

# The Father's No and the Mother's Yes: Psychological Intertexts in Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

A. R. Kizuk  
University of Western Ontario

## ABSTRACT

These radically different novels by two of Canada's foremost writers present remarkable structural resonance when subjected to analysis of their psychological intertexts. The essay argues that textual instabilities in the narratives ultimately subvert received ideas of truth in contemporary society, including and in particular the language of modern psychology. This language, like all language, at best amounts to a flawed translation of symbolizations taking place in individual psyches. For the protagonists of both novels the "truth" of psychology is entirely eclipsed by what may be one of the first myths of postmodern times.

"To love is to survive parental meaning."  
— Julia Kristeva

Aside from the fact that Robertson Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* were both published in 1985 and nominated that year for the Booker Prize, the two novels would seem to have very little in common.<sup>1</sup> Davies sets his novel largely in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century; Atwood sets hers in "Gilead," a post-apocalyptic United States, sometime between 1985 and 2045. Davies' novel is a *Künstlerroman*, partly a novel of manners, and very much 'a man's book.' Atwood's is Social-and-Economic-Science Fiction, a millennial cautionary tale, and a feminist description of "a women's culture" (137). Both novels are fictional biographies, however, and present the lives of their protagonists in psychological terms. Both resolve their protagonists'

internal conflicts by setting up the Freudian family romance — the myth of the Father — in such a way that it is subverted by elements of what Julia Kristeva calls the myth of the feminine.

As Atwood's protagonist, Offred, says more than once, "Context is all" (154, 202). Davies and Atwood present their stories as transcriptions of tape-recorded narrations that are already interpreted by those characters who hear the tapes. Davies' mythical characters, the Lesser Zadkiel, the Angel of Biography, and the Immortal Daimon Maimas, the guardian angel of the protagonist, Francis Cornish, interpret a recording of Francis' life as they review it. In the "Historical Notes" with which Atwood's novel ends, a future historian, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, lectures on the proper interpretation of Offred's tape-recorded autobiographical statement. Thus, the reader

becomes a third party at once removed from texts that interpret themselves. Yet both Davies and Atwood employ various devices to ensure that this self-interpreting structure remains unstable.

This instability is even present in the novels' titles. Davies' title derives from the novel's epigraph, a thirteenth-century proverb. Atwood's also derives from one of her epigraphs, *Genesis* 30: 1-3. Her other two are a passage from Swift's "Modest Proposal", and a Sufi proverb. Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone will not Out of the Flesh*, literally translated from Latin, lacks a main verb. Atwood's Sufi proverb *In the desert there is no sign that says, / Thou ushalt not eat stones*, a paradox of a type delightful to Sufis, lacks rational sense.<sup>2</sup> The proverbs are suggestive in that they both leave something out. There is similarly a gap in the thematic focus of both novels: the nature of truth and the need for certainty in human life. At one point in Davies' novel, Francis learns that "modern man wants desperately to believe in something, to have some value that cannot be shaken." He learns that Hitler's Germany is "fearful proof of what mankind will do...for certainty" (335). In Atwood's novel, Offred believes that "people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot" (227). She also makes this point in reference to Hitler's Germany (154-56). The novels' epigraphs and theme problematize the concept of proverbial, self-evident, manifest truth in human life, thus raising a question about the nature of truth.

This question is central to both protagonists' perception of themselves and the meaning of their lives. Francis clings to a value that he hopes cannot be shaken, which he expresses in the form of a personal maxim, *Tu autem servasti bonum vinum usque adhuc* (Thou hast kept the best wine till now). The maxim derives from the story in *John* 2:1-12, and inspires his greatest painting, *The Marriage at Cana*. Offred too clings to a personal maxim, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (Don't let the bastards grind you down), which she finds scratched into the floor of her closet. The passage in which the Commander translates this maxim is one of the key turning-points in the novel. In both novels, the protagonists futilely struggle to preserve their maxims as guiding principles in life. Francis' maxim is at best no more than an deferral of uncertainty, and the bastards do in the end grind Offred down.

*What's Bred in the Bone* begins with the commissioning of the biography of its protagonist, Francis Cornish, by the trustees of his estate in order to launch the Cornish Foundation for Promotion of the Arts and Humane Scholarship. The biography "must be dropped," however,

because the biographer, Father Simon Darcourt, has uncovered unsavoury, possibly scandalous details of Francis' life as an artist and art-collector. Zadkiel and Maimas "are drawn by the sound of their own names" to the scene of the trustees' discussion. The Immortals decide to amuse themselves with "the record, or the film, or the tape or whatever it must be called," of Francis' life (19). Throughout, they intervene to comment on the life and debate moral issues that arise. As the Recording Angel and an emanation of Francis' essence, the Immortals embody the biographical impulse — the 'truth' of a life. Yet they are not omniscient. If the biographer, Darcourt, will never "know the whole truth," neither will they. "Would it amuse you to be reminded of the story, so far as you and I can know it? said the Angel" (19). Thus, with the device of an unreliable narration, Davies leaves a chink in the novel's interpretive closure through which the reader can peer.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a 'what if' novel in which back-to-the-Bible fundamentalists have overthrown America and set up a theocratic state. Offred, a Handmaid or breeding-slave, serves in her master the Commander's home during the 1990s. "The time before," when she was married to Luke and had a daughter, fell just before the take-over in the mid-1980s (123, 182, 231, 313-14). These are the mid-80s of an alternate world in which nuclear accidents along the San Andreas Fault gave rise to an immune mutant strain of syphilis which, among other causes, created a world-wide, drastic, and sudden decrease in fertility and the birth-rate (122). In "the time before" there were mobile Pornomarts ("Feels on Wheels"), widespread infant-kidnapping, a totally computerized monetary system, and intense sectarian rivalries between religious groups (66, 73, 182). Offred's memories of the time before, "attacks of the past, like faintness," (62), and her Handmaid's indoctrination at the Rachel and Leah Re-education (Red) Centre, supplement the main narrative of the novel. Thus, Offred's story braids together three separate periods in her life (presented achronologically). This braided narrative is, however, subject to an intermittent and self-conscious commentary upon the nature and truth of what is being related (49-50, 106, 138-9, 144-5, 255-6, 279). In these passages Offred worries about the effects of telling a story in one's head and not writing it down. She relates her story into the tape-recorder "over, over again," to get it right (279). She needs to feel that she is telling her story to someone, and she is troubled by the "truth" of a story that is "a reconstruction" (49-50, 144-5). At one point she remarks, "Maybe I'm crazy and this is some new kind of therapy" (105). Offred's self-consciousness damages her reliability as a narrator, and, like her, the reader may begin

to seek the truth through “tiny peepholes” that remain “in the gaps between the stories” (31, 67).

The self-interpreting structures of both novels are apparently designed to frame an interpretive instability within narration itself. The unreliable narrators, deficient maxims and proverbs, are like arrows in a Klee painting, pointing to some unstated level of meaning or truth beneath the already-interpreted surface. Turning to the novel's non-literary, psychological intertexts, the reader may perceive that both novels develop an opposition between the phallus and the matrix as these terms are used in Freudian and Jungian psychology. As used by Davies and Atwood, “matrix” can be described as an archetype, an invisible factor of the psyche, what Jungians refer to as a “function-trace,” an irrepresentable source of primordial images. Psychoanalysts and their critics use the term “matrix” to refer to the unconscious “site” of such image-making—image-generation in the psychological sense of a localized imprinting of manifest meaning upon the unconscious’ latent content.<sup>3</sup> Being fictional, neither Francis nor Offred can be said to have an unconscious, but the novels employ matrix as a register of symbolizations that might occur if the characters were real. For both protagonists, matrix is essentially the womb, a source of creative pleasure, the oceanic state.

In *What's Bred in the Bone*, Ruth Nibsmith defines matrix as the creative source of all meaningful human experience. Ruth is the second of the three people that Francis loves in his life. She is a psychic and an astrologer, she becomes a “decoder” for MI5 (367), and the Daimon Maimas calls her a “Sibyl” (399). Francis meets Ruth in the 1940s at Schloss Dusterstein, the Ingelheim family Castle in Germany, where he is studying art and art-restoration under the Master, Tancred Saraceni, a Wise Old Man figure. Ruth is the governess of the Countess’ daughter, Amalie. Ruth and Francis are lovers, but like her Biblical namesake she is ‘a friend’ rather than a romantic figure. One evening she does Francis’ horoscope and reveals the significance of all those factors that have shaped his personality. Aside from family, there are astrological influences,

“Now—here’s that very powerful and influential Saturn. That’s destiny. You remember about Saturn? He had it tough, because he was castrated, but he did some castrating himself. What’s bred in the bone, you know. Patterns necessarily repeat themselves.” (307)

This influence gives Francis “a sense of reality,” but more important, as he is about to paint his masterpiece, a triptych in the style of the Old Masters, *The Marriage at Cana*,

“it’s a giver of spiritual power, and takes you deep into the underworld, the dream world, what Goethe called the realm of the Mothers. There’s a fad now for calling them the Archetypes, because it sounds so learned and scientific. But the Mothers are truer to what they really are. The Mothers are the creators, the matrixes of all human experience.”

“That’s the world of art, surely?” says Francis. Ruth replies, “Art may be a symptom, a perceptible form, of what the Mothers are” (308). In Davies’ novel, the matrix is an area of the unconscious that partially can be read or accessed through symptoms or signs. The Master Tancred Saraceni rejects “what the psychoanalysts, who are the great magicians of our day, call the Unconscious, though it is actually the Most Conscious,” because it is a language “perilously easy to fake.” The language of psychology is at best a rough translation of what the Mothers are, not a true representation of the matrix it interprets. For Saraceni, the unconscious is the “unseizable reality that lies behind the dream” (333-4). Yet, for Ruth the decoder, this reality bears the mark of the castrated and castrating deity, Saturn.

Matrix is never deciphered for Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but her maxim is. Her decoder is the Commander, the second of the three men in her life (we note again the curious structural resonance of these two novels). He is identified by Professor Pieixoto in the “Historical Notes” as a powerful member of the ruling elite, Frederick R. Waterford, the originator of the Gileadean dress-code and “Salvaging,” an institutionalized sado-masochistic fantasy based on the myth of Orpheus and the Maenads (a castration-myth), which Offred is forced to attend (319-22). Offred is the would-be surrogate mother of the Commander’s children. Any pleasure in the relationship between a Handmaid and her master would lead to trial and even death, because sex in Gilead is legally a matter of procreation alone. The Commander, however, is corrupt and desires intimacy with Offred in order to spice up his life. Hence, without fear of reprisal, she is able to ask him to translate the Latin inscription that the Handmaid before her had scratched into the floor of her closet. The Commander asks her to write it down and gives her his pen—another illicit act because literacy is forbidden to Handmaids in Gilead—

I print the phrase carefully, copying it down from inside my head...*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Here, in this context, it's neither prayer nor command, but a sad graffiti, scrawled once, abandoned. The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains.

Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another [Red] Centre motto...I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal. The Commander takes the smile-button page from me and looks at it. Then he begins to laugh...“That's not real Latin,” he says. “That's just a joke.” (196)

He explains that the phrase is a school-boy joke from his own Latin textbook, shows her the book, and points out another, the joke-conjugation, *pim pis pit, pimus pistis pants*.

This is an important turning point in the novel. Before she knew what her maxim meant, Offred had chanted the Latin words in secret as a small gesture of revolt. Now, not only is the sense revealed, *Don't let the bastards grind you down*, but also the fact that she is but one more Handmaid forced to visit the den, play Scrabble, and kiss the Commander, “as if I meant it.” The cost of this knowledge is a matter of definition: Offred must tacitly agree to exchange her legal Gileadean status of a breeding-slave, defined by her fertility, for a mistress' status defined by the Commander's illicit lust. At the centre of this scene of translation, however, there is that lame pun, “Pen Is Envy.” Lacking as psychoanalytic doctrine may be, as it applies to women, the reader must account for it in an interpretation of Offred's behaviour, since the text is alive to such associations. “Here, in this context,” the phallic pen is an instrument of the power that has overthrown America and set up an Oedipal fantasy as a political and economic structure.

The core and justification of this structure in Atwood's novel is matrix, or the mother, that place where Gilead's infertility must be redressed for the sake of an efficient birth-rate. In Latin, matrix means “breeding female.” Hence the significance of the “Birth Day” section, in which Offred and other Handmaids aid in a birth through sympathetic ritual. The Wives are pleased with Janine, the birthing Handmaid, who is “like a daughter” to her Commander's Wife, “One of the family” (123). In the birthing-room Offred is overwhelmed by the smell of birth, “a smell of dens, of inhabited caves...Smell of matrix” (133). After the birth, she notes that the infertile

Wives are for once jealous of what the Handmaids have, “Envy radiates from them, I can smell it” (136). And Offred thinks of her presumed-dead, feminist mother, “You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one” (137). Decades later Professor Pieixoto worries over the problem of interpreting “the obscurity of the matrix” out of which come the voices of the past. “Try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day” (324).

Thus, the novels use castration-anxiety and penis-envy as symbols or symptoms in a register of the protagonists' inner conflicts. The foregrounding of these notions alone might suggest a psychoanalytical reading.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the novels seem to invite us to view Francis and Offred's fictional psyches through the peephole of psychoanalysis. Both refer constantly and copiously to psychology and Freud (and never Jung).<sup>5</sup> Oedipal conflicts profoundly affect wealthy bourgeois households, past and future, and the triangular structure of these ‘family romances’ manifests repeatedly, almost obsessively, in both novels.<sup>6</sup> John Irwin, a Freudian critic interested in the psychological intertexts of fiction, has suggested that such repetition might be regarded as “afterimages” of substitutive Oedipal conflicts.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, however, the novels' plots and characterization parallel psychoanalytic doctrine remarkably closely.

Psychoanalysts believe that castration-anxiety and penis-envy originate in the ‘phallic stage,’ ages 3-5, when the child perceives the Father as a rival and as a threat to his or her serenely blissful relationship with the mother—what Davies calls the “paradise” of the “mother's body” (73)—in the earlier oral and oceanic states. Fearing, in a child's terms, the impending or forgotten loss of his or her phallus, the phallus becomes a symbol incorporated into the child's unconscious in a state of melancholy and mourning for a Lost Object, and the latency period begins. According to Lacan, the child believes that he or she has no right to possess the phallus, because she or he is defined by a relationship with the mother in which the child's self mirrors the mother's, and the mother has no phallus. “Woman is castrated,” and hence “the subject feels the threat of castration, and feels it from both directions implied by the Oedipal triangle.” Lacan suggests moreover that “insofar as the subject must mourn the phallus” an unresolved Oedipal complex can initiate writing that is always elegiac.<sup>8</sup> In one way or another, both novels echo each of these psychoanalytic tenets.

From the Jungian point of view, the matrices or symbolic registers of the protagonists' fictional psyches can be said to have been scarred by this threat of castration. The phallus as an archetype can initiate primordial images central to myths of either the Father or the Mother: the castrated and castrating Saturn, for example, or Atwood's Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife. In the middle of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred envies Serena's power to castrate her tulips' "swelling genitalia" with pruning shears, and she tells us, "What I coveted was the shears" (91,109,161). To read the novels in this way encourages the reader to view the narrated lives as case histories that display mechanisms of mourning the phallus as a Desired Object. Francis' painting and Offred's spoken narration, we might say, demonstrate how a language of elegiac individuation might compensate for the phallus' symbolic loss, absent yet virile with "the power of the words it contains," in Offred's phrase.

In both novels, the protagonists resist the meaning that these puissant words might impose on their lives. Yet as an emotional scar, despite this resistance, the lost phallus determines their behaviour. Till the last, they remain obsessive-compulsive neurotics. Francis' exaggerated conformity, mysophobia, and parsimony, Offred's inability to make decisions, kleptomaniac, and her preoccupation with cosmetics and smells, continually intrude on their relations with others. Psychoanalysis of course traces trauma that initiate such impulsive defense-mechanisms back to unresolved Oedipal complexes. Both protagonists are unwanted children and the absence of a father marks their early childhood years. Francis is literally rejected by his parents and pines for his mother (163). His father is merely an appendage to the mother's family (42, 152-3). Offred's mother is a single parent. The lack of a father, combined with her mother's too-often repeated insistence that she was *not* an unwanted child, contribute to the anger and hostility Offred does feel toward her mother (189-90). Incest is a bone of contention in both tales, and the protagonists each suffer a traumatic experience of a type that psychoanalysis calls the primal scene.

Let us look at these scenes in turn. In *What's Bred in the Bone*, the significance of mother-and-son incest to Francis' development as an artist is made explicitly in those passages concerning Bronzino's sensual Renaissance painting, *The Allegory of Love* (184, 259). Francis' mother "flirted with everybody, even her elder son" (165), and the Master Tancred Saraceni points out the "mother's part in that affair" (259). Francis ultimately equates his mother with Bronzino's incestuous Venus (431). His grandfather the Senator's servants become substitute parents for Fran-

cis, and one night, wondering why Zadok, the handyman, creeps upstairs to visit Victoria Cameron, the cook, he decides to spy on them. What he discovers is not the parents in a sexual embrace, but the family's great secret, the Looner (129-39). The Looner is Francis' older half-brother, the illegitimate, deformed and retarded offspring of a chance encounter between Zadok and Francis' mother. Masturbation is the Looner's only pleasure in life (aside from music), and he lives under the constant threat of being deprived of the phallus by both Victoria and Zadok. Here, castration takes the form of their fastening "a wire cage over his bobbing genitals" (136). This discovery is a considerable shock to young Francis, "just as he thought he was breaking free from that torment" (137).

In later life, Francis' parsimony, spying and painting are the means by which he plots against regressing to the phallic stage. In *The Marriage at Cana*, his masterpiece of elegiac individuation, the Looner is foregrounded and sublimated. From the Looner's lips pours the maxim *Tu autem servasti bonum vinum usque adhuc* in Old Germanic script (391). Ironically, however, this painting is a fraud, painted as part of Saraceni's "quixotic anti-Hitler" scheme to trick the Nazis into exchanging genuine works of art for phony German Old Masters (321). Hence *The Marriage* must remain forever anonymous and disguised. As a mechanism of mourning, however, the painting fails. The sublimation is counterfeit; the painting a bad translation of the family's secret shame. Only in his dying moments in the novel's close does Francis honestly bless the Looner. He then laughs that he has kept the best wine till the last, and the Daimon Maimas remarks, disarmingly, "*Of course, we know that it is all metaphor, you and I.*" (434-5).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, numerous references to the Oedipal triangle precede the primal scene. On her arrival in the Commander's home, Offred impulsively wishes to turn Serena Joy into "a motherly figure," and then remembers that she had seen Serena before, in the company of her own mother (26). Later, the Commander "is positively daddyish" to her (193). Handmaids are kept ignorant of the Gileadean status quo, and Serena's knowledge is "like a smell." The novel proliferates with the "smells of mothers," and on the night of "the Ceremony," her mating with the Commander, Serena's perfume has "the scent of prepubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother's Day" (90). One of Offred's slips of the tongue occurs in her description of the Ceremony—Offred's lying between Serena Joy's legs with the Commander fucking "the lower part of my body"—as "everyone's wet dream, two women at once"

(105-6, compare p.148). She does not say, 'every man's wet dream.' Passages that betray how stimulating the Ceremony actually is to her, and how unreliable she is as a narrator, also precede the scene. She remarks that "boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men" in a passage on erotic paintings. This is immediately followed by a description of how she passes the time by practicing labour and fantasizing about Chopin's sensual ballet, *Les Sylphides*: "thin white dancers flit gracefully among the trees, their legs fluttering like the wings of held birds" (79-80).

Offred's narrative is her way of repressing memories of erotic impulses she could not humanly avoid under such perverse circumstances. Her story is also a mechanism of elegiac individuation in that through it she mourns all she has lost from the time before: her husband, her child, even her own name. In the moments before sleeping with the Commander as his mistress, later in the novel, she remembers her mother and realizes, "I've mourned her already. But I will do it again, and again" (265). But like Francis' painting, this mechanism fails. The shock of being desired by the Commander is too much, "I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now" (153). Her identity wearing increasingly thin, she is simply not up to stealing Serena's knives and pruning shears (57, 108, 161, 305). She fails utterly as a spy for the resistance. Powerless to stop the Father's pen from drawing the "flesh triangles" of her "geometrical days" under Serena Joy's roof (214), she becomes Serena's "obverse" (271), "serene, at peace, pervaded with indifference" (303). In the end, when all hope of finding her family of the time before is removed, she is erased, "I can't bear it, to have been erased like that" (240). Nick, the chauffeur, pronounces her real name in the end of the novel, and she wonders "Why should this mean anything" (305). This failure to withstand regression to the point of ego-paralysis compromises the 'truth' of her narration. "All of it," as she says, "is a reconstruction."

In either case, the protagonists suffer an impoverishment of the self that remains unresolved despite their considerable efforts to resolve it. In *What's Bred in the Bone*, Francis grows up in his grandfather's home, named "St. Kilda," with obvious associations, under the autocratic rule of his strait-laced, "power-greedy" Aunt, Mary-Ben (45-8, 125). "It was in the Senator's daughters that the future of the family resided," and a "cool million" inherited from his mother's father, the Senator, assures Francis' future as an art-collector. In a letter, the Senator tells Francis that in order to succeed he must master the languages of the eye, religion, and money (228-9). After Francis leaves the Senator's "House of Sin" (139), these

three languages enable him to become "a watcher, and a noter" and a "snoop" for MI5 (133,172), the discoverer of his personal myth (227), and a "grammarian" of money (374). These languages compensate for a genetic lack suffered by the male side of the family.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narration resists the imposed definition of herself as chattel, putting the terms of power and exchange in her society under constant scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> Money has trickled through the Commander's home for years, "as if through an underground cavern, crusting and hardening like stalactites" (89). She sees Gilead's economy as middle-class avarice turned inside out and placed under the "acquisitive thumbs" of the Commander (165,97,65). Yet, Handmaid or mistress, she remains the Commander's property. What little pleasure she has in life before her affair with the chauffeur Nick, in the end of the novel, is like the action of a verb to her, the "active tense. Tensed" (108). At all other times she is a "Lady in waiting," and this passivity "is also a place." "It's this room. I am a blank, here, between parentheses. Between two other people" (239-40). Speaking into her tape-recorder, Offred tries to replenish this blank.

Thus, both protagonists turn to language itself to combat the inherited or socially imposed definitions that are destroying them. Both seek a better translation of the truth. Francis eventually transfers his trust in his three languages to his maxim and the personal myth it inspires. Offred trades in her maxim for the telling of her story into a tape-recorder. Yet none of these languages succeed in resolving their interior conflicts. What's bred in the bone will not out of the flesh, and it causes Offred to wonder what it was "that made us feel we deserved it" (186). Her 'talking cure' and his personal myth achieve just the opposite of the well-rounded, adult individuality that one might expect from essentially therapeutic forms of art. In a manner of speaking, the novels depict language as scar-tissue upon the truth; peeling it back exposes the instability beneath the self-interpreting closure of both novels. Attempting to comprehend the protagonists' inner turmoil reveals only a loss of self.

In the end, both protagonists are I-less as infants. Francis' great painting and personal myth sits anonymously in "a great gallery in the States, gloated over by lovers of art and by countless students who had university degrees in Fine Art, guaranteeing the infallibility of their knowledge and taste" (433). Offred escapes Gilead on an "Underground Femaleroad," fleeing the consequences of her crime. "All I did was know" (297). We learn the real names of other Handmaids in the novel, Moira and Janine, yet

Offred never tells us her real name. Even in relative safety en route to Canada, she remains 'of Fred.' This anonymity severely complicates a psychological reading, for in the end the subjects of our analysis simply disappear.

As fictional psychobiographies, the novels record two cases of severe regression. As novels, however, they appear deliberately to imply a reading that leaves something to be desired. What is left over—what the Immortals and Professor Pieixoto cannot know fully, the best wine, what *bastards* cannot finally destroy, what remains a blank behind the foregrounded family romance and all its horror—may be related to what Julia Kristeva calls the "true guarantee of the last myth of modern times, the myth of the feminine." This myth has been explored by writers like late nineteenth century anthropologist J.J. Bachofen, Jungian psychologist Eric Neumann, poet Robert Graves, and even Atwood in her criticism.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary feminist scholars have identified the myth's presence in the seductive *id* of a 'female hysteria' in response to which psychoanalysis first knew itself as a power to be reckoned with.<sup>11</sup> And this aspect of the myth appears in the novels as Davies' *furor uterinus* (145) and Atwood's "wandering womb" (156), related in either case to the protagonists' mothers.

It is not the myth itself, however, that concerns us here, but rather its "guarantee": a serene and eternal *jouissance* in certain kinds of fiction, a creative bliss that undermines the Father's power by allegiance to the wealth and furor of the matrix. Kristeva speaks of a "rhythm, tone, color, and joy" of fictional minds that are finally unnameable, resistant to present-day interpretive strategies, and hence "fully seductive."<sup>12</sup> As the novels' best-selling popularity suggests, our interpretation has yet to account for the pleasure of reading the hollow outline of an "I" that marks the novel's symbolic matrices like a scar. Institutionalized forms of power, wealth and psychological interpretation are the primary obstacles to the protagonists' struggle to find some meaning in their lives: 'some use, that is, some plot.' A blissful identification of the self with the matrix, however, ultimately removes these obstacles.

Near the end of *What's Bred in the Bone*, Francis returns to Canada on his "great missionary journey" to teach Canadians that art should console and exalt. He returns "to a homeland he did not know," one that had "lost its way, had suffered what anthropologists call Loss of Soul" (411). But this is exactly what Francis suffers when he denies his love for Alwyn ('all-wine') Ross, "a denial of love itself—death to the soul" (433). Ismay, Francis' first love, taught him the folly of idealizing love; Ruth Nib-

smith was his decoder, a 'true' and unselfish love. Ross is a 'mirror-love' in René Girard's sense of the term: a subject's non-possessive ability to desire to become the object of love, or to desire the desire of another, thereby becoming a non-subject.<sup>13</sup> Francis sees a reflection of himself in Ross as he would have liked to have been in his youth: a charming and extroverted man at one with his *anima*. Near the end of the novel, Ross, his reputation as a curator at stake, needs Francis' financial aid to buy *The Marriage at Cana* for the National Gallery of Canada. Just before Francis says yes, Ross exclaims, "Frank, I love you" (423). Francis perceives that in saying this Ross means, 'I am your Master; I have control over you'—"the subtle sodomy of the soul" (388), which Francis finally cannot bear. Hence, he denies "love itself," but only to exalt and protect a mirror-love.

Similar affirmations in the beginning of the novel reflect this consolation in the end. "Almost three years old" in his mother's garden and aware of "a minute guilt" regarding "creatural needs," Francis nods at "a peony, a beautiful but whorish flower," and the peony nods back. "It was a significant moment, for it was Francis' first encounter with beauty" (62-3). It is significant also in that the feminine peony is a mirror for an inchoate and pre-Oedipal self-awareness. Later, an adolescent Francis poses in his bedroom mirror dressed up in women's garments. This posturing, "seductive beyond his power of resistance," Maimas explains, was "a yearning to know" the spiritual wholeness of "*the Mystical Marriage, the unity of the masculine and the feminine in himself*" (124). The Immortal Daimon Maimas possesses this desired unity, being voluptuously female above the waist and vigorously male below. "Perhaps you are the creature of the future?" asks Zadkiel. "Only as a symbol, brother," says Maimas (125). Ross, the peony, the transvestitism and Maimas are all translations of an originative mirror-love, in which the child knows himself only as a reflection in the Mother's "I." Hence, in the novel's close, Maimas can affirm that Francis' love for Ross "*was not stupid*" and that "*He didn't die stupid*" (426,435). This love is finally the best wine, drawn from the jars of the Mothers. As he is dying, Francis' laughter carries him into the rhythm of an infinite regression created by the rhythm, tone, colour and joy of this love. It is through his identification with the matrix that Francis finally escapes the Oedipal triangles in his head.

Similarly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred regresses to a pre-Oedipal, selfless love in an effort to cope with the institutionalized primary obsessions of Gileadean America. In the beginning of the novel, she speaks of "yearning,

for something that was always about to happen," a yearning "for the future" (13). Later, she explains that for her the future would be an incarnation of the verb *to love*, "That word, made flesh" (237). Offred often expresses feelings of desire through images of melting (91,110,154), and the first evening in the Commander's den she feels like melting cotton candy (148). Later she says, "Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. Even the bricks of the house are softening" (162). "Taboo is dissolved" (164), and making love to the Commander as if she meant it, she thinks, "I'd rather have Serena there too" (266). Though it costs Offred her identity, this desire enables her to say that "forgiveness too is power" (144). While practicing labour, anticipating birth, her maxim dissolves into a blissful interior rhythm: "All I can hear now is the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening..." (156, Atwood's ellipsis).

"There remains a mirror, on the hall wall," which "bulges outward like an eye under pressure" (19,58). Offred sees herself as Serena's "obverse" in this mirror. The mirror is also a displacement of the eye that she imagines has been removed from a chandelier-mounting in her room, "like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out" (17). The mounting, a plaster wreath of vines, fruits, and flowers, is a constant reminder that the Handmaid before her in the Commander's home had hanged herself (138). "That's where she was swinging, just lightly, like a pendulum" (223). The imagery of the lost phallus as a scar upon the matrix is clear. The hanged woman, "my double" (305), Offred, and Serena Joy form an identity in this mirror-eye "I." As in Davies' novel, it is through this interior reflection that Offred escapes the Gilead in her head. Later, speaking into her tape-recorder, the self-loss of this identity persists in the gaps between the stories, continually undermining her reconstruction, blurring time-lines and softening distinctions. In a murderous fantasy put in "only afterwards," she stabs the Commander "between the ribs," and he bleeds "sexual" like a menstruating woman (150). Everything becomes a reflection of everything else. She sees reflections of herself in the spies Nick and Ofglen (109,176). Offred and her friends, "sucky Janine" who escapes Gilead through withdrawal and the courageous, lesbian, rebellious Moira, are all three 'offred' reflections of a Handmaid in a three-sided mirror.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the "Dear You" to which the story is told "can mean thousands" (50), a vast interplay of desired listeners in which the teller of the tale is forever lost as an identifiable subject. "I tell, therefore you are" (279), but the "I" is never named.

Both novels frame the scarred psyches of the protagonists within three different contexts: the myth of the feminine, the language of psychology, and Professor Pieixoto and Simon Darcourt's marginalized concern over the meaning of the lives that they each interpret. The evasiveness of Francis' maxim, the futility of Offred's, the self-conscious commentaries on the veracity of narrated personal history, the highlighting of language as at best a rough translation of any truth, the novels' incessant figurative triangulations, and the unresolved Oedipal conflicts, all combine to complicate the reader's response. Moreover, the novels seem designed to entice the reader to spy on the regression of fictional minds even as the protagonists spy on their respective cultures, that is, inadequately, without resolution. Yet the protagonists' surrender to an originative mirror-love would seem to suggest another response. Conceivably, one could attempt to fathom the *jouissance* of these fictional psyches by entering imaginatively a simulacrum of their self-awareness. But then interpretation would lose its analytical thrust and become a matter of imitation, a repetition of cathartic self-loss in the cradle of an I-am-the-(m)other identity. Furthermore, if the myth of the feminine is the last myth of modern times, these novels present a contemporary myth of the child that would put to rest or at least critique much of the discourse in our culture concerning the Father's No and the Mother's Yes.

#### NOTES

1. Robertson Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985). Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).
2. The sense of the proverbs is not so much lacking as hidden. As in *Genesis* 28:18, stones, ritually anointed by travellers, often marked the boundaries of ancient Middle Eastern townships, but in the desert a Sufi disregards such rituals and limits. Davies' is not ungrammatical in Latin; "out," can with ellipsis operate verbally.
3. Jacques Lacan, in his "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 2, regards a child's first experience of self-awareness as an identification with "the symbolic matrix." Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catharine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1982), pp. 231, 248, treats psychoanalysis as a rhetorical activity "on the tropic matrix" in which Freud "unwittingly rediscovered the 'old catalogue of tropes'" that the West has always relied upon to characterize the notion of an original or primitive language. Jacques Derrida, in his "Freud and the Scene of Writing," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alain Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 229, argues that psychoanalysis is a metaphor of writing that violently inscribes "itself in nature, matter, or matrix."
4. On this point, one could mention Davies' "enormous enthusiasm" for Freud, which preceded his well-known interest in Jungian psychology: Patricia Monk, *The Smaller Infinity: The Jungian Self in the Novels of Robertson Davies* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 6.
5. Davies, pp. 18, 71, 124, 145-46, 203, 226-7, 259-60, 307-08, 310, 333, 371, 428; Atwood, pp. 47, 79, 119, 156, 196.

6. A partial list of triangles in Davies' novel includes the trustees (Arthur, Darcourt, Maria), Francis' mothers (Mary-Jacobine, Mary-Ben, Victoria), fathers (the Major, the Senator, Zadok), lovers (Ismay, Ruth, Ross), religions (Protestant, Catholic, Celtic), paintings most important to him (*Love Locked Out*, *The Drolig Hansel*, *The Marriage at Cana*), and the three levels of narrative (the Immortals dialogue, the life, the trustees' dilemma). The novel is the second volume of Davies' third trilogy. Triples in Atwood's novel include: flowers (tulips, irises, dandelions), Offred's mothers (mother, Lydia, Serena), and men (Luke, the Commander, Nick), the Handmaids (Janine, Offred, Moira), spies (Ofglen, Offred, Nick), and the narratives (the time before, the Red Centre, the posting). This triangularity is also apparent in the novels' self-interpreting stance (tape, those who hear the tapes, and the reader).
7. John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/ Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), pp. 9-11.
8. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), p. 46.
9. Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, pp. 14, 21, 24, 32, 34-5, 39, 49, 71, 141, 143, 146, 148-9, 163, 191, 198, 217, 239, 298.
10. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967); Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1955); Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth* (London: Faber, 1948); Atwood, "Superwoman Drawn and Quartered: The Early Forms of *She*," *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), pp. 35-54. This is her earliest critical essay; later she rejects as a unit Graves, Freud and Jung's interpretations of female psychology: Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 68. But recently psychoanalytical critics have returned to Graves' 'grammar' in connection with castration-anxiety and Lacanian psycholinguistics: Anton Ehrenzweig, "The Creative Surrender," *The Practice of Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. Leonard Tennenhouse (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1976), pp. 136-51; Norman N. Holland, "Recovering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), pp. 350-70. The myth lives.
11. "Freud's discovery of the unconscious was a response to the body language of nineteenth-century hysterics... The [female] hysteric's seduction of her doctor is at the heart of...the psychoanalytic contribution." Dianne Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.," in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, eds., Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 115.
12. Kristeva, "The Father, Love, and Banishment," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, eds., Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (New York: Columbia, 1983), p. 399.
13. Girard develops his concept of mirror-love in his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965).
14. Associated with a child's envy of her mother's cosmetics, Atwood had used a similar triple-mirror symbolism in *Lady Oracle*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1976), pp. 62-65.

## PORTRAIT

is gentleness is collaborative hue  
 deranged stars come down furloughed  
 with the best intentions  
 every metropolitan adventure in your mind  
 moves to the country now  
 where seams are straight forever  
 the imagination cursing what it has not become  
 spangled apricot enclosures crowd  
 manila envelopes instead of  
 e.s.p. each lover has and locates you  
 no matter how you slip away  
 the pinched nerve of editing  
 scours the charts for best loved hits  
 all of them pressure points dying  
 to be relieved of duties  
 and they are because you let them  
 be supreme  
 surrender your best  
 thinking which is feeling

Sheila E. Murphy  
 Phoenix, Arizona