Hatching the posthuman: Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s egg”

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In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Coral Ann Howells, having commented that Margaret Atwood’s short stories “have as yet received little scholarly attention”, suggests that discussion of the stories and other writings is a kind of “academic sleuthing” as critics “explore the metaphysical dimensions and postmodern strategies of Atwood’s story-telling” (10). In this essay I will engage in a bit of this sleuthing as I consider the “postmodern strategies” of one of Atwood’s stories, “Bluebeard’s Egg”, particularly in regards to the relationship between the body and text.

Madeleine Davies, in a discussion of three of Atwood’s novels, argues that “[i]n each text..., the body that Atwood writes offers a figurative commentary on the framing narrative and forges provocative connections between the two...’text’ and ‘body’ are locked together in mutual expression” (69). The complex parallels and intersections between body and text of the “posthuman subject” are remarked by Katherine Hayles, who argues that the subject “is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction”. The fluidity and unfixed nature of the posthuman subject is analogous to unfixable and volatile signification, and Hayles sees “deep connections between the struggle to maintain control of ... narrative and the threat to ‘natural’ body boundaries posed by the cybernetic paradigm” (23).

These comments present a useful starting point for a reading of Margaret Atwood’s story “Bluebeard’s Egg”, where multiple intertexts circulate in the narrative, evoking and resisting old “meanings” and opening up new ones, at the same time as the body threatens to enter the world of cyberspace. Just as identity in this story is not fixed and single, but layered, enigmatic, deceptive and in the process of transformation, so do other stories haunt the text: echoes not just of the older Bluebeard tales (particularly those of the Grimm brothers and Perrault), but of epic, fairy tale, myth, detective fiction, science fiction, even the nineteenth century novel. These create complex and shifting layers of palimpsests which destabilize attempts to arrive at simple and single “truth”. In
“Bluebeard’s Egg” language and bodies intersect, at the same time as both are in a continual process of construction and reconstruction; textual meaning and the meaning of the body are fluid, situated as they are “within the history of discourse itself” (Hutcheon, 7). While this open-endedness and undecidability may be unsettling and even confronting, it can also be liberating. If the story is not fixed, you can create your own (the egg at the end is smooth and white, waiting for new inscriptions); and unfixed subjectivity/bodily identity, whilst it may lead to “a failure to be completely there, or with the occupation of liminal territories which mark uneasy gaps between ‘real’ and ‘other’” (Davies, 58), can also generate a liberating space in which the self can be remade (the egg also suggesting new birth). In the rest of this essay I will explore the play of unfixable signification in “Bluebeard’s Egg”, and then consider the way it is analogous to, and interconnected with, the unbounded body and emergent subjectivity.

Numerous critics have pointed to the complex network of intertextual references throughout Atwood’s fiction. Sharon Rose Wilson comments, for example, that “Margaret Atwood reuses the old, great stories, modifying and usually subverting them, hiding their traces in order to reveal contemporary landscapes, characters, and problems” (xi), which is rather like the process described in “Bluebeard’s Egg” by Sally’s cooking instructor, who “quoted one of the great chefs to the effect that the chicken was merely a canvas”; it is what she does to it that makes “all the difference” (143) – a slyly subversive assertion of the independent creativity of the chef/writer in the face of those postmodern theorists who deny the author agency. This process of modification and subversion can leave the reader unanchored and grasping for transparency and stability of signification. According to Michael Riffaterre “a valid interpretation … must arrive at a stable picture of the text” (227), despite the fact that we cannot know the author’s intention. This may be achieved, according to Riffaterre, through a “dialectic exchange between a coded message and its decoder” (228). What Atwood presents in “Bluebeard’s Egg”, though, are multiple and contradictory coded messages and numerous possible keys to unlock the code, none of which quite fit. The story itself is a secret chamber.

In “Bluebeard’s Egg” there are several references to games and puzzles: to Monopoly, to Pick Up Sticks which Sally remembers playing with Ed’s children where “if you moved one stick in the tangle, even slightly, everything else moved also” (164), and to Ed himself as a puzzle: “the house is made of ice. It’s held together only by Sally, who sits in the middle of it, working on a puzzle. The puzzle is Ed” (153). Like Sally, the reader works on the puzzle of interpretation, but echoes and layers of other writings create a network of possible significations so that meaning is endlessly deferred. In “Bluebeard’s Egg” each clue, each possible reading, each “piece of evidence” (134) in the “tangle” (164) of narrative possibilities the reader “glue[s] into place in the vast mosaic” (134), are like Sally’s attempts to gather together bits of evidence and piece Ed together. But moving one stick means that the whole structure shifts and stability is tantalizingly elusive, a point Atwood makes in her poem “True Stories”: “The true story is vicious/and multiple and untrue” (244).

Despite this undecidability, there is always a tantalizing sense that resolution might be arrived at if the reader were only to work at it hard enough: “Everything about Ed means something, though it’s difficult at times to say what” (149). The reader is in something like Sally’s position as she contemplates the enigma of Ed: if Ed is in her inner world, “in Ed is Ed’s inner world, which she can’t get at. She takes a crack at it anyway” (152). The problem for Sally is that arriving at a sense of “Ed’s inner world” (which Sally likes to
imagine as a fairy-tale realm in which Ed, the nurturing healer, carries a magic potion) is always blocked by the exigencies of the self. The angel of the house has wings that are “frayed and dingy grey around the edges” and she looks “withered and frantic” (153), rather like the queen bee in Sylvia Plath’s “Stings” – “Her wings torn shawls, her long body/Rubbed of its plush” (214). But just as the bee in Plath’s poem is reborn “More terrible than she ever was, red/Scar in the sky, red comet” (215), so does the egg, “pulsing...rose-red, crimson” (166), suggest vivid possibilities which go beyond the end of the story – a breach in the boundaries of the narrative. The possibility of rupturing the boundaries is suggested in Sally’s rereading of stories she already knows: “Sally would ramble about the house or read the endings of murder mysteries she had already read once before” (151) (where we wonder whether Sally is raising her consciousness about the possible danger of Ed, or even picking up some tips about how to dispatch someone herself). Her rereading could suggest that she is ‘stuck’ on the same old story, but also suggests the possibility of re-imagining the ending, reminding us, as we, too, “reread” a story, that narratives are never closed, but always in process.

7 Sally makes a number of practice forays into deconstructing old stories, including a skirmish with the specialist (and excluding) language of the heart surgeon. “The heart men are forbidden to talk shop at Sally’s dinner table, but they do so anyway” (144), and Sally can’t resist needling them from time to time.

“I mean,” she said to one of the leading surgeons, “Basically it’s just an exalted form of dress-making, don’t you think?”

“Come again?” said the surgeon, smiling. The heart men think Sally is one hell of a tease.

“It’s really just cutting and sewing, isn’t it?” Sally murmured. (144)

8 Sally’s “needling” (where she becomes the one who does the sewing, using language to “stitch up” these eminent males), her finding equivalence between the domestic, feminine world and the masculine enclave of the medical specialist, reveals and deconstructs the hierarchies of power implicit in the way language is used.

9 Sally also uses the subversive potential of language to imagine scenarios from which she retreats in her everyday life. In her Forms of Narrative Fiction course Sally “had no trouble concocting a five-page murder mystery, complete with revenge” (155). Her dinner parties also act as a venue for the process of creating fiction – in this case drama. We are told that “what she likes best about these dinners [...] is setting the table, deciding who will sit where and, when she’s feeling mischievous, what they are likely to say. Then she can sit and listen to them say it. Occasionally she prompts a little” (144). Sally as writer/director is empowered, an artistic detective figure who constructs and then reads the scene, predicting the way it will unfold. But in “real life” the story can get away from the creator, the endings can be unpredictable (which is analogous to Elaine’s feelings in Cat’s Eye as she views her art: “I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean” (409)). Nonetheless there is a potent sense of the imaginative possibilities that might arise from twists in old plots. Whilst Sally “has no control over” her “black and white heart” with its “insubstantial moth-like flutter, a ghostly heart” (165) (an image which suggests the old narratives that haunt the present), she is learning to envisage new ways of telling the story that “the story left out” (166).

10 Within “Bluebeard’s Egg” there are numerous instances of spaces that leave room for the telling of stories that have been “left out”. An example of this is Sally’s invention of stories for Ed’s first two wives: “Since their actual fates have always been vague to Sally,
she’s free to imagine all kinds of things, from drug addiction to madness” (150). Sally can only imagine negative possibilities for these ex-wives because her vision of the world is circumscribed by the need to endorse the patriarchy’s negative vision of women if her own status is to have any value – as Cristina Bacchilega comments, “Sally accepts the restricting plot in which a woman’s survival depends on her being recognized as the ‘true bride’” (114). But within “Bluebeard’s Egg” there is another, recuperative story: the story of Bertha, famously silenced in another “Bluebeard” text, Jane Eyre. Charlotte Bronte, like Sally, imagines madness for a troublesome wife and shuts her, without language, in an attic. In Atwood’s story Bertha resurfaces as the writing-instructor who teaches others new ways to tell stories. Sally’s bitchy remarks about Bertha arise from the fact that Bertha wants Sally to think about who is telling the story, and this threatens Sally’s belief that survival depends upon clinging to the status quo. Sally prefers to repeat male stories, believing, for instance, that the “pay-off” of her job is “that her boss provides her with an endless supply of anecdotes”(141), but these are not her stories, and cannot confer any kind of imaginative freedom.

Throughout “Bluebeard’s Egg” old patriarchal narratives lurk beneath the surface, but apparently with a diminished capacity to harm, watered-down, like the “anecdotes” that her boss tells. These old stories might be able to be left behind, or at least rendered less dangerous, if only the habit of telling them could be broken. The routine of repetition is a bit like Ed’s unchanging routines of lovemaking. Sally’s neurotic and habitual story of the women waiting to besiege Ed, which “sets even her own teeth on edge” (153) is a tame-down version of the story of the sirens waiting to lure Odysseus to his fate on the rocks surrounding their island, which Atwood briefly alludes to: “everywhere he goes he is beset with sirens”(139). It is a story that has lost its edge. The old heroic narrative of epic seafaring and mortal danger, of surviving the lure of the sirens and the precarious passage between the rocks inhabited by Scylla and Charybdis, is replaced by the banal suburban scene of innocuous-looking Ed “puttering around the rock garden”(134), making things safe for Sally’s car. In an apparent reversal of roles, Sally becomes Odysseus (though the car seems to be voyaging by itself) and Ed the protective keeper of the rocks.

Another remnant from time past is the playhouse at the bottom of the ravine. Maria Tatar comments that this may be a place where Ed has “romantic trysts” with other women (113), but this reading suggests that an attentive reader will be able to piece together a series of clues that will lead to some kind of a “solution”, whereas the reader is much more likely to be led up the garden path. Instead, the playhouse, which is described as “ancient” and “falling apart” (133), can been seen as another vestige of an older story, a crumbling remnant of the pleasure castle of an earlier Bluebeard, connected with Ed in that he too is clad in a “relic” (133) (his old windbreaker) and comes from “an era so prehistoric Sally can barely imagine it” (133). Considered in this way, the ravine contains all that is abject: the leftovers of the old tales that have lost their power to terrify, the brutality and bloodiness of Bluebeard being dissipated into drunks who “emerge squinting like moles into the light of Sally’s well-kept back lawn” (133), and to Ed snacking on cold roast beef rather than dead girls (the gruesome repast of the cannibalistic robber and his gang in the Grimm brothers’ Bluebeard tale “The Robber Bridegroom”). Nonetheless these relics still have the power to unsettle the smooth surface that Sally works to maintain, like the drunks who break down the fence between the house and the ravine which has been constructed to police the borders between
civilization and wilderness. The house balances rather precariously “on a ravine lot” (153), and the dangers that are potentially here surface in a later narrative, *Cat’s Eye*, where the ravine is a place where dead girls are found and wildcats indeed roam.

If the stories that have already been told can still unsettle the surface equilibrium of “Bluebeard’s Egg”, the stories yet to be told are potentially even more disturbing – but also exhilarating. Whilst women’s dismembered bodies lie at the secret heart of earlier Bluebeard tales, in “Bluebeard’s Egg” the unbounded body which, at its extreme, blurs the distinction between human and machine/cyborg is presented as a new kind of threat, but also as having liberating potential. Just as echoes of other texts retreat and rise to the surface, so too do bodies, such as the bodies of Ed and his children: “Right now the kids are receding, fading like old ink; Ed on the contrary looms larger and larger, the outlines around him darkening. He’s constantly developing, like a Polaroid print, new colours emerging” (152).

The association of the human body with language is also apparent in the description of the “black and white” image of the heart on the screen. This links the heart with written script, and, like language, “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other” (Bakhtin 292), resisting ideas of a simple, bounded and “readable” entity. Thrown up on the screen the heart is in the borderland, a space that shifts as the boundaries between body and machine lose their distinctiveness.

In his essay “The Precession of Simulacra” Jean Baudrillard argues that our “postmodern” culture is a world of signs, which have become not just a substitute for the real but the real itself. Distinctions between the “real” and the model have broken down, and we now exist in a world of hyperreality: “Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” (6). Contrasting iconoclasts and iconolaters, he comments that the “metaphysical despair” of iconoclasts “came from the idea that the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as the original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination” (5) – a description which is reminiscent of the egg “glowing softly as though there’s something red and hot inside it” (166). Baudrillard argues that, compared to iconoclasts, “icon worshipers were the most modern minds, the most adventurous”, since “therein the great game lay – knowing [...] that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them”(5). He presents successive phases of the image:

It is the reflection of a profound reality;
It masks and denatures a profound reality;
It masks the absence of a profound reality;
It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

“Bluebeard’s Egg” demonstrates all the stages of the “image”, but particularly the uncertainties and deceptiveness of the second and third stages which are perhaps the most disturbing, because the “masking” creates an uneasy sense of threats that cannot be articulated or pinned down. The possibility of “nothingness”, of absence, is as frightening – or perhaps more frightening – than the Gothic room full of dismembered bodies. To avoid the possibility of an empty room within herself Sally expends energy creating a range of different identities that act as simulacra, “masks” that cover her fear “that she’s a nothing, the way Marylynn was before she got a divorce and a job” (140). The fact that Sally has literally had a series of jobs (and taken a series of courses) suggests her restless
anxiety and fear of commitment as well as fear of looking too deeply at herself in case she finds that she really is “nothing”, that she belongs to the world of the cyborg: “This is the latest in a string of such jobs Sally has held over the years: comfortable enough jobs that engage only half her cogs and wheels”(141). She also avoids scrutiny of the world she inhabits, describing the men in her life in terms of images dug up from advertising: Ed is imagined as “a boy with curly golden hair”(135), her boss “looks like an English gin ad” (142). Labelling them “stupid”, in the case of Ed, and “[vapid]” though “outwardly distinguished” (142) in the case of her boss, she constructs identities for these figures to render them “safe”. Despite this, she stashes away pre-packaged food on planes as a reserve in case she finds herself in that metaphoric empty room without supplies. In all its miniaturized plasticity, it suggests the world of simulacra, perhaps of Baudrillard’s second phase, in that airline food more often than not “masks and denatures a profound reality”. In contrast to this food, Sally desperately tries to hang on to the “real” in her elaborate cooking, starting from scratch, for dinner parties. Its “authenticity” is a tilt at the “instant” food Ed, in fact, prefers, an attempt to assert the “real” as against the “image”, though in the process she burns her fingers when she peels chestnuts for the purée, suggesting the revenge of the world of hyperreality in response to her futile attempt to resist it. The plane food represents the kind of fare you might have to take with you to survive if entering the world of cyborgs; what Sally tries to avoid recognising is that she may be living in one already.

Sally also works at herself as a kind of defense against the possibility that “she’s a nothing”. Her attempt to hide this possibility from herself results in behaviour that suggests merging of the second and third stages of Baudrillard’s image. Sally’s masks both “denature” reality and conceal the absence of it. She works to contain the body and disguise incipient signs of aging with dress and makeup. Body maintenance is necessary, so Sally thinks, to camouflage how she “really looks”(138). The word “real” accumulates significance: Sally’s story is to be “cast in the realist mode” (156); “Ed is a real person, with a lot more to him than these simplistic renditions allow for” (135); and when he shows her into the room with the heart monitor, Ed “checked to make sure there was nobody real booked for the room” (146). When Sally dresses again, “she put on her clothes, neutrally, as if he were actually a doctor “ (147). Given that Ed is “actually a doctor”, this complicates the idea of what is “real” and what is not, what is fact and what is fiction. In much the same way Marylynn’s “naturalness” (her undyed hair, etc.) may not reflect transparency of being, after all. She presents an image, “makes everything she is wearing seem fashionable”(138), but there is the uneasy feeling that her hair, her clothing may act as a mask.

For Sally, being “real” wards off the danger of being “nobody”; yet to be “nobody” is to be both most abject but also most threatening. Odysseus saved himself from the Cyclops by declaring himself to be Nobody, a name that allows him to survive but which negates his existence. This dialectic of being and nothingness is also at the heart of “Bluebeard’s Egg”. When Odysseus reclaims his identity by declaring his name as he sails away from the island of the Cyclops, he puts himself in danger: Polyphemus throws rocks at him because he now has “reality”, whereas as Nobody he was invulnerable – unreadable, and therefore ungraspable. Read in the light of this episode in the Odyssey, Ed’s act of moving the rocks around in the garden may seem less benign and innocent than it did initially. Perhaps he is motivated by the desire for self-preservation – the need to protect himself if he is “unmasked”. The facility with which his body can transform itself (a modern-day
version of the transformations so common in fairy tales) is seen as Ed shaves himself. His “smooth skin” reflects his “egg-like” potential to give birth to something alien – “Assyrian...or a frost-covered Arctic explorer; or, demi-human, a white-bearded forest mutant. He scrapes away at himself, methodically destroying the illusion”(160).

In a recent article in The Guardian, “Aliens have taken the place of angels”, Atwood writes about “why we need science fiction”, saying:

Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It lets the shadowy forms of thought and feeling - heaven, hell, monsters, angels and all - out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants may be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime, but a necessity; because increasingly, if we can imagine it, we’ll be able to do it.

In much the same way as fairy tales articulate the “shadowy forms of thought and feeling”, and warn against the dangers of transgressive behaviour through an interweaving of realism and fantasy, so science fiction, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. says, “is not a genre of literary entertainment only, but a mode of awareness, a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future”.

In “Bluebeard’s Egg” Atwood demonstrates this “complex hesitation” as the magical transformations of the fairy tale world morph into the more frightening transformations of the “posthuman”, such as the transformation of the heart from flesh into machine which Walter describes to Marylynn: “some day, when they’ve perfected it ... all hearts will be plastic, and this will be a vast improvement on the current model”(164). The possibility of this kind of transformation troubles the insecure hold on “reality” throughout. If it reaches this, the “heart” will become its own simulacrum. But the blurring between the image and the real is already operating as far as hearts go. We learn, for example, that “Ed is a heart man, one of the best, and the irony of this is not lost on Sally: who could possibly know less about the workings of hearts, real hearts, the kind symbolized by red satin surrounded by lace and topped by pink bows, than Ed? Hearts with arrows in them”(139). Here there are multiple ironies as the image of the heart supplants the “real” heart (“it masks the absence of a profound reality”). If Sally is privileging the emotional life over the mechanics of the body, the symbol she reaches for has all the “unreality” of simulacra, a blend of Baudrillard’s four phases of the image. The red satin heart reflects (or is an emblem for) “a profound reality”, but in its kitsch-ness it denatures this whilst acting as a hollow emblem for feeling that may not be there. At the same time Ed becomes a strange, robotic replica of an “ordinary” human. The description of him as “a heart man” suggests not just the insular clubbishness of the medical fraternity but the absence of the complex personal dimensions that make one human.

We are told that Ed “was good with small appliances” (146) (a perversion of the more familiar phrase “good with small children”), and his affinities with the world of the machine are apparent when he uses his new heart monitor on Sally: “He seemed so distant, absorbed in his machine, taking the measure of her heart, which was beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control” (147). The machine becomes an extension of Ed, a threatening instrument of power and control. At the same time as the machine separates Sally from part of her body, Ed’s body merges with the machine. The possible outcome of this blurring of borders between human and technology is imagined when Sally, at the party, “looks over at Ed, who is staring off into
space, like a robot which has been parked and switched off” (164), which goes one step further than her earlier intimations of his affinities with the world of hyperreality, when she fears that “Ed will vanish, to be replaced by a stuffed facsimile, useful for little else but an umbrella stand. Ed is a real person” (135). Marylynn also produces an image of Ed that demonstrates a desire on her part to contain and control and render harmless: “... he’s just like a button: he’s so bright and shiny. If he were mine, I’d get him bronzed and keep him on the mantelpiece” (139). Lurking beneath Sally and Marylynn’s insistent assertions of Ed’s cuteness and innocence and stupidity are the Gothic fears and fantasies of monstrous transgressions and transformations found in earlier Bluebeard stories, repressed but not erased. Psychic fears and desires now emerge from the shadows as, to use Gabrielle Schwab’s words, the “phantasmic aspects of the technological imagination” (194).

23 Schwab comments on the way the “technological imagination” (which is prone to throw up “fantasies of cyborgs”), “expresses fears and desires that are not so much from technology per se as from deeper psychic sources” and that “technology becomes a field of cathexis, an imaginary screen onto which psychic energies from the most archaic to the most current may be projected” (194). The body “becomes a text, screen onto which cultural fantasies, desires, fears, anxieties, hopes, and utopias are projected” (194). Schwab argues that because we are not yet habituated to cyborgs, we have a “tendency to see them as grotesque” which “involves a defense mechanism against their inherent threatening qualities” (194). But in “Bluebeard’s Egg” Ed’s ultimate disguise (if he does indeed belong to the world of cyberspace) is that he is not grotesque but “handsome”. Whatever he is, like the egg he is in the process of becoming, even if that is only in Sally’s imagination: “she’s always conscious of Ed’s presence in the room, any room; she perceives him as a shadow, a shape seen dimly at the edge of her field of vision, recognizable by the outline”. This latent body, this “shadow”, is akin to the “shadowy forms of thought and feeling” that Atwood describes in her interview.

24 This process of emerging, written on the body, looks beyond the text to the birth of a new paradigm. Whereas Baudrillardian postmodernism presents a bleak vision of a world that has lost touch with its referents and which does not offer the possibility of social change, Donna Haraway offers a more positive picture of the possibilities inherent in the ambiguities between “natural and unnatural, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed” (152), saying of cyborgs that “in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling” (154). Haraway sees the power of writing as central to survival for those who have been oppressed, “on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other”, and argues that “Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control” (175). The power of writing glows softly in the egg at the end of the story. It suggests the potential for the birth of a new story, neutral, freed of gender (or at least androgynous, associated as it is with the smoothness of Ed and with female reproduction) and able to destabilize old power structures of “command and control”. It represents the power of “stories, retold stories” to “reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities” (Haraway, 175).

25 The final paragraphs of “Bluebeard’s Egg” suggest the beginnings of this process of reversal. Sally’s acquiescence to the old gendered power structures, however ironic, has been shaken: she notices, for example, the way Ed describes Mrs Rudge as “the woman”,

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as he did Mrs Bird before her; this erasure of individual identity is something that has happened to her and that she has done to herself. In bed, Sally envisages her heart beating “on and on forever; she has no control over it”. “But now she’s seeing the egg, which is not cold and white and inert but larger than a real egg and golden pink, resting in a nest of brambles” (165). Whereas earlier in the story Sally feels herself to be shut off from Ed by a wall, and that she is “locked outside” and “must hack her way through the brambles”, here she, the active princely one, has arrived at the heart of the narrative. Karen F. Stein suggests, ‘the power the protagonists gain … derives from their own authorization and self-assertion, from their voices. Telling the story is the act that gives them power’ (158). At the end of this story there is the possibility that Sally will shift into the first person. The final sentence of the story is enigmatic: “But what will come out of it?” (166). At the very least an alternative to the passive and helpless “ghostly heart” seems possible. The pulsing egg, ‘rose-red, crimson’ (166), suggests the bloody chamber of past stories, but also something more vibrant, a fresh new heart. Within it lies the possibility of another story which, instead of leading to death, may take us into an exhilaratingly posthuman, post-gendered future.

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Dans la nouvelle “Bluebeard’s Egg” de Margaret Atwood, nombre de stratégies post-modernes sont employées pour explorer le rapport entre le corps humain et le texte littéraire. La fluidité du sujet et l’instabilité du corps, toujours en cours de “devenir”, présentent des analogies avec le sens insaisissable, évasif et fuyant engendré par la structure intertextuelle du récit littéraire. La remarquable complexité de cette structure déstabilise le lecteur pour l’empêcher d’atteindre une vérité “pure et simple”. La fin ouverte d’une histoire et l’insaisissabilité de son sens peuvent, certes, perturber voire rendre hostile le lecteur à l’égard du texte. Elles peuvent cependant aussi le libérer, ouvrant pour lui un espace neuf dans lequel il pourrait créer ses propres histoires et des identités nouvelles. Ainsi, Sally, l’héroïne de Margaret Atwood dans “Bluebeard’s Egg”, porte en elle les traces de vieux récits qui hantent son personnage. Elle fonctionne comme un modèle pour le lecteur qui, à travers ses formidables tentatives de déconstruction, en particulier dans sa propre écriture, crée pour elle-même (et pour le lecteur) une multitude de possibilités de sens et de développements identitaires, toutes résultant de distorsions nouvelles qu’elle apporte à de vieux récits.

ABSTRACTS

Dans la nouvelle “Bluebeard’s Egg” de Margaret Atwood, nombre de stratégies post-modernes sont employées pour explorer le rapport entre le corps humain et le texte littéraire. La fluidité du sujet et l’instabilité du corps, toujours en cours de “devenir”, présentent des analogies avec le sens insaisissable, évasif et fuyant engendré par la structure intertextuelle du récit littéraire. La remarquable complexité de cette structure déstabilise le lecteur pour l’empêcher d’atteindre une vérité “pure et simple”. La fin ouverte d’une histoire et l’insaisissabilité de son sens peuvent, certes, perturber voire rendre hostile le lecteur à l’égard du texte. Elles peuvent cependant aussi le libérer, ouvrant pour lui un espace neuf dans lequel il pourrait créer ses propres histoires et des identités nouvelles. Ainsi, Sally, l’héroïne de Margaret Atwood dans “Bluebeard’s Egg”, porte en elle les traces de vieux récits qui hantent son personnage. Elle fonctionne comme un modèle pour le lecteur qui, à travers ses formidables tentatives de déconstruction, en particulier dans sa propre écriture, crée pour elle-même (et pour le lecteur) une multitude de possibilités de sens et de développements identitaires, toutes résultant de distorsions nouvelles qu’elle apporte à de vieux récits.

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