontinuous form; every subject, every author, every self is the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time. . . . In short, the self can no more be author of its own discourse than any producer of a text can be called the author--that is the originator--of his writing. "To write," as Barthes has cleverly shown, can be conceived as an intransitive verb with an impersonal subject, in the same sense as in the French idiom *il pleut*. (Sprinkler 3)

In "The Death of the Author" Barthes provides similar description of the dissolution of originality in writing:

> We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. . . [T]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. . . . Did [the writer] wish to **express himself**, he ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he seeks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely. (147)

Because "the beginning of language is the beginning of a series of deferrals of meaning," even if an author (as subject, or self) possessed knowledge of a unified self,

> The problem begins when he attempts to communicate that knowledge to another through linguistic symbols. . . . In any communicative situation, Lacan would say, there is the possibility of dialectical reversal, of truth being changed into untruth through the workings of the Symbolic. (CSLT 847)

In fact, the argument is strong that the failure to express an author's truth through linguistic symbols is not merely possible, but inevitable. "It is language which speaks, not the author," writes Barthes; "To write is to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'" ("Death" 143). Barthes elaborates:

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,' and this subject is empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together,' suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. ("Death" 145)

Since meaning is dispersed along a chain of signifiers, in writing "the represented is always already a representation, not a signified" (CSLT 357). Jacques Derrida deals with these issues in Of Grammatology, and "one of the consequences of Derrida's theory of writing is that a sign[a word, a text] always carries a further sense than the one intended by the author" and as a result "'the point of origin becomes ungraspable'" (CSLT 357, Derrida, Of Grammatology, quoted in CSLT 356).

While the liberal humanist "work" can be allocated to an author, its centre of meaning, the text which by the nature of writing has no centre, no single meaning, is without an author. In the liberal humanist conception of the work "[t]he author is regarded as the father and the owner of his work; literary research therefore learns to

respect the manuscript and the author's declared intention" ("Work" 78). In the poststructuralist philosophy that I am using, and which I believe is called for by Thomas's texts,

> The Text . . . is read without the father's signature. [Rather than the work/author's metaphor of filiation] [t]he Text's metaphor is that of the network: if the Text expands, it is under the effect of a combinatorial, a systematics (an image which comes close to modern biology's views on the living being).
>
> Therefore, no vital "respect" is owed to the Text. . . . The Text can be read without its father's guarantee: the restitution of the intertext paradoxically abolishes the concept of filiation. It is not that the author cannot "come back" into the Text, into his text; however, he can do so only as a "guest," so to speak. ("Work" 78)

So despite other critics' assessments and even that of Thomas herself, the texts are free to be read with respect to whatever meanings can be attributed to them:

> If the author is a novelist, he inscribes himself in his text as one of his characters, as another figure sewn into the rug; his signature is no longer privileged and paternal, the locus of genuine truth, but rather, ludic. He becomes a "paper author": his life is no longer the origin of his fables, but a fable that runs concurrently with his work. ("Work" 78)

As far as the reader is involved, he or she does not interpret a text, rather the reader participates in the "explosion," the "dissemination" that occurs in language. The experience of the reader is likened by Barthes to that of "a fairly empty subject" who strolls amidst a valley filled with noises, smells, sights and such that are at once

familiar but induplicable in their combination, creating an impression particular to that subject experiencing **that** irrepeatable stroll: "The reader of the Text could be compared to an idle subject (a subject having relaxed his "imaginary.") . . . What he sees is multiple and irreducible. . . . All these occurrences are partially identifiable: they proceed from known codes, but their combination is unique, . . . differences that can be repeated only as difference" (77). Concisely: "[T]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" ("Death" 148).

However, given what we have already discovered about the nature of self, we must realize that "[T]his destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" ("Death" 148). Given that the author no longer holds any authority, nor is the reader the locus of any single meaning, we are left with only the text at the point of reading: "It is the letter, the text, which 'in-tends,' which exists on the inside while both the human subject of writing and its final meaning are always elsewhere" (CSLT 848). It is my contention that the three novels of Audrey Thomas referred to as the "Isobel Carpenter Trilogy" (Diotte) overwhelmingly "intend" all the mentioned arguments against the liberal humanist notions of self, subject, author(ship), and autobiography.

Let me now trace concisely the arguments made in this chapter, before examining the texts themselves.

We established that the "liberal humanist subject" is grounded in originality and inventiveness, uniqueness, autonomy or self-determination, and authority attained by his ability to be the locus of genuine truth. It has been shown to be true that the

author is the literary manifestation of this liberal humanist subject. It has also been shown that the liberal humanist subject/author is essential for autobiography as it is generally understood, since autobiography appeals to the **extra**textual existence of the author whose existence is written of in the autobiography. Poststructuralist theory attacks the notion of the liberal humanist subject/author; this is done in two related arguments. The first argument consists of two parts: the first part depicts the subject as something socially constructed and actually unknown because of the delusion of memory; the second part explains that the nature of language, of which the subject must consist, debilitates the subject from ever knowing his own true meaning or definitive essence. The second argument is an intertwining off-shoot of the language part of the first argument. That is, even if the subject were self-knowable and unified, it could never be conveyed as such through language to another because the nature of language is such that origins can never be traced. Without this liberal humanist subject/author there can be no autobiography.

The next chapter will explore in detail the ways in which Audrey Thomas's texts attack through style and theme the existence of the liberal humanist subject, and thus deny the possibility of autobiography.

CHAPTER TWO

The Meta-theme of The Isobel Carpenter Trilogy:

The Dissolution of the Liberal Humanist Subject

"The problem and the danger of reading the 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" (Diotte 60). Presumably, the assumption that is held by those readers or critics who succumb to this danger is that noting the difference and similarities between the novel and the actual biography of the novelist will improve understanding of both. A few critics of Audrey Thomas's novels fall prey to this dangerous assumption, and see the thematic bonds between novels as only further reference to that same novelist.[3] Of course, most critics avoid this danger and view the structural relationships integral to a Thomas novel as the structural relationships integral to the text of the author (in this case, structural relationships that indicate the author is writing her autobiography). Should the case arise, as it does with Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Blood, and Blown Figures, that the structural relationships in several novels are strikingly similar many critics consider all three texts to be further references to the same author. The three novels are considered the sequential texts by a particular Thomas character, the three volumes of an autobiography of an author--a character usually referred to as Isobel Carpenter.[4]

As Robert Diotte writes in "The Romance of Penelope: Audrey Thomas's Isobel Carpenter Trilogy," it is true that "[t]here 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" (60). Many of the structural relationships are very similar and would seem to indicate an autobiography in three sequential volumes. Songs My Mother Taught Me is a "family-centred bildungsroman set in and around Utica, New York, in the1940's and 50's [that] traces Isobel's psychological and emotional development through the formative years from age five to seventeen" (Gottlieb & Keitner 364). Isobel is trapped in a family headed by "a pusillanimous father and a mother full of impotent rage" (364). Life incidents include: spending summer vacations at Journey's End, her Grandfather's country Eden; general and specific embarrassments at the hands of her mother, friends, and lovers; working at a mental hospital; losing her virginity to a co-worker. A thematic focal point, on one level, is self discovery. Stylistically, the supposed autobiography is replete with shifting perspective and word play.

Mrs Blood, one could argue, is the text by and about an expatriate Canadian woman immobile in an African hospital during an extended miscarriage. References are made to many of the incidents that occur in Songs and many similar moods are expressed. Themes recur: identity formation (and breakdown); bitterness and despair; expression or the lack thereof. As in Songs, the perspective flutters between first and third person.

Blown Figures, nearly schizophrenic in perspective, is apparently the story of a Canadian woman returning to Africa to exorcise the haunting memories and despair left over from an extended miscarriage she experienced there five years earlier. As we

shall see shortly, the novel is again replete with "memories" of the incidents, characters, and emotions of the first two novels and takes the thematic and stylistic elements to a further, cumulative level.

Songs My Mother Taught Me, as well as the other two volumes of what Robert Diotte calls the Isobel Carpenter Trilogy contains many elements that suggest its generic definition is that of autobiography--the text, that is, seen as the autobiography of a girl named Isobel. If we can achieve a sense of what is required of writing for it to be **considered** autobiographical, and illustrate that these requirements are met, then we can use these "autobiographical" volumes as criticism regarding autobiography as a genre, since the criticism of autobiography exists **within** the literature. We might achieve this by illustrating the texts' allegiance to a conglomeration of some of the common-sense elements of autobiographical writing, and, in accordance with my particular requirement for autobiography, illustrate the apparent presence of a liberal humanist subject's hand on the pen, so to speak. (I can make no effort in this space to **exhaust** the examples that suggest autobiography: I merely need to indicate the existence of what appears to be autobiography to justify using the texts as criticism of the genre.)

The most obvious clue that we are dealing with autobiography (at the textual level) is the predominance of the first person pronoun, for the "definition of autobiography [that] establishes the intrinsic character of the enterprise and thus the general (and generic) conditions of autobiographical writing," is, we are told by Jean Starobinski, "biography of a person **written by himself** [emphasis added]" (73).[5] The seventh word in chapter one of Songs is "I," and it is repeated four more times in that first half page. The title itself contains the possessive form of the first person,

"My," and suggests that the contents of the text will be a recounting of the author's childhood experiences under the influence of her mother. Mrs Blood uses the possessive form at the third word, in the sentence that serves as a formal introduction of who is writing, by the person who is writing. The "my name is" phrase in the first line causes the reader to listen, to regard the author as speaker, as a storyteller, and to expect a story of a personal nature (Mere narrators need not introduce themselves, only their characters.). Blown Figures is more subtle in regards to this first clue. The plural first person pronoun is employed: "Cripples, one-eyed people, pregnant women: we are all the children of eggs, Miss Miller, we are all the children of eggs" (3). The pronoun, in combination with the direct address of the statement to Miss Miller, suggests a speaker, to whom we are also meant to listen. When we "Consider Isobel" as instructed (as listeners to the address to Miss Miller) in association with one of the dedications, we encounter a double enlightenment. The dedication reads:

> To Isobel
>
> because you are fond of fairy tales, and have been ill,
>
> I have made you a story all for yourself
>
> --a new one that nobody has read before.

Assuming, then, that the "we" of the first line is not spoken by Audrey Thomas, we can assume the dedication is written by the person addressing Miss Miller. As well, we can assume that the author who is writing the story of someone named Isobel (who is real enough to have a dedication directed at her) and has intimate knowledge of Isobel to the extent that the author knows that "Isobel cannot read their sleeves" and "Isobel remembered a song her father used to sing," is, in fact, that Isobel. Thus, Blown Figures, like the other two texts, begins as a biography of a person told by herself.

A second commonly assumed element of autobiographical writing is that it be "'[a] retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence'"(Lejeune 18). That each of the three volumes is written in prose, for the most part, hardly needs to be illustrated, and that each is a retrospective is nearly as obvious. Again, the first page of Songs informs us that, "Years later I was to wonder what scholar-gypsy had wandered through our state, bestowing such illustrious names on places (which seemed to me then, years later) so singularly lacking in lustre"(13). The "years later" may be the present or it may be also a reminiscence occurring during writing, but it certainly signals a retrospective viewpoint given that the anecdote being related describes actions being performed as a child: "But then, aged five . . . I would trace with sure but excited figures the arteries and veins of the vast complex of New York" (13). Similarly, the author/narrator of Mrs Blood very quickly informs the reader of personal events that occurred in the past: "I came to this place sitting up on a kitchen chair (you know the kind) in the back of what professes to be an ambulance" (11). Looking back to that event in light of her present knowledge allows Mrs Thing to make the retrospective judgement regarding that past experience: "I say 'professes,' or better still, 'purports,' because things here aren't always what they seem to be and one must behave accordingly. . . . Take that matter of the ambulance for instance" (11). A.F. Bellette cites Mrs Blood's pattern of "observation, recollection and confusion" and confirms that, "[t]he present in Mrs Blood is merely the most recent past" (66). Blown Figures, always the most subtly autobiographical, provides no immediate, first page evidence of a retrospective point of view. However, within the first ten pages we regress from the (maybe) present embarkation, to spending time in London, to descriptions and assessments of a previous time in London. That the retrospective

point of view will deepen is suggested to the reader by Isobel's assessment, "That the London of the past was more real than the London of the present" (10). In "The Site of Blood," George Bowering explains the autobiographical use of retrospective in terms of the state of mind of the character who is telling her own story:

> This will be a story into Isobel's personal past. The narrative zips back and forth through time, into the African experience of five years ago, back further to sexual experiences in England, forward to three days ago. . . . What else would you expect to pass through the mind of somebody who is thousands of miles from domesticity, and halfway to the puzzle in her own past? (87)

The depth and scope of the retrospective accounts of earlier experiences increase in each novel as the reader gets further into the prose accounts of the author/narrator/character's existence.

Through use of the retrospective perspective, the texts help fulfil another "requirement" of autobiographical writing. The conditions of autobiographical writing "require that the work be a narrative and not merely a description. Biography is not portrait; or if it is a kind of portrait, it adds time and movement. The narrative must cover a temporal sequence sufficiently extensive to allow the emergence of the contour of life" (Starobinski 73). We meet the Isobel of Songs in a retrospective account of herself at age five, and leave her at the age of seventeen having witnessed her recounting of a progression from "Songs of Innocence" through some of life's struggles and onto "Songs of Experience." The "contour of life" that emerges in Mrs Blood is twofold: those several critical months during which Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing narrates her frequently retrospective account of life, an account that skips between

childhood, youth, and adulthood. Her present life is carved in deep relief through her act of expression and her past is held up as living portraiture, vignettes of howwhywho she is as reflection of howwhywho she has always been. The Isobel of Blown Figures presents a jagged contour of life in the immediacy of her zigzagging mental state. As well, the text does delve into the past both in retrospect, and in the implied presence of the past as a current influence on the disturbed mind of Isobel. The contour of life emerges in each text from its temporal range and its narrative progression along a journey, be it a journey of growth as in Songs, through suffering in Mrs Blood, or the possibly real/possibly imagined African journey in Blown Figures. That a contour of life evolves out of the narrative journey is an inevitable result of how each text's author is fulfilling yet another "requirement" of autobiographical writing. Howarth's description of the "poetic autobiographer": "[t]hey share equally strong doubts, especially about their current state of mind. Uncertain of the present, they study the past for some explanation of their later difficulties" (105).

What might also be considered an example of autobiographical elements manifesting themselves through the narrative self-biography by the author of each text is the representation of themselves in the third person. Jean Starobinski explains that the distancing of the author-writing from the author-as-they-are-current-to-the-recalled-anecdote is "subtly expressed in the contamination of the discourse by traits proper to history, that is, by the treatment of the first person as quasi-third person" (79). In Songs, Isobel in the first person, the "I" of the majority of the text, is often referred to as "Isobel" by herself. Usually this occurs as the "I" wants to make qualifying observations about Isobel-as-third-person. While relating the experiences of having, losing, then finding formerly favourite dolls now tattered, bleached, and featureless,

the "I" gives way to an address in the third person: "Isobel, perhaps they are your totems?" (19). The author even recounts an occasion where this same third person narration was used in writing while a child. She writes: "Dear Isobel. Having a swell time. Your friend. I" on several postcards. More than simply a sentimental account of loneliness, this self-correspondence represents the need to recount one's life indirectly to one's self; and the author's inclusion of this particular anecdote represents an agreement statement of this fact.

"In Songs My Mother Taught Me," Joan Caldwell tells us:

> [W]hat may appear to be a conventional first person narrative, split only chronologically into the "Songs of Innocence" of childhood and the "Songs of Experience" of adolescence, is in fact a curiously constructed record of two voices, where the narrator refers to herself sometimes as "I" and sometimes as a third person she observes. The division is not made as one might expect into infant Isobel, not yet conscious of her individuality except as a name, and the older self-conscious "I" Sometimes a distancing occurs during a recollection of something the older girl was afraid of: "At first Isobel did not dare go beyond the swinging doors until the inert shape beneath the blankets had been wheeled away." Sometimes, on the other hand, it is the adult teller of the tale who is objectified: "Look how well Isobel remembers." (47-8)

Mrs Blood hardly manifests this trait yet it is implied by how the author separates her chapters. Each time the bold letters of "Mrs Blood" or "Mrs Thing" appear it is as though the author were saying "Here is the story of (a third person known as) Mrs Blood [or Mrs Thing]." We have established that Blown Figures appears to be Isobel's

biography, written by Isobel, therefore it is written, for the most part in third person, occasionally stream of consciousness type observations. Even so, the narrator telling Isobel's story often addresses Isobel-as-she-is-in-the-recollection, in order to harass her with the knowledge that she presently possesses. Using what amounts to introspection --given that Isobel is telling her own story--yet appears to be an author questioning the motive of a biographical subject, the author instructs the subject: "Wasn't that precisely why she was here, why, in the end, she had let herself be destroyed? (For there are no victims, Isobel, there are no victims)" (7). The use of the third person in the telling of their own life story by the author of each text helps exemplify the "narrative biography of a person by themself" condition for autobiographical writing (As we shall see later in this chapter, it also contributes greatly to the attack on autobiography.).

Above we have seen that the three texts that comprise the "Isobel Carpenter Trilogy" separately have traits that suggest that they are autobiographical texts. By stringing a thread of theme and style throughout the three we can sew together an autobiography in three parts of their narrator. Robert Diotte writes:

> Yet the fictional world in her Isobel Carpenter trilogy . . . 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. (60)

And we will find that while this single narrator at first appears to be an example of a liberal humanist subject, the themes and style that link the trilogy ultimately suggest

that she is not a liberal humanist subject; thus, the autobiography in three parts cannot exist as such.

Several prominent themes are shared by each of the three texts. This consistency within autobiographical texts would seem to suggest consistency of narrator. To further support the idea that the three texts make up an **autobiographical** trilogy, we will find that the themes are suggestibly characteristic of themes common to autobiography, yet actually undermine its foundation--the liberal humanist subject.[6] One such theme tends to parallel and support the autobiographical trait of the expression of a contour of life.

While above we discovered that each text expressed a contour of life through time, we also find the contour of life expressed in each text through the metaphor of "journey," what Howarth describes as "'a spiritual experiment, a voyage of discovery'" (85).[7] Songs, the first text of the trilogy, commences with a catalogue of place names, "Rome. Syracuse. Ithaca. Troy. . . .Vestal. Ninevah. Oxford. Delhi. Cincinnatus" invoking a sense of worldly adventure. The current narrator informs us of her eager five year old self's sense of quest and her own allegiance to explorers. On a map given to her by her grandfather she

> would trace with sure but excited fingers the arteries and veins of the vast complex of New York, following the route of the family's visits with something, perhaps, of the spirit of that unknown man or men who had seen fit to scatter the names, if not the seeds, of antiquity amongst the prosaic towns named after more recent and transatlantic glories. (13)

The journey motif in Songs introduces several related motifs that can be found in the rest of the trilogy. These motifs include: that life is a journey that is tied to one's family; and that journeys are the seeds of growth.

We see that life is a journey tied to one's family by the Carpenters' yearly road trip to the summer lodge of Isobel's grandfather, appropriately named "Journey's End." The name itself was considered a cruel joke on the part of the grandfather who built and christened the lodge at the end of his wife's life. As they approach their destination they "sighed, with the general relief of voyagers who have passed the worst of their hardships and perils" (15). The significance of this journey is emphasized by its grandeur as compared to regular errands, which are themselves viewed by the young Isobel as life-affecting quests:

> The journey to town, like the journey to the woods itself, was almost a religious experience, with us as children and noviciates, recognizing and genuflecting before the necessary stations of our ecstasy. Except the journey to Excelsior was less intense because more frequent, more familiar. Nor did it begin any experience so large and important as a summer. (21)

The idyll of a "Journey's End" is something that is reached after one's trials and tribulations. As a child, learning only the songs of innocence, Isobel is able to reach the journey's end with tribulations only so severe as road trip annoyances. As she moves out of innocence, Isobel begins to learn the songs of experience, an idyllic journey's end is unreachable. Literally, her grandfather disposes of the lodge, and Isobel's first summer of experience begins with the emotional and physical "journey" of working in a mental hospital. Amongst the hardships of work, and the embarrassment and pain at

the interaction with her family. Isobel grows to appreciate the journey for its own sake. She becomes aware of the growth potential inherent in the journey and seems to feel "contempt and disgust" for those who lack the imagination to embrace the journey (54). She observes that her father "came back to his mother's room where he was born" (54), stuck at the beginning of the journey, self-deprived of any spiritual or emotional growth. Isobel, on the other hand, ends her songs of experience with an anthem to those willing to voyage. She invokes again "Rome. Syracuse. Ithaca. Troy." this time suggesting the European places she intends to visit now that she has ventured along the path of life far enough to be making her own choices. The next volumes in the trilogy confirm that life continues to be a journey, at the end of which you arrive only by dying.

We first encounter Mrs Blood within, as she describes it, "what might be the strangest (if not the ultimate) **journey of my life** [emphasis added]" (14). We encounter her at a pit stop along the emotional, psychic process of an extended miscarriage--a journey whose end is loss. She states that "I am here because I bleed" and our **second** impression is that she means the "here in the hospital." The **first** and permeating impression is that she is in fact affirming her existence, as in "I exist qua Mrs Blood because I bleed." The very next sentence describes the travel--"I came in the back of a converted diesel truck, sitting very tall on a straight backed-chair which was chained to the floor like the chairs on a ship in a gale"(14)--by which she has arrived at this point. The physical journey by truck and the metaphorical voyage by sea are seen as causal to the effect of coming into being.

We learn through the experience of Mrs Blood's children, as seen through her perspective, that "voyaging" is the route between significant times in our lives. Upon

reaching England by boat Mrs Thing comments that the children were quiet, and could not be drawn out because "the children weren't really very interested, suspended as they were between the past and the future" (51). Incidentally, we see here once again that journeys, both physical and as ephemeral as time's passing, are associated with one's family ties. It is also possible to get a sense of the author's attitude towards journeys through witnessing her fear. Every journey or voyage, especially those as significant as personal growth, suffering, or into madness will have both treacherous and joyous moments--like the contour of one's life. Mrs Blood recalls a family car trip through foggy mountain roads to the beach: she admits that "I was ashamed because the children were back there listening and could tell I was afraid. I really wanted to turn back, but was too ashamed to say so" (58). While passing a detonation sight for highway construction Mrs Blood confesses that ". . . I didn't think we should get out of the car, so we all sat there hot and cross with our own private crossnesses and irritations until finally the man with the flag waved us on and we listened but we never heard a boom" (58). Even when one "clears the fog", the anxiety of life's travels, like the boom that does not sound, lingers without resolve. Although she can answer "Yes --it was." to the question "Well, was it worth it?" Mrs Blood knows that the foggy cliffside roads of life are not ever truly past: "And I said, 'Yes--it was,' but was sorry he had said anything at all because now he reminded me that we had to take that road to get back home" (59). Mrs Blood is aware that others influence the journey one takes through life, such as family, the flagman at the detonation site, some unknown force; and when feeling defeated she opts out of taking action for herself: "One only tries to get to Z if one believes that Z is there. . . .One should stick to the square one lands on and wait for somebody else to throw the dice" (94). Mrs Blood and her husband,

"Uneasy. At a loss for words. Wanting the journey to begin" (197), feel a certain relief as the final stage of her abortion begins. She is "Not frightened so much now it's started" (197) yet soon realizes that this leg of her journey is morbid, and ominous of the future: "Then," she writes, "I see the vultures wheeling and begin to cry" (197). The vultures are not the only evil presence, real or imagined. Mrs Blood states that, "The land is treacherous . . . The pain moves over me like an explorer in heavy boots. . . . The pain has been sent by Joseph and by the lizards and the insects and the flowers" (206). The vultures along with other real and imagined dangers in Africa suggest that "Africa" is both a destination on a perilous physical journey and that "Africa," the dark continent, is the state of pain that we each encounter on our difficult and often frightening journeys into our consciousness--what we recall, spirits and all, past and present.[8] And as Mrs Blood hysterically quotes, the journey of life is but an unfriendly, unsatisfying, incomplete journey with no conclusion, no completion of self-discovery: "I am so sated in the world, that I have lost my way forever" (218).

Blown Figures begins with a quotation that strongly suggests that Africa is a state of mind and being: "We have all Africa and her prodigies/Within us." As well, the reference to "all the Alices" in the dedication and the address to Miss Miller in the first sentence ally Isobel and the journey she is undertaking with the journey into nonsense taken by Alice in Alice in Wonderland.[9] What **might** be a physical journey that Isobel is undertaking to the dark continent as the book commences, is certainly going to be paralleled by an interior journey of non-sense into dark consciousness. As the text begins Isobel is waiting on the ship that has stalled at departure, "musical ghosts" of band music serenade the waiting passengers, whose families have come to see them off, and "A few paper streamers had been unfurled before the breakdown (if

that's what it was) had occurred" (4-5). The bold capital type of the song lyrics, meld into a musical reflection of Isobel's ghosts, her haunting past and tenuous mental/emotional health, serenading Isobel's anxiety: "GET OFF GET OFF booms the big bass drum. GET OFF GET OFF GET OFF" (6). It becomes clear that the "breakdown" in question is quite likely the nervous breakdown of Isobel, and the reader is ominously forewarned that he is about to embark with Isobel on a voyage into madness. It is because sense fails to accompany a person on an interior journey into madness that a true exploration of her self is impossible: "The traveller who has returned from a journey may tell all he has seen, Miss Miller, but he cannot explain it all" (47). As though Isobel were aware of this inability for self-discovery through self-exploration she realizes the futility of attempting self-determining action: "Having made up their minds to the journey, they were as twigs upon the water; they must let the journey take them where it would" (97). Interior journeys through madness or simply through self-contemplation can never result in a subject's self-knowledge. As the self-determining element of the journey disappears--as it must--the ability to reach self-knowledge becomes purely random. Arriving there is pure chance; and as the following quotation suggests, the destination of self-knowledge is a mythical one. Wishing to embrace the twig-on-water attitude, Isobel describes a journey of discovery in terms that depict such a journey as being only as sound as rumour and as realistic as legend:

> In the water she had been introduced to a man who knew a man who was going to Timbuktu on a boat up the River Niger. "Timbuktu," thought Isobel, her ears still full of water. "Prester John? The mountains of the Moon?" It would be out of her way. But water, a boat, the idea of

> being carried somewhere, of once having embarked the impossibility of further choices. (58)

As the theme of journey to selfhood links the trilogy volumes it progresses towards the conclusion that such a journey is in fact impossible, and so the author fails to be a true liberal humanist subject in that she cannot know her true self.

Tying in with the sense of journey, and further exemplifying the sense of retrospective perspective inherent to autobiography that was mentioned previously, is the theme of temporal interaction; that is: the past is always present. All present consciousness is inseparably linked to events, thoughts, feelings of times past.[10] Anne Archer writes: "Characteristic of Thomas' writing is the juxtaposition of the present with the past. Isobel/Thomas [is] writing in a Wordsworthian fashion to 'understand herself'" (216). This interweaving of temporal experiences, however, direfully affects the accurate expression to one's self of one's own present consciousness because the memory of whom we have been (or believe we are) is mired in the swamp of memory, a tangle of misremembered, invented, or revised impressions of reality that was.[11]

In Songs My Mother Taught Me, the story told by Isobel begins emersed in memory. The author, writing at whatever point in her life she happens to be writing, is enacting the existence of autobiography by **writing about her past**; Isobel is recounting stories from her childhood. The past is the story that Isobel weaves, and the act of her weaving supposedly tells the reader about the Isobel of the present time (that is the time of writing). Why should the reader believe Isobel? Why should we put faith in her accounts of her childhood exactly as we put faith in the truth of the stories of a non-fictional autobiographer? The answer is that she asserts the strength of her memories. "Look how well Isobel remembers," she notices of herself (38). She tells

the reader that, "On the way to the mountains I tried to memorize each group of Burma Shave signs we passed, every new billboard or poster slapped against a barn" (33). Sometimes she would say to herself: "'Ten years from now you will remember this moment and it will be the past'" (33). Isobel assures us that, "If something truly unusual happened I tried to impale the whole complex of sight/sound/touch/taste/ smell on my consciousness and memory as though such an experience was like some rare and multicolored butterfly" (33). She provides "proof" of her ability to memorize:

> I shivered and began to try to memorize the afternoon: net curtains, tables covered with red-check tablecloths, my father's cracked and dirty fingernails as he picked up a roll and buttered it, the hair that had started growing on my legs, the sunlight setting out a neat gold carpet by the door. (34)

She **remembers** remembering: "My childhood memories of him and his untidy, smelly room could still arouse distaste fifteen years later" (53). Through the description of "a plethora of sensuous detail" (Gottlieb 365), Isobel lends credence to the truth and accuracy of her memories; take the following passage as example:

> It's funny, for I was never close to my father and we never once had a genuine conversation, a stripping away of layers; but I remember those early morning summer breakfasts as really pleasant times. He would put the coffee on to perk and I would make scrambled eggs. Sometimes we had sliced tomatoes from the garden, yellow or red, still with the spicy smell of the tomato vines about them. Occasionally a grapefruit or melon. One day he said to me, "Say, d'you kids remember when you both had the measles and I brought you up a grapefruit with a

> maraschino cherry on it every day"? I said I remembered and he said, "Yeah. Jesus. Where does the time go?" (151)

Since Isobel is aware that her father "had an almost pathetic desire to be 'remembered' or 'known'" (151), the reader might wonder whether or not Isobel took pity on her father and claimed to remember when in fact she did not (Perhaps, she even falsely remembered based on his suggestion.). Bearing in mind that the autobiographer is creating a text in hopes of being remembered, the reader might also wonder whether Isobel **actually** recalls what she claims to recall throughout the text or if she might be fictionalizing the account of her life to the reader the same way she might have fictionalized her memory of measles and maraschino cherries.

Two of the "songs" her mother taught Isobel relate to the accuracy of memory. First of all, Isobel learns that the relating of family history to strangers--much like what an autobiographer does--is tinged with humiliation. She remembers "the humiliation of hearing my mother relate our family history, in a confidential tone, to yet another set of polite but indifferent listeners" (32). Secondly, Isobel learns that it is permitted to offer something to the world as valid knowing full well that there is no objective substance to it. After relating the family history, "Mother gave the cashier something on account with a check she knew would bounce" (33). Isobel can "serenade" the reader in confidential tones, but the reader should not expect any sound foundation to what she offers.

Furthermore, Isobel often admits to failures of memory. Despite her claims to remember well, she informs the reader that, " . . . my earliest memories flicker like firelight and lamplight . . . figures coming and going--dissolving re-creating themselves . . ." (18). Of her mother's tantrums she must ask herself, "Why did she do

it, Isobel? I can't remember" (82). Often she has to speculate about details, as in the case of who came to visit: "Maybe the minister once or twice, but I don't remember it" (105); and Isobel must make assumptions: "It must have been springtime, for I remember I was using quince apple blossoms to cover the body with" (101). That memory is a pieced together revision of chaos is suggested by Isobel's description of her mother's room: "Her chest of drawers was filled with boxes of unfinished sewing and candy boxes full of old photographs and greeting cards. . . . Indeed, the whole house was soon like this, our layers just added to the junk that was left behind" (54). Even concrete evidence of the past must be re-evaluated, as Isobel expresses when confronted with the present reality of her grandmother versus an old photograph. She muses, "Had she ever been a girl named Sharon and had she ever worn the gay hat with the partridge feather as she did in the little silver picture frame on top of our old piano?" (14). It is likely that Isobel revises her past, intentionally and unintentionally, for she must know that it is to her advantage given the dedication: "All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay" because it is rebuilt according to their own purposes, true or not, and she might be continually "re-creating herself".

Mrs Blood is equally deluged in the theme of memory, of the past bleeding through to the present. Mrs Blood accounts for this fact: "I have memories preserved intact, like men in peat, to be found by a later me. That is what happened this morning with this memory" (33). Like Isobel in Songs, Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing tries to assert her ability to remember. Like her children (51), Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing is "suspended between the past and future". "I remember one [store] where we used to go and get our pants and socks and have shoes repaired," Mrs Thing informs us on the first page of the text (11), beginning slowly, with basic, easily accepted memories. She proceeds to

confess memories of a more interior nature, confiding that "when I was little, ambulances seemed to me like wild things, fleeing through our streets, looking for someone to eat, looking for me" (13). The author presents us with the evidence of her memory for details of events, feelings, impressions, conversations, as in this passage describing an incident in England, decades earlier:

> And I can still remember meeting Jack who was outside the New trying to decide whether the film would be any good or not, and I didn't want to stop and talk to him because I was so afraid he'd spoil it. And he looked at us and laughed that crazy, almost soundless laugh he had and then asked Richard if he'd ever heard somebody or other's remark about sitting up in bed and eating buttered toast with cunty fingers. (85)

However, the imperfection of Mrs Blood/ Mrs Thing's facility for remembering is frequently announced, such as, "I can't remember the smell of Joseph's bread, only the smells of this place and the smell of blood" (16). The author confesses that "I am an old log thrown up by the sea, and the past clings to me like barnacles" (91) and later explains that "I am covered with memories like barnacles. Weighed down, encrusted with them so that only the vague outline of my original shape remains" (148). It seems that the voyage of life is such that memories become a distortion of one's essence. Even quite early in the text, Mrs Thing admits that memory may be false, that perfect recollection is not possible; she writes:

> "Remember this," I thought, and sought to make it a part of me, like a song or an equation. Something= . . .[sic]; but see, I cannot even remember what the something is, or whether there was Michaelmas

> daisies growing along the ditch or whether that was some other place and time. Our heads become crowded and details fall away. (34)

Once again suggesting the distorting effects of the unconscious, Africa is mentioned as an influence on one's ability to recall: "Events are blurred, as though the hot breath of Africa had already blown upon the mirror of my mind" (193). The final pages of Mrs Blood find the narrator representing her thoughts as her miscarriage reaches the final stages. The actual events--"They are taking the thing away. Elizabeth is weeping" (219)--merge with the memory of Richard, a former lover and father of the youthful author's aborted child. As in this case, in which events and emotions become linked in memory, so is the case with any other recollection: it has been distorted by time's passing and by revisionist contemplation. A similar pattern is evident in the way that Mrs Thing looks at past events and gives them significance relative to events that have since come to pass, as in the case of omens for her journey: "All the signs were there from the beginning if only we had stopped to think. A dead man on each boat" (18).

A further doubt can be aimed at the veracity of memory, that is, that individuals attempt to remake themselves in the same way that they consciously and unconsciously revise the events they purport to recall. An individual, in this case a fellow patient in the hospital, and in theory, an author or autobiographer, might be attempting to present an image of herself that is not exactly accurate. As described by Mrs Thing, Mrs Mate seems to remake herself in a fashion that is designed to appeal to her observer. Mrs Thing writes:

> I wanted to ask her about her past, but although she questioned me minutely about myself and my life in Canada, I could not bring myself to reciprocate. Why? Was it because I sensed that she is recreating

> herself in some image culled from the American ladies' magazines and the ads in the Graphic? (41).

Not only do people invent images of themselves, but they are consciously and unconsciously influenced in that recreation by outside cultural factors--social boundaries, media images, and the like. When describing her attempt to recall the domestic setting in which her family awaits, Mrs Thing must imagine the details, and as she does she realizes that memory relies on imagination and that events shared by individuals will differ according to there experience. She wonders:

> What did they have for dinner? What is Jason reading, thinking, drinking, saying? They are on a strange road and I stand at the corner unable to cross. They no longer exist except as photos in an album, like our past life. Now they have an album of their own, and I too have my own unutterable souvenirs. (108)

Mrs Things's "unutterable souvenirs" are unutterable because everyone's experience is only their own, there is no objective reality to which to appeal, no extratextual reference to verify the story that is told (And as we will see, we get different stories of the same events even from the author herself.). One may never know an other or for that matter, one's self, because of this failure of expression: "I would like to really know them, but I sense that they are only as verbose as they are because I am a stranger and they are young and romantic. So I must arrange the snippets of information I gather on a thread of pure conjecture" (84).

In Blown Figures the reader really is exposed to snippets of information left to be threaded on the reader's conjecture. The "African winds" of dark unconscious bordering on madness have blown across the figure of Isobel as she perceives herself.

The result is that Isobel's consciousness is constantly fluctuating between past and present, the imagined and the real, truth and desire. One intrusion of the past is in the form of Isobel's memory of what her Grandfather willed to her: "(Harry was dead. He had left her a ten volume Photographic History of the Civil War, a Life of General Grant, The Quiver Readings, Don Quixote and Paradise Lost . . . " (8). This list evokes much of what we have already discussed with respect to autobiographical themes. Memories become merged with other memories--her grandfather is remembered for the books he left. The photographic history of the civil war is metaphoric reflection of the text we read: fragmented images of Isobel's internal conflict. One biography, that of Grant, is cast into a fictional light by the **imagined** life of Don Quixote, who happens to be, not coincidentally, a man full of self-delusion on fruitless quests. And Paradise Lost might signify the loss of innocence that Isobel has already experienced on her life's journey. Since "the London of the past was more real than the London of the present," and London is remembered in the form of a photograph--one which has been retouched by the same woman who has been retouching Isobel's photos since Isobel's childhood (10)--one must wonder as to the veracity of the memories that will dominate the mental landscape of the text. Furthermore, Isobel the author informs the reader that Isobel the character is her creation, to be portrayed or touched up as she sees fit. Isobel admits that: "I can do anything I want with Isobel. I can make her fat or thin, like a fun house mirror. Give her an elegant back--she always wanted an elegant back--a lisp, a limp, a missing finger, a wart on the end of her nose, a lover, a husband, a dead child"(74). The reader has heard of the lover, the husband and the dead child, but now the reader must wonder whether or not these barnacles of memory are any more true than a description of Isobel possessing an elegant back, whose only apparent reality

exists in the author/character's desire to be so described. If we recall from the prologue that "We have all Africa and her prodigies within us" we can see that the Africa-as-unconscious metaphor appears again in Blown Figures, acting as further illustration of Isobel's (or anyone's) confusion of factual history amidst delusional filler. We are told that, "[I]t struck her once again how the people in Africa seemed to live only in half reality. . . . They could tune out or transcend the factual reality of their discomfort. . . . [T]he whole atmosphere was one of dream or myth" (189). Margaret Laurence suggests that the narrator has "a way of saying that we all change and fictionalize our own pasts all the time" (100). As in the other two volumes of the trilogy, the past and the present blend confusingly, and one cannot be certain what is an accurate memory, or a conscious or unconscious deception.[12]

One motif that runs throughout the trilogy is related to the "Africa" as dark unconscious motif: the motif of madness. The permeation of the texts with a motif of madness adds to the suggestion that an individual may not have an accurate perception of her self; and if she cannot accurately perceive herself, she cannot accurately express that self to others, in this case, a reader: "Isobel as a character is simply not capable of giving us the norm or locus to measure the rest of the characters' and the writer's intention" (Diotte 65).

Madness, in Songs My Mother Taught Me, is closely associated with chaos. Similar to the point made earlier about the chaotic nature of jumbled memories as depicted by Isobel's description of her parents' home, the emotional chaos that dominates the Carpenter family dynamic is reflected in the physical disorder of the home. Pages 54 and 55 are a catalogue of chaos: "The chaos began in the basement, down steep, ill-lighted stairs . . . A pair of skis (one broken), cans of paint with their

lids gummed up, most likely forever . . . [b]roken terra-cotta flower pots" (54-5). More disorder is recalled causing Isobel to declare that "[i]t was a pretty scary place to be" (55). Chaos and madness are seen to be linked by contrast to the mentally and emotionally therapeutic nature of order; the house--except for the father's room--is redecorated allowing Isobel to express that she felt "for the first time in that terrible house, a kind of sensuous peace" (61). Paradoxically, a pattern of consistent chaos can become a form of order: "However chaotic the personal relationships within our family there had been a preciseness to my days and to my turnings" (140). Then, "like Alice down the rabbit hole" (Songs 144) from Alice in Wonderland, Isobel begins work at an actual mad house. On her very first day of work Isobel encounters the chronically mentally ill on Ward 88 and begins to see madness in its obvious form: "I had not known that madness would stink or speak to me directly. I felt that I would vomit if I didn't faint first" (147). Yet, only two weeks later Isobel has participated within the real madness to the extent that she accepts it easily, claiming: "[a]nd thus did I lose my mind's virginity" (148). A partial explanation of why it is that Isobel easily accepts an environment of actual madness, is that it is a concrete portrayal of the emotional madness characterized by the chaotic relationships within her family. "The terrible strain of all those years of pretending we were a 'normal' family had taken a terrible toll on me," Isobel writes; however, "Those crazy ladies, who were known by everybody, including themselves, to be mad, were refreshing" (149). By instilling order in the actual chaos of the ward, Isobel seems to gain control over the emotional chaos of her family. One patient, an elderly typhoid carrier, symbolizes Isobel's potential madness. Isobel admits that she may be projecting her own feelings onto the woman who is "[i]solated by madness, isolated by carrying within herself the

destruction of other people" (160). Isobel sees her as "unhappy, cut off, an outcast" as a result of the woman's madness and she pities the woman, as well as herself, perhaps recognizing the tragedy of being created inherently mad. Leaving behind the ordered chaos of the "Shit Ward," Isobel begins work in the sterile Operating Room and describes the experience in a way that suggests belief in an escape from madness: "There was such timing, such precision, such control. I, who had lived most of my life in chaos and disorder and who had found on 88 a kind of undistorted mirror image of the madness of my family, found in the OR a beauty and self-control that was created out of pain and ugliness and decay" (199). That this utopian escape from chaos and madness is not actually attainable is driven home by Isobel's accidentally being cut by a scalpel that might have been infected with syphilis. As the narrative ends with Isobel uncertain of her fate with respect to the disease, the final quotation from the Lewis Carroll story emphasizes that communication cannot be trusted since "madness", or self-delusion or misperception, is inescapable:

> "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."
>
> (207)

Beginning with the quotation that ends Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Blood delves into the motif of madness primarily through reference to the mad world of Alice in Wonderland. Mrs Blood summarizes my argument about madness--or at least about the artistic distortion process of being "through the looking glass"--as

permitting or causing misrepresentation of your self, even to yourself, with the line: "Once you're well and truly down the rabbit hole nothing seems incredible" (19).[13] And she associates the Wonderland metaphor with the Africa metaphor I have discussed by writing, "To be driven mad by a mosquito bite. It is terrible but fitting for this rabbit hole" (23). Throughout the text there are repeated references to Alice in Wonderland; following are some examples. An invitation to madness: "I put a sign on my breast, 'Eat me,' and on my lips a notice, 'Drink me,' but only the mosquitoes came" (26) in relation to "Only a madman would offer his flesh to a mosquito here" (149). In self pity: " . . . the whole new thing that was out there--and I couldn't get at--like Alice and her garden" (12). There is a character named "Mrs Hare" (28). Referring to the Chess Game in the Carrol story, in which one's role is dictated by another: "One should stick to the square one lands on and wait for somebody else to throw the dice" (94). Asserting her memory and directly referring to a text other than this one: "I remember Alice's debate about how she would send Christmas presents to her feet" (121). Observing the non-sensical creatures of Africa: "But the creature, who belongs to Lewis Carroll, scorned our offer and just went clicking on up the drive until he disappeared into the bush" (174). Wondering about her use of references: "And why did it occur to you to dress them as Alice and the White Rabbit for the fancy dress parade? Why that?" (180). And finally, wanting the madness and chaos to end, as it does for Alice, Mrs Thing says, "'I want this to be a dream'" (96).

In regard to the related madness metaphor involving Africa, Mrs Blood has the following to say: " . . . my Africa is only real for me" (43) and "'Once you've had a taste of Africa, you know, it's always in your blood'" (156). Diotte describes Isobel's Africa as being experienced as "an exaggeration," serving as "the background for the

kind of mental exaggerations of relationships and emotions that she herself creates" (63). Together, these two quotations re-emphasize the persistent inability of anyone to have objectively correct perceptions of one's self or of one's experiences.

"To all the Alices, whatever your mothers called you," reads a line in the dedication of Blown Figures and alerts the reader to the continuance of the Alice in Wonderland motif that permeates this text. As I mentioned previously, the first line of chapter one of Blown Figures is an address to Miss Miller, an apostrophe that arises again and again throughout the text occurring many times (19,31,32,34,42, 47,68,82, 102,103,120,130,134,136,140,141,143,146,147,148, 151,178,181,185). Louis MacKendrick claims, in "A Peopled Labyrinth of Walls," that Miss Miller "makes no response, and may function peripherally as merely a psychological projection. Some of the narrator's summonings of Miss Miller seem direct reflections of her own madness" (172).

As well, there are many quotations or slight distortions of quotations from Alice in Wonderland. The stylistic significance of the presence of these quotations will be discussed below, but as in Songs My Mother Taught Me, and Mrs Blood, the re-occurring Alice in Wonderland motif suggests an environment in which nonsense and confusion are dominant features of the landscape. The following are some examples of the quotations from Alice in Wonderland that occur in Blown Figures. "SO EITHER WAY I'LL GET INTO THE GARDEN AND I DON'T CARE WHICH HAPPENS," precedes a replica of an ad to "Be Taller;" the advertisement is followed by "I MUST BE GROWING SMALL AGAIN" (46). "O DEAR, WHAT NONSENSE I'M TALKING" quotes Isobel, and the reader might be tempted to agree given the mixture of thoughts that occur in the text (47). Isobel quotes from Alice in Wonderland at times

to illustrate that she has associated her own experience with Alice's: wishing the time to hurry she quotes, "'If you knew time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't' talk about wasting it, it's him'" (50). "Queens never make bargains!" she seems to threaten (66). While thinking about cursing in French she quotes, "'He taught Laughing and Grief,' said the Mock Turtle" (75). Perhaps desiring to be separated from the pain of her body Isobel seems to associate her feelings with this quotation: "'The executioner's argument was that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had such a thing to do before, and he wasn't going to begin at his time of life'" (143). She makes reference to two other head-chopping incidents in Alice in Wonderland on that page and the next (143-4). Perhaps itself a small metaphor for madness: "The chief difficulty is in managing my flamingo" (145) quotes Isobel. Several of the references that Isobel makes suggest a textual environment in which delusion or illusion are present. One such reference is, "Oh, what fun it will be, when they see me through the glass in here and can't get at me!" (68); because of the Alice story, the reader is warned that all that one sees might be a distortion of reality. Anne Archer questions the sincerity of all that the reader is told: "For Thomas' narrators tend to dominate their stories, generally to the extent that we know the supporting cast only through suspect second-hand reports" (220). Like the episode with Tweedledee and Tweedledum in Alice in Wonderland (145), Isobel queries her own creation about whose reality is the true reality: "You're only a sort of thing in my dream, Miss Miller; you're only a sort of something in my dream," she says of one imagined character, and of her own version of her self she asks, "Ah, Isobel, how do you like belonging to another person's dream?" (143).

In keeping with the unreal environment created by the Alice motif are several supporting examples of the delusionary state of reality, including: "None of this was real so why not adopt, temporarily, a sister or a friend?" (24). The reader must wonder how much of the text is adopted in the same gung ho spirit of make believe. A second example is in the form of an admission to Miss Miller in which Isobel says, "I have such strange twinkling random thoughts, like distant stars, in the great darkness of my mind" (32). Hallucinations occur frequently, including quite early in the text; in this example Isobel "had suddenly seen" all of her friends and relatives "dangling upside down from great black meat hooks, their throats slashed, their mouths open in a silent collective scream" (20). It seems that the reader would consider it likely that not all the experiences related to the reader are entirely objective and actual. One final example of reference to Alice in Wonderland relates the motif we have been discussing to the theme of splitting--that one's self is not actually a unified entity but a fragmented text. Found near the end of the text, the quotation is: "'This curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people'" (210).

Within the trilogy the motif of splitting or fragmentation occurs consistently. This motif along with the motif of the loss or dissolution of the self, creates an overall theme: that the self or subject is not in fact the unified, solid, subject required of liberal humanism and, in turn, of autobiography as we have discussed it. Thus, the self is unknowable, and as we shall see, inexpressible.

In Songs My Mother Taught Me, the motif of split personality occurs in two ways. It is spoken of directly or suggested directly, and it is exemplified through the presence of a third person point of view within the text of an "autobiography." Isobel addresses the splitting of her personality while recalling being forced to view

herself in a mirror. She writes, "I learned to disconnect myself early, to leave my body and stand outside, above really, looking downward at Clara holding Isobel" (63). She recalls other out of body perceptions of herself, such as when announcing the end of the war: " . . . running down the sandy road barefoot (and yet at the same time observing Isobel, messenger of glad tidings, running down the road in faded shorts and summer-toughened feet.)" (102). Isobel's "'real' life" working at the hospital separates her from her other life with her family, so that "the 'me' who took the bus back downtown twenty minutes later had nothing to do with the 'me' who had a life on 88" (150). During sexual awakening she views herself from the outside: "It wasn't me, it was some stranger who stood there and let this creature suck at me. Who unzipped his pants to discover the great bruised-looking thing she had never actually seen before" (181). To distance herself from new, potentially frightening experience, such as beginning the part of her job in the OR, Isobel splits into "Somebody, not Isobel [who]moved forward and Knocked on the door," only to return to herself--"Isobel came back"--when the situation involves a familiar, although unpleasant, co-worker (187).

Quite often throughout Songs My Mother Taught Me, Isobel either refers to herself in the third person, or even addresses herself as though a third person to some other part of her self's first person. She describes "the three of us, Harry, Jane, and Isobel" (16); inquires of herself, "Isobel, perhaps they are your totems?" (19); addresses postcards "Dear Isobel" and signs them "Your friend, I" (27); and informs the reader and herself, it seems, to "Look how well Isobel remembers" (38). Further examples of these third person "interventions" include: "I thanked him for the money, but I never spent it and Isobel has it still" (43); requiring introspection of herself by

asking, "Which was worse, Isobel?" (49); commenting that, "Isobel's family was always eating" (71); and summarizing the family interaction: "Such were the feasts of my childhood, of Isobel's youth" (83). She not only questions herself, she responds: "[Harry]Loved us.('did he, Isobel?' 'he did.')" (87).

As the label of "trilogy" suggests, a similar motif of splitting works itself through Mrs Blood. While it is also an element of style that I will discuss below, the **admission** by Mrs Thing that, "Some days my name is Mrs Blood; some days it's Mrs Thing," is the first line of the text and prepares the reader for further thematic evidence of the splitting of identity. Gottlieb and Keitner write that:

> At first, one is tempted to illuminate the obscurity of the character . . . in the light of feminist insights about woman's status and nature. For example, the Mrs Thing/Mrs Blood split suggests the fragmented nature of woman, divided, not only from other women, but also from herself, by language, tradition, religion, and law, in order to be for someone else. (368)

It is expected when the reader encounters Isobel making distinctions between parts of herself, as in the case of Mrs Thing's dislike of her husband's ability to cope in her absence: "But the bad me resents the ease of his adjustment--I am the only one who has to suffer" (98). It seems that Mrs Thing distances herself from her less than wifely feelings by portraying them as belonging to someone else altogether. At another time she refers to "my nasty inside self" when describing the silent sarcastic remarks that come into her head when she feels resentful (133). Using simile, Mrs Thing explains how hurtful treatment by her husband causes her to split into real and unreal selves; she writes, "I had no energy, no joy, no ambition. It was as though, when he left the house,

he took the real me with him and I was just a stand-in, waiting in another person's part" (146). Mrs Thing also refers to herself as "the other me" (195) and "the unreal me" versus "the real me" (180); the reader must wonder what experiences that are recounted here are "real" and which "unreal". At one point, Mrs Blood actually defines the word "cleave" as "to split" and "to cling" relating it to the image of her husband and herself, joined as one being through marriage, unable to experience the oneness because of being two opposed halves: "Now I think we are like Siamese twins, irrevocably joined in a back-to-back position. Not looking at one another, **unable** to, lying wide-eyed in the darkness and wondering how it happened" (181). That "[t]here are only two seasons here, wet and dry" contributes to the motif of splitting, as does the image of the Bambara carving. Because of the wet/dry extremes, according to a friend of Mrs Thing, "a beautiful Bambara carving they had split right in half" and Mrs Thing ponders, "Will I too crack like the Sutcliffes' Bambara?" (179). Mrs Thing writes of "when my fear threatens to completely shatter me" (192) and several times Mrs Thing/Mrs Blood recalls a woman asking if she "played Duplicate" (180,204). In "The Divided Self," McMullen writes that the novel is "a completely internal working out of the two opposing modes of looking at the world presented in the context of a singularly female experience, a miscarriage" (55).[14] As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the third person aspect of this motif is exemplified most significantly by the section headings of "Mrs Thing" and "Mrs Blood".

In keeping with the similarities uniting the trilogy, Blown Figures contains the motif of fragmentation, evident early in the text:

> . . . [A]nd yet sometimes from behind the invisible glass wall of her disguised madness she stared at the three of them as though they too

> were illusions, like herself, mannequins in a department store. . . . Sometimes she was on one side of the glass (**she** was the mannequin), sometimes she was on the other (they were **all** mannequins and "they" included she who stood outside and rapped and called. (14)

Since "We have all Africa and her prodigies within us" the splitting motif is evident when Africa (written as MAFROKA) is described as "the broken, the divided land" (41). While encountering ticket hassles Isobel seems to split: "She was aware of her own smallness at the same time; her voice was very thin and something quite separate from herself. The voice of the other Isobel was speaking" (76). In her madness, Isobel confronts Miss Miller, saying, "Don't speak to me Miss Miller. I am sure I shall split. I will split!" (109). It seems that Isobel of Blown Figures is prone to splitting, and this is further evidenced by the fact that most of the experiences in Blown Figures, are described, as I discussed earlier, in the third person, from where we are asked to "Consider Isobel" (3) through to where "Isobel danced to the obosom's drums with the smashed egg still plastered on her head" (233).

Throughout the trilogy there are other motifs that contribute to the attack on unified selfhood, including the prevalence of depictions of people, mostly Isobel, in terms of roles. Contrary to the philosophy of liberalism, one does not have the freedom of subjectivity, one is not free to act, but is acted upon. A person is defined by others relative to the duty that they feel is owed them by the person being defined. This is especially true of women, as Linda Hutcheon writes that identity or self "in the Western liberal humanist tradition has been defined in terms of rationality, individuality, and power; in other words, it is defined in terms of those domains traditionally denied women, who are relegated instead to the realms of intuition, family

collectivity, and submission" (5) By bearing all the imposed multiple roles, women lose the ability to be subjects.

In Songs My Mother Taught Me, Isobel tries to define herself according to her position within her family: "But who was Isobel when she was awake? Daughter of Warren Joseph Cleary, and Clara Blake, nee Goodenough, Cleary, younger sister of Jane Elizabeth, who walks beside her, black-gowned and white surpliced in the Junior Choir" (29). The significance of roles as factors of identity is illustrated by Isobel's characterization of the women at a class celebration according to their positions as mothers: "'Now let me see, "Merry Christmas to Mommy from Helen." Well! Will Helen's mommy come forward, please?' . . . Naturally the novelty of this wore off. Peter's mommy, Mary Lou's mommy, Ronald's mommy--" (46-7). Isobel, as well as the text's title, suggests that she thinks of herself in terms of being a daughter, and identifies aspects of her self based on their being the result of being a daughter: "Mother equated her misery with lack of 'station' and 'nice things.' And, being my mother's daughter, I did this too" (57). Names--especially married names--function as identities, yet names are imposed by others, and are in fact only monikers of one's role relative to family. During the war: "The downstate aunties sent us sterling-silver identification tags on thin silver chains. 'Isobel M. Cleary,' in beautiful copperplate script. . . .I did not like to be so absolutely **chained** to me" (96). Free will--a definitive element in the liberal humanist notion of subject--is not available to a person identified in a roll by others, and Isobel feels this, acknowledging that, "I was more or less used to being a pawn in my parents' quarrels" (124). Because of one's roles, one is not always free to identify one's self on one's own terms: "At six I already understood, although I could not have articulated it, that Jane and I were the dream images

projected above the wasteland of our mother's life" (97). Despite the pressure of others identifying us, one does not always match even that identity; Isobel describes her mother's disappointment at realizing this fact: "It began to dawn on her that I would never be the golden girl she had dreamed of but simply Isobel, her daughter, another of life's misfits" (136). Like family roles, gender roles are constructed by society and infringe on one's ability to define one's own self. In Songs My Mother Taught Me, this aspect of the role motif is not very prevalent, yet there is the one example in which Isobel feels the socially inflicted handicap of being female, admitting that, in a confrontation with a male co-worker, "His masculinity defeated me" (192).

In Mrs Blood, the effect of roles on the definition of identity is a frequent motif. In hospital, Mrs Thing, perhaps sarcastically, has identified a patient, by that patient's own manner of identifying with a role; the woman is known as "'I-am-the-daughter-of-a-chief'" (22). Naming, as an aspect of the role motif, is contributed to, once again, by the way in which Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing refers to herself by objectified names that represent the two roles she plays, that of visceral, suffering, frightened mother in the physical sense, and that of selfless maternal agent for the social, material fulfilment of her family. Bellette writes that "Her own identity is constantly fought for but never attained" (67) and notes that her "Fantasy selves [including]Alice, the Red Queen, the White Queen, Mary Queen of Heaven, the Nightmare Life in Death [are] fantasies that are essentially the creations of men" (67). Social, ethnic roles play a part in identity: "After all, he and I are 'white,' relatively speaking, and thrown together in a strange country. And his wife is English. Therefore we are 'connected,' as it were" (24). As always, traditional family roles play their part in typing an individual. Jason's mother stresses her identification with role of mother by reminding Mrs Thing that,

"'He wants such a lot of looking after'" (67). Jason's mother also refers to her husband as "Father" rather than by name (134). Like Isobel's mother in Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Thing is excessively concerned with how appearances will affect other people's perceptions of how well she fills her role. Mrs Thing worries that, "if they go with buttons missing and braids undone the ladies will discuss it over coffee. 'Poor things. They seem very happy, of course, but you can see they need a mother's touch'" (137). When the reader reads that there is "Beer or tea and sandwiches for all the 'Mummies and Daddies'" (139) at a children's party, the reader discovers that adults other than just Mrs Thing seem to be identified according to their parental roles. Both Jason and Mrs Thing expect that it is "'The woman's role'" to plan ahead for trips and the necessities of daily living; unfortunately Mrs Thing does not live up to this expectation, being "not a practical person" (140). In a long episode (160-1), Mrs Thing criticizes herself for being unable to fulfil the expected woman's role. She feels guilt at her laziness, which is actually the immobility caused by her miscarriage; she fears her own inadequacy relative to the capabilities of the other women who can do such typical wife/mother tasks as sew curtains or cook without recipes. Roles confuse and dilute any sense of unique self that a woman might have:

> It is impossible for me to see other people as separate from myself. Jason is my husband; Mary, my daughter; Nicholas, my son. I can only imagine what they are thinking by imagining what I would think if I were in Jason's position--which is quite different from imagining what I would think if I were Jason! (191)

Elizabeth Potvin writes:

> Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing is in conflict with her many roles: patient, mother wife, lover, neighbour, creator, and destroyer. Like an artist attempting to catalogue her experiences and organize out of the chaos of daily life a consistent philosophy, Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing comments on the many selves which operate simultaneously in her mind. (39-40)

Blown Figures maintains a slightly less dominant roles motif. Similarly to the other volumes in the trilogy, Blown Figures does at times demonstrate that family roles are a form of identity, for "She was Isobel, wife of Jason, and mother of Mary and Nicholas (MA MA, MA MA, the breast)" (14). And again, much later in the text, Isobel recalls her daughter screaming "'Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!'" and not fulfilling the motherly role that identifies her: "She had deserted her daughter; she whose arms were meant to enfold her, to comfort her, to say 'there, there,' had run away" (200). Isobel fails even to fulfil the identities imposed on her by others.

The motif of loss or dissolution of the self runs forcefully through each of the three volumes of the trilogy. In Songs My Mother Taught Me, this loss of self is often suggested by the absence of first person pronouns, as in "Would sit on the buffalo rug in front of the fire, squinting up at the clock, my fingers on my wrist" (18) and, "Made tiny eye holes and stared at our elders. . ." (19). Isobel asks at the beginning of chapter two, "But who was Isobel when she was awake?" implying that she does not have the answer (29). "In a house where the body was virtually denied any existence" (63), a child can grow up without much of an image of self; and this absence of self image is portrayed in Isobel's description of looking for her reflection in water: "I stood in the middle of the bridge, leaning on the parapet and gazing down into the muddy river. What did I expect to see reflected there? My face? A sign? There was only a metallic

shimmer, painful to look at, where the sun spread itself on the water" (140). In a similar experience, Isobel's sister and she recount the result of one of their mother's tantrums, smashing the bathroom mirror: "'The frame hung there for days and one night, brushing your teeth, you chanced to look up and saw only a blank piece of cardboard and not your face. Your face had disappeared'" (84). Sadly, this lack of self is reflected not only in the images of the text, but also in how it has affected the main character, who "always wanted to be somebody, **anybody** else" (163).

Similar loss of self episodes occur in Mrs Blood. Mrs Thing recalls a childhood incident in which the face of her mother "disappears." Fearing that she has lost her nurse and hoping that "the person I was following wouldn't turn around and prove to have a different face" Mrs Thing recounts a childhood experience with fear: "And when I threw my arms around my mother's waist she was no longer my mother but a terrible voice which said, 'What on earth,' and who wore the face of a stranger" (38-9). That one's own self can be a stranger is implied by Mrs Thing's description of herself in a photograph; she writes, "I look--how do I look? Slightly drunk, happy, about to take a bon voyage. A stranger. A face in a blurred mirror" (194). In delirium of her miscarriage--itself an image of the inability to form self--Mrs Blood confesses, somewhat cryptically, "I am not what I am" (215). And again the reader might consider the image of the marriage union as Siamese twins (119), an image that depicts the dissolve of possibly unique beings into a multiple yet joined being: "Now we are linked together like some grotesque infant with two of everything except some vital piece--backbone perhaps. Our history prevents us from ever drawing apart: Mary, Nicholas, the past as 'we,' not he and I"(119).

Blown Figures is representative of the dissolution of a self in its **style**, which I will discuss below, but the dissolution **motif** occurs throughout as well. Early in the text, Isobel recalls a possible omen in the way in which her mother addressed letters to her: "For years her mother had written her letters during her own personal crises. They always said TO BE DESTROYED in the upper left-hand corner, just above her name and address as though it were she, and not the letter, which was to be destroyed"(13). Later in the text, an inserted fragment from a print advertisement--probably for some type of insurance--asks, "Are you self-employed" and since Blown Figures is concentrated around Isobel's destructive journey into self the answer for her is yes. But the ad continues, "But suppose you had an accident," forewarning of the possible destruction of self (134). One such "accident" might be the influence of those that helped construct what one believes to be one's own self, as the proverb says, "'He who molds your head like a waterpot it is he who can break you'" (185). In a delusional state, Isobel writes of herself, "She was dissolving again" (132), and depicts her own imaginings of self destruction:

> Her arm, which lay mostly outside the bus window, resting on the windowsill, had detached itself and taken on a life of its own, a separateness, which terrified her. . . . [I]t all became more than real and yet at the same time an illusion--it was not her arm but someone else's arm. Soon it would be her legs that would go funny, her other arm, her body. What would happen when it reached her head? her whole self would be OUT THERE somewhere and she would be . . . NO. (132)

Perhaps the final "NO" is a refusal to continue with the illusion, or perhaps it is the answer to the question of what she would be, the ultimate negative, nothing. At times

Isobel fears that she is nothing, confessing that she "believed not only in the non-existence of God but had (increasing) periods of sheer terror when she knew for a fact that she herself did not exist" (128). Even in the eyes of her husband Isobel seems to fail to exist: "('Isobel doesn't live,' said Jason to a friend, 'she exits.' He meant to say 'exists.')" (13). Amidst the pressure created by the presence of other's selves, "Isobel felt hemmed in by brown legs and gabardine trousers; she was dissolving again" (189). Finally, just prior to her complete disintegration, Isobel is dissolved by her own delusional logic:

> Isobel knew that she was about to confess to the crime of witchcraft and yet she also knew there were no such things as witches. "If this is the case," whispered one of the demons who perched for a moment, in the guise of a red buttertly, on her shoulder, "then by confessing to being that which is not, you are confessing to being nothing." (222)

The remainder of the text is a fragmented portrayal of a self in complete breakdown, almost random thought processes and associations representing the disintegration of the self.

Stylistically, the three volumes of the trilogy contribute to the theme of the non-unique, anti-liberal human, nature of subject. While it is true that similarity in style contributes to the idea that the texts are volumes in a trilogy, they attack the notion of a single, unified self in two stylistic ways: their style is fragmented rather than unified and typically narrative; and their style includes making use of sources other than original and unique thoughts or experiences.[15] Robert Diotte describes the books as "episodic internally" and says that "the dominant structural techniques through out the trilogy are juxtaposition and discontinuous narrative" (61). Because this multiplicity of

roles makes it impossible to have a typical narrative thread of self, the narrative fragmentation of the texts reflects the fragmentation of identity.

Songs My Mother Taught Me stylistically contributes to the theme of disunified self by the fact that it is in two parts rather than one consecutive narrative. While the title of the text suggests a unified body of songs, within the text they are distinguished between Songs of Innocence, and Songs of Experience. It is true that each part is mostly a straight-forward narrative--Songs My Mother Taught Me is the most narrative of the three texts in the trilogy--yet within each part there exist subtle breaks in the narrative. One such break is the occurrence of flashback. While the flashback might consist of thoughts relative to the incident in which it occurs, its presence disturbs the flow of narrative. An example of this occurs while Isobel is narrating a story about dinner and dessert: while describing her mother's interest in the father's dessert Isobel interrupts the narrative with a repetition of the mother's nagging of the husband from an earlier episode at Journey's End. The text reads as follows:

> And when it came, over her sherbet, Mother:
> "Just give me a little taste, Daddy, just to
> see what it's like."
> ("You didn't have to make such a pig of
> yourself." "Who Did?" "You. You're digging
> your grave with your teeth." . . .) (77)

The same stylistic contribution to this theme occurs each time the third person perspective intervenes, questions, or criticizes (as mentioned previously), such as when Isobel reminds herself of her grandfather's advice:"('Isobel, there is nothing in life worth clenching your fists about.')" (198), first encountered on page 92. Furthermore,

the typical narrative is called into question by the time-stamping of passages "4:17" (93) and "4:35" (102) and the implication that the reader is supposed to believe that the nine pages between have either occurred within that eighteen minutes or been written, like journal entries, within that eighteen minutes--neither is possible.

A greater amount of narrative interruption and fragmentation occurs in Mrs Blood. To begin with, there are two separate narrators, Mrs Thing and Mrs Blood, and each seems to tell her story with a different focus and a slightly different voice:

> Mrs Thing, then, might be woman as she is acted upon: passive, performing perfunctory roles that have blurred her identity and transformed her into her object or function. Mrs Blood, by contrast might be woman in touch with a universal source of female strength, yet wholly overwhelmed by her reproductive capacity.
>
> (Gottlieb/Keitner 368)

Sometimes, as on page 61, the contributions from Mrs Blood and Mrs Thing seem to be written as though entries in a journal, void of narrative progression or any remarks meant to include them within the flow of narrative. One brief Mrs Blood "entry" skips between four apparently unrelated images and memories (61); then a Mrs Thing entry is a reportorial quotation from a visitor at the hospital (61-2). Several passages in the text (119-120, and 189-191, for example) contain what appear to be snippets from local African newspapers, without any real comment or narrative progression from either Mrs Thing or Mrs Blood, going so far as to include a drawing of a smiling fish (191). Other passages (214-220 for instance) consist of one or two line thoughts, quotes, or allusions in a nearly random order: "She verbalizes a catalogue of horoscopes, advertisements, and assorted trivia from the local newspaper . . . reports domestic

chatter . . .reproduces someone else's diary . . ." (Gottlieb/Keitner 369). Clearly this text is no ordinary narrative that would be representative of a liberal humanist subject's self expression.

Blown Figures, usually the least typically autobiographical of the three volumes, is also the most fragmented, least narrative structurally. Newspaper clippings, diagrams, poems, cartoons, brief quotations, brief images, foreign language passages, and blank spaces dominate the overall structure of the text. Archer claims that "the montage-like displacement of events all powerfully simulate Isobel's sense of her divided self" (218).

As I discussed in Chapter One, intertextuality suggests multiplicity, rather than unity. The deferral of meaning that arises out of a discourse which is woven with quotations, references, and echoes--one's cultural language--makes it such that a text can never be unified and original. Once writing, the author dissolves in the intertext of language. That an "autobiographical" trilogy is so (externally) intertextual tells the reader that, for one, autobiographical texts cannot truly express a self, **even if it were** a liberal humanist subject; and secondly, because of the intertextuality between volumes, the autobiographical subject at hand--Isobel-- is a text, multiple and unoriginal, and therefore not a liberal humanist subject.

Songs My Mother Taught Me begins with a quotation from a Yeats poem, introducing a pattern of literary allusion and even of borrowing of text from outside sources that is witnessed to a greater degree in the other two volumes of the trilogy.[16] "[L]iterature of the past furnishes an ironic framework for the entire novel," Caldwell tells us of Songs My Mother Taught Me (50), referring to Blake's writings. Beyond the reference to Blake in the division of the two parts of the text, the text contains

children's nursery rhyme type passages like the prologue containing the cyclical story told by "Antonio;" bits of hymn, such as "All thing Bright and Beu-uu-tee-full" set out within the print on the page (35); distinctly printed poems such as "Oh the only girl I ever loved/Had a face like a horse and buggy . . ." (72); the type from invented Burma Shave signs (92); an allusion to Plato's cave (139); an allusion to the fanciful tale of the Ancient Mariner, voyager and compulsive story teller (160); quotations from the inside of greeting cards (162); invented headlines written in bold capitals (163); and numerous aforementioned references and quotations from Alice In Wonderland. The originality of the self that is supposed to be expressed in this "autobiographical" text is called into doubt by the author's reliance on external, socially shared and constructed references.

Like Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs Blood begins with a literary quotation and contains those intertextual elements mentioned directly above. "Echoes of Carroll's work are everywhere in Mrs Blood and Blown Figures," Caldwell informs us, "to enforce the narrator's sense of alienation in the strange 'mad' land both of Africa and of her own mind and body" (50). Both this text and Blown Figures, because of their reliance on available fragments of outside texts to express ideas, suggest a lack of originality or uniqueness to the thoughts and experiences of the author. "Mrs Blood has read a lot," we are told by Bellette: "The pages of the novel are filled with literary echoes, from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from Carroll, from Coleridge, as well as from the unsung compilers and compositors of dictionaries and newspaper ads. A great deal of symbolic freight is brought into the novel in this manner" (66). Isobel's reliance on intertextuality informs the reader that one's own self is to a great degree constructed by external influences, rather than essentially one's own and unique.

While the fragmented narrative structure and use of external intertext within the trilogy attacks the possibility of one's expressing a true autobiography, the occurrence of intertext between the volumes of the trilogy, and within a single volume of the trilogy, attacks the notion that the liberal humanist subject that would be the subject of that autobiography is likely to exist. Beginning with Songs My Mother Taught Me--justified only by fictional chronology--as a basis from which to compare stories relayed in the next two volumes of the trilogy, the reader may find some repeated memories, what Gottlieb and Keitner call "a (by now) well known Isobelian past" (371). While it would seem that the repetition of these memories in separate texts should contribute to the argument that they are in fact volumes of an autobiographical trilogy, the distortions between the first and second version of the episode force the reader to realize--along with the fact that memory is faulty--that stories **change** in the telling, consciously or unconsciously. One episode, by way of example, from near the end of Songs My Mother Taught Me (177-183) appears in altered form in the early part of Mrs Blood (35-36). This episode is Isobel's sexual encounter with an older boy named Digger. In the first depiction of it Isobel describes the setting in detail, the process of getting to their rendezvous, and vividly describes the sexual acts and sensations she participated in and experienced. In the second depiction of this same experience, many details are left out: Isobel hides from anyone in the village who might see her (from her Father, in the first episode); Digger says, "You'll be able to nurse a baby really well," (versus: "Good for nursing"); Mrs Blood claims that after his kissing her breasts she "didn't feel anything else" (yet in the first depiction she loses herself in sexual bliss during extended touching and oral sex). The reader, familiar with both depictions, is left to wonder at the author's possible intentions for

altering her story: Are other stories to be accepted as true when one reads them? It would be a chore in itself to catalogue the common episodes and passages shared amongst the three texts; suffice is to say that in the retelling a distortion usually occurs.[17] Speaking more of Thomas herself then of the narrator in the trilogy, Wachtel explains a truism for the narrator: "Transparency is an illusion. An incident may be related in one way and reappear in another book, to take a different course" (4). And Caldwell makes a similar claim: "When on looks closely at all of Thomas' novels, it becomes apparent that the episodes are not in fact repeated; each telling is a different form and for a different artistic purpose, as a painter might give the same model in different poses"(47). The "artistic shaping" (Caldwell 47) that occurs when Thomas puts her life into fiction is the same as what one can assume happens between the living of her life that Isobel experiences, and the expression of her life in writing in the form of these volumes of her autobiographical trilogy. Realizing this, the reader of the trilogy must deduce that the telling of any story in the form of an autobiography is likely to be some distorted version of the actual, objective events; thus, what the author appears to want the reader to learn of the author from the telling must be absorbed with scepticism regarding the bias in the portrayal of the events. Nothing can be accepted as truth because nothing is impartially offered as truth.

The final aspects of style also contribute to the argument that truth cannot be expressed because the very nature of language is such that it never gets around to a conclusive meaning. All language is open to interpretation, as I discussed in Chapter One. Each word "practises the infinite deferral of the signified" (Barthes, "Work" 76), meaning that distortions and variations of meaning are inherent in every word. While one interpretation of the word play and parody that the narrator of the trilogy performs

might be that she is manipulating a system of language that excludes so that she can, by distorting it, learn to identify herself.[18] I would argue that in fact the word play and parody demonstrate that the narrator is aware of the deferral of meaning and is thus confessing to her inability to express herself. Throughout the three volumes of the trilogy the reader can notice Isobel's tendency to play on words. Again, while this seems to link stylistically the texts, arguing that they are indeed volumes written by the same author, as a theme the point is made that writing cannot be trusted to convey a simple, single truth.

In Songs My Mother Taught Me, Isobel confesses to her "love of words", and the fact that this love of words created problems in understanding: "Because of my love of words and my mother's particular obsessions, I mistakenly associated Germany and germs" (95). Even before this confession the reader witnesses Isobel's penchant for punning. While exploring a cemetery, in particular, a crypt, Isobel melds meanings of words: "'Shut up.' (And Jane's whisper came back from the walls as though those dead people were whispering shut up shut up shut up which is what they were and what we would be too)" (39). Several times Isobel's habit of word play is exemplified in the telling of jokes. The answer to knock-knock jokes with the question "'Jenny who?'" is "'Jennytalia'" (196); "'Sam and Janet who?'" is "'Samandjanet evening'" (188); and "'Isobel who?'" is "'Is a bell necessary on a bicycle?'" (142).

In Mrs Blood the author is at her most playful in terms of language. However, before citing examples of her word play, it is prudent to illustrate from her text that Mrs Blood/ Mrs Thing is aware of the failure of language to adequately express meaning. The African quotation at the beginning of part three is explained in English but qualified by the explanation, "Free translation of the symbols seen carved on a

Chief's stool" (201). That language symbols need to be translated in the first place suggests the inadequacy of language, and that the translation is "free"--in other words, not authoritative--further implies this fault. It is mentioned again, this time about Russian, that "this can be only an approximate translation" (208). A similar concept is implied in the slight joke made by Mrs Blood:

> "And one of the most amazing things," she said, "was the way the driver said 'Allons, allons," and the horse knew what he was talking about. For a minute I thought to myself, 'What a clever horse to understand French,' when I have such difficulty with it." (175)

The nature of language is that a single word may have several meanings, the appropriateness of which is it the responsibility of the listener/reader to assess. While trying to understand the concept of descendants, Mrs Blood, as a child, attaches a literal meaning to the scenario: "And I looked up 'descended' (because he would never tell us the meanings, you know) and saw the man come slowly down out of the sun under his big white parachute" (112). Given that people can sit around "uttering sounds which were mostly. . . meaningless" (75) when the speaker and listener understand different languages (or even different experiences with the same language), it is not surprising that others "wouldn't understand. And they would be right not to, for the real Africa (whatever that may mean) is none of these [words] and my Africa is only real for me" (43).

It is common for Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing to exploit stylistically the fact that words have different meanings based on one's experience and associations. This exploitation is made most evident by her play with words. Mrs Thing plays word games with her doctor, guessing the meaning of French phrases such as "boite de nuit,"

which is taken to mean outhouse, a box delivered at night, a nightclub, and the more ominous, coffin (25-6). Recalling her memories is referred to as "'doing our exorcises'" (68). Mrs Blood toys with definitions of the word "grave" (150), arriving at six different meanings and employing the word in an array of meanings:

> Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven
>
> image . . .
>
> "You are very ill," he said gravely. "You are
>
> gravely ill."
>
> And the grave will decay you. (150)

From "grave" she associates to "grieve" and then puns on the French, referring to her own suffering, "Avez-vous du pain?" (150)--pain as hurt, pain as bread, as the proverbial bun in the oven. As with "grave" she puns on "lie": I lie/You lie/Come love lie/beside me lie/Your lies/beside me" (172). In keeping with her morbid sense of humour, Mrs Blood switches words into common phrases, referring to the dead as "Peasants under grass" (210); and "All fresh is glass" (66). One can ironically substitute words into known phrases to emphasize a certain association, as Mrs Blood/Mrs Thing does in the following examples of parody. Of her own ill flesh she writes, "I stink therefore I am" (21). Religious parody: "This is the bloody and bawd of Christ which was riven for thee" (21). The male bias of Catholic sacraments is emphasized by one's emphasizing the usage of male pronouns and the hidden word in "**Amen**" (151). Parody of bible verse to illustrate the anti-christian nature of prejudice: "The skins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children" (156). Another example of religious parody: "Give us this day our barely dead" (171). And even without substituting words the irony becomes evident when common phrases are juxtaposed

with uncommon situations, such as the sacrament of communion being "performed" with the bleeding body of Mrs Blood:

> And call out to Jason who has no ears, "This is my body," and fling back the sheets and cry out to him who has no eyes, "And this is my blood." And take his head between your hands and force it down, crying, "Drink this, eat this in remembrance of me." . . . (91)

Word play and the resulting parody create an atmosphere in which the reader must feel that all meaning is only tentative, subject to re-interpretation at any time, constructed, and multiple. In this sort of environment, no objective truth can be reached.

A similar atmosphere of play and parody is present in Blown Figures, in which Isobel notes the curious deferral of meaning by quoting: "'No one dared to say, "the King is going to die," although they might state, "the house is going to fall" or "the great tree is about to be uprooted"'" (162). As in Mrs Blood, the substitution of words can create humorous, ironically true statements, such as "Time is money, Miss Miller./The whores pass slowly here" (154). Isobel also plays with the visual aspect of language, creating French words--which will need to be translated--from phonetic spellings which first need to be pronounced to be understood: "Uhn ohm mah pree mohng sahk!" (118). "Bun shawns!" she writes in a similar example, as well as "She was very young for Heure H" (41). Even parodying her own poem creates an atmosphere that demands a re-examination of meaning: "The mirrors are broken" from her poem (44) is distorted to "the mirrors are doorways" in similar lines written in prose (85). While the meaning is unclear, the fact that different associations can affect the meanings of sentences is again emphasized. Like the reader, while Isobel seems to revel in her own word play, the slippery nature of meaning with respect to language--

the inability to express truth--leaves her "Squashed by the words, strangled by the sentences. Isobel struggles to get free" (111).

CONCLUSION

At this point, the reader of this discussion probably shares with Isobel the sense of being "squashed by the words" and is "struggling to get free." To aid that struggle, let me summarily trace the arguments that have been put forth in this paper.

It all began with the idea gained from certain criticism that Audrey Thomas was depicting her own life in her novels. Quickly, we moved on to the more acceptable idea that the **narrators** were writing their own autobiographies. In order to use these narrators' texts as criticism of autobiography--since the criticism exists within the genre--we had first to prove that they were in fact characteristic of autobiographical writing.

Since there is no definitive definition of autobiography, and each critic creates their own parameters, the only way to prove the above assertion was to set up our own parameters. We qualified autobiographical writing in terms of various characteristics, including authority, originality, uniqueness, unity, and truthfulness, together which illustrate that autobiographical writing is founded on the liberal humanist notion of subject. Indeed, we tried to prove that autobiography requires at its heart the liberal humanist subject.

French critical theory within the Poststructural movement has created some interesting challenges to the liberal humanist subject, and by extension, to the concept of autobiographical writing. We explored these challenges under two very closely

related areas of critique: the critique of the unified self; and the critique of the expression of self (or any "truth"). Together these critiques destroy the "extratextual referent"--the liberal humanist subject/autobiographer.

The critique of unified self asserts that the self is socially constructed, and, therefore, is multiple, not unique, not inventive, and not original. The socially constructed self is "held together" by the thread of memory, which we discovered to be extremely flawed and untrustworthy.

The overlapping critique of the **expression** of self/truth asserts that the self is multiple and unoriginal because it is constructed in language. Language has the inherent problem of the "infinite deferral of the signified," that is, language can never allow its user to arrive at a final meaning. Therefore, a self cannot arrive at a final concept of themself, nor could they ever **express** that concept truthfully and with meaning to an other.

Because the texts are then stripped of the authority of the author, they are free to be interpreted according to whatever thread of meaning can be picked out from them. We have looked at the three texts in question relative to the thread of meaning (surely not the only one) that expresses their allegiance to the French critical attack on the liberal humanist subject, and thus on autobiography.

We first established that the texts qualified as autobiography by illustrating their adherence to qualities of that writing, including the use of the first person pronoun, the use of a retrospective account, the provision of a contour of life, and the use of a third person perspective at times. We then established that the three texts were linked in a trilogy of autobiography because they share elements of theme and style that suggest the same narrator. These themes and styles--some of which are

characteristic of autobiographical writing--include themes of journey to self discovery, temporal interaction (memory), madness, fragmentation, role-identity, and the dissolution of the self; and elements of style including fragmented narrative structure, intertextuality, self-intertextuality, and word play and parody.

We established that each of the above themes and elements of style actually demonstrated the fallacy of the liberal humanist subject. The journey fails to end in discovery. Memory is flawed and cannot unify a person. Madness creates a landscape of misperceptions and lies. The self is shown as fragmented, not unified. Roles are identities created by others, denying the autonomy of the subject. The self is seen to be anything but solid and expressible. The split narrative suggests a split identity that is represented in the narrative. Intertextuality admits that the self is not original or unified. Self-intertextuality emphasizes that stories change in the telling. Word play and parody confess the realization that meaning can never be pinned down: there is no signified, no locus of truth, and therefore no extratextual referent.

Since the extratextual referent is the liberal humanist subject as autobiographer, we must then conclude that there is no autobiographer, and thus no autobiography. The texts of Thomas's narrators argue that this is the case. A worthwhile exercise would be to examine the presence or absence of similar arguments in the four other novels of Audrey Thomas, Latakia, Munchmeyer/Prospero on the Island, Intertidal Life, and Graven Images.

It might also be interesting to examine why criticism of the texts at hand tends to emphasize the autobiographical nature of the writing, rather than the arguments against autobiography. And taking one step further out, wonder why some criticism

still maintains that not only are the texts autobiographical of their narrators, but that the novels are representative of the life of Audrey Thomas.

Perhaps the pursuit of this wonder lies in the significance of autobiography (before it is defeated). Autobiography's supposed significance is that is depicts truth, both of an individual and of that individual's time and place. Perhaps an examination of this type would lead to interesting conclusions about the ideological functions of the Canadian canon;[19] that is, we might discover that because autobiography is seen as the ultimate case of mimetic literature, and mimetic literature circularly reinforces the Canadianess deemed admirable in the Canadian canon, autobiography is embraced by the Canadian critics.

Notes

[1] Chris Weedon defines subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (32), and I would add all of the characteristics of the liberal humanist subject that I discuss: for I use "subject," "selfhood," "self," "personality," and "identity," fairly interchangeably, since I am not attempting the definitive work on "subjectivity," and the critics I have used separately use different terms when it is clear that they are discussing the same entity.

[2] As I do by limiting autobiography within the liberal human notion of subject, I have not pursued absolute definition of autobiography and use the term to describe whatever writing is meant to refer outside its text to the creator of that text and her world.

[3] See, for instance, Archer; Wachtel.

[4] See, for instance, Archer (215-16); Bowering (87); Diotte; and Lawrence (99).

[5] In a discussion of styles of autobiography, Starobinski provides a good catalogue of commonly accepted qualities of autobiographical writing.

[6] See, for instance, Archer or Diotte for discussions of many elements shared amongst books of the trilogy. I have tried to focus on only those that help demonstrate the autobiographical qualities of the texts so that I may rightfully use the texts to critique autobiographical writing.

[7] In a discussion of a variety of types of autobiographers Howarth provides a good catalogue of accepted qualities of autobiographical writing.

[8] Elizabeth Potvin writes: "The many references to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness support Thomas' contention that Africa is a metaphor for the unconscious in her fiction" (390). The metaphor appears throughout the trilogy, and throughout my discussion.

[9] Alice in Wonderland, like Africa, is a recurring metaphor. See, for instance, Diotte:

> 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. (65)

Also, see below, regarding "looking glass."

[10] See my discussion of the faults of memory in Chapter One.

[11] Howarth describes a type of autobiographer who "assumes that he was and is essentially the same person so his book depicts the past as a series of spontaneously ordered events" (96). He also describes a type that "share equally strong doubts, especially about their current state of mind. Uncertain of the present, they study the past for some explanation of their later difficulties" (105).

[12] See my discussion of memory in Chapter One: the author is not a true liberal humanist subject because the narrative she tells herself of herself--her narrative thread of memory--is merely a fiction.

[13] The "looking glass" is recurring metaphor for the distortion between life and art, experience and expression.

[14] Miscarriage, as the title of this thesis suggests, is a metaphor for the inability of a unified self to be formed. See Boxill (114) in which he suggests that Mrs Blood/ Mrs Thing is incapable of creation, just as a true self is incapable of existing, and incapable of being expressed.

[15] "In a narrative in which the narrator takes his own past as theme, the individual mark of style assumes particular importance," writes Starobinski (74), supporting the idea that the trilogy may be seen to be linked as such by the common elements of style, autobiographical or otherwise. The novels are "held together by Thomas' cumulative experiments with narrative techniques which etch, illuminate, and enlarge Isobel, her chief creation" (Gottlieb/Keitner 364)

[16] See also MacKendrick: "Blown Figures is both psychologically and poetically structured" (169); and "What can be ascribed to the narrator constitutes a meta-text. Her fragmentary associations, allusions, metaphors, and suggestive parallels acts as part of generally hallucinatory intrusions into Isobel's consciousness" (180). See also Caldwell (54).

[17] See Wachtel: "In writing and rewriting one's life it becomes new; each time is different" (6)

[18] See, for instance, Potvin.

[19] See Bennet; Lecker; Mathews; and McCarthy.

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