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POSTHUMOUS PRAISE
BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCE IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

By
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POSTHUMOUS PRAISE

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the phenomenon whereby a number of deceased Canadian women writers have had their lives utilized in subsequent works of fiction, drama, poetry, film, and biography. The dissertation gives this phenomenon a name—biographical influence—and argues that it represents a challenge to traditional literary canonicity in the Canadian context. Whereas literary canonicity has traditionally been the domain of literature professors, the phenomenon of biographical influence may be read as a writer-enacted substitution for traditional canonicity. This writer-enacted canon is comprised of literary heroines who have been elevated to their status not, as is traditional, because of the value of their work. Rather, entry to this new canon is reserved for writers whose lives often come close to eclipsing the value ascribed to their work. This is an ironic canonicity that valorizes the writer's life, while claiming to valorize the writer's work.

Recent critiques by Lucasta Miller of the Brontë myth, Jacqueline Rose and Janet Malcolm of Sylvia Plath's posthumous status, and by Brenda Silver of Virginia Woolf's iconicity are a manifestation of the cross-pollination of Cultural Studies discourse with English Studies that this dissertation seeks to emulate. While Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" comes closest to providing the language with which to name the phenomenon this thesis describes, his theory

does not account for three important differences in the Canadian context. First, instead of re-writing precursors' works, in Canadian literature, writers re-write their precursors' lives. Second, instead of this re-writing coming from a defensive position, in Canadian literature the intention is to aid the precursor's reputation, in many cases to solidify it. Finally, Bloom's theory cannot explain why it is that in Canadian literature, most "precursors" are women and not men. In the foreshortened female literary careers of Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther, as well as in Susanna Moodie's life, the dissertation argues that some contemporary Canadian writers have found, among other things, a metaphor for expressing the large odds against literary success in this country. To explain the metaphor, the dissertation elaborates an argument based on Nancy Armstrong's reading of the rise of the novel that sees literary desire as the basis of biographical influence in Canada. It then uses close readings of works in which Susanna Moodie, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Pat Lowther appear as characters, as well as Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*—novels where biographical influence is fictionalized—as evidence for the phenomenon of biographical influence.

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But they're melting to myth,
every year harder to believe
in, and the further we travel away
the more we require
in the form of proofs.

— Carol Shields, "Pioneers: Southeast Ontario"

Please die I said
So I can write about it

— Margaret Atwood, "Their attitudes differ"

Chapter One

Introduction: Theorizing Desire into Canadian Literature

1.

This dissertation offers a theory to explain an important phenomenon in recent Canadian literature, the repeated use of some deceased Canadian women writers' lives as subject matter in contemporary Canadian fiction, poetry, drama, film, and biography. I call this trend biographical influence, and postulate it as evidence of an argument I make implicitly and explicitly throughout the dissertation. The argument is that a particular type of literary desire, conspicuously manifested by creative writers, is replacing traditional critic-centred canon-making to become a dominant mode of understanding Canadian literary tradition. While seemingly a benign phenomenon that might be explained away by invoking the argument that recent Canadian literature is postmodern—a genre that revels in using writers as characters—the dissertation argues that something more motivated and systematic than generic concerns is at stake in the phenomenon of biographical influence. At stake is the question of who has the ability, the need, and the power to create a Canadian literary canon, the critic or the author? Theorizing desire into Canadian literature, understood as an unconscious, unmediated form of attraction, is my way of suggesting that the more compelling explanations for

why we read who we read are now being produced by creative writers and not by sometimes logic-encumbered critics.

The conjunction of literary influence and Canadian literature is by all counts a strange one. Perhaps no other national literature in the world is as devoid of public claims of influence as is Canada's. In fact, the notion of influence has been actively derided within Canadian literature, without strenuous opposition.¹ While it is true that in the 1880s the poet Archibald Lampman memorably claimed Charles G.D. Roberts' book of poems *Orion* as an important influence in his becoming a poet, it is not until the late twentieth century and the often remarked-upon influence exerted by the critic Northrop Frye on the early poetry of his students Margaret Atwood, Jay Macpherson and James Reaney, that we find another notable example of literary influence on Canadian writers by Canadian writers.

In the strict definition formulated by Harold Bloom, literary influence—the poet awakening “to his calling when irresistibly seized upon by one or more poems of a precursor or father-poet” (Abrams 445)—is a rare occurrence in Canada. This dissertation argues, however, that there is an analogous kind of literary relationship that Canadian literature exhibits in a pronounced fashion in several important cases. This relationship we will call biographical influence, defined as the influence of one writer's life on another writer's art.

The theory this dissertation puts forward is not confined, however, to the identification of cases where unconscious biographical influence (as in Bloom) is at work. It will be primarily argued that biographical influence is self-consciously utilized

by a number of Canadian writers as a way of furthering specific politico-literary ends, namely, the achievement of canonicity and tradition, where these things do not previously exist.

Specifically, biographical influence entails the usurping of the critic's function by the novelist, poet, dramatist and biographer. This process is best captured in the relationship between Margaret Atwood and her precursor (to borrow a term from Bloom), Susanna Moodie. Over a career spanning more than thirty years, Atwood has in several of her literary works re-written the life of Susanna Moodie, the nineteenth-century Canadian writer, in the process enabling and ensuring the canonization of Moodie as an early Canadian writer. Yet Atwood's use of Moodie is clearly not a Bloomian instance of influence, where battle is done between the precursor and the later writer, both considered "strong" writers.

Rather, in the Canadian example the dynamic of influence is typically played out on an unequal footing, between a living and vital writer (e.g., Atwood), and a deceased writer (e.g., Moodie), whose work had been forgotten or undervalued in 1970 when Atwood published *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. The effect of the process of biographical influence is to create a new canon of literary heroines—all of them actual Canadian writers—who have been elevated to their heroic status not by critics (as is usually the case), but by subsequent generations of authors. The "Posthumous Praise" of my title is intended to draw attention to the contest over the reputation of certain Canadian writers and their entry into an alternative canon reserved for authors whose often-tumultuous lives eclipse the value ascribed to their literary output.² Cultural capital

becomes vested in these writers' lives, and only by extension, in their works. The dissertation raises the question of whether the pervasiveness of biographical influence is a sign of a state of decadence in the country's literature, or whether there are other explanations for this inward turn.

2.

In setting out to show how biographical influence operates, I shall have recourse to a number of critical terms and theories. The work of Harold Bloom has already been cited. Bloom's rigid theorization of literary influence, which is based on canonical English poetry, is important to this dissertation, even though I treat a mixture of prose, some plays, and fewer poems, and all from a late twentieth-century Canadian context. Besides Bloom, the work of various literary critics working in the large area I demarcate as "influence studies" has also affected my thinking on the topic.

The volume entitled *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, for example, edited by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, has been especially helpful as it summarizes work undertaken over a long period of time. Clayton and Rothstein propound a dialectical argument wherein the older term "influence" is set against the post-structuralist term "intertextuality." Clayton and Rothstein do not synthesize their argument, leaving it to critics such as David Cowart, in his monograph *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing*, to attempt—largely unsuccessfully—such a synthesis.³

In part, this lack of success among theorists of influence such as Bloom and Cowart has to do, this dissertation argues, with their turning a blind eye to one of the fundamental ways in which influence is manifested. By looking for significance only in the way one author's writing has been influenced by another author's writing—a strictly formalist preoccupation—these critics are missing an important process. This process is the relationship between some authors' *lives* and other authors' *writing*. The perhaps unintended effect of such a process is to produce an alternative form of canonicity whereby certain writers are now known more for the events of their lives, than for what they ever wrote. Thus, in one of the most famous twentieth-century examples, the *life* of the poet Sylvia Plath has influenced the writing of subsequent poets and biographers and critics to the point where it is impossible to ascertain whether the canonicity of Sylvia Plath is based on the events of her life or on an appreciation of her works. What kind of canonicity is this, we may ask, that is ostensibly founded on the writer in question's work, but in reality more vested in that writer's life? In the Canadian example, three writers stand out as having had their lives influence the later writing of novelists, playwrights, biographers and poets. These three are Susanna Moodie, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther. The fact that all three are women, and that the majority of works in which they feature as characters are also written by women, is the one of the salient components of the argument that follows.

The biographical influence exerted by Moodie, MacEwen and Lowther is a specifically gendered influence, both by virtue of these writers being women, and because their being women is what later writers find interesting, and worth writing about.

The question of why this should be so is the crux of this dissertation. What is it about the experience of being a female writer (a different experience in Moodie's and MacEwen's and Lowther's cases) that is so central to successive generations of Canadian writers that they have decided to reproduce it in numerous works of their own? Is there, for example, a useful metaphorical alignment to be made between the fact of being a woman and the fact of being a Canadian writer?

It has often been noted that Canadian writing is matriarchal.⁴ The line running from Susanna Moodie through Sara Jeannette Duncan to Ethel Wilson to Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields, the argument goes, is more pronounced than the splintered tradition evident in John Richardson, Frederick Philip Grove, Morley Callaghan, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Timothy Findley and Robert Kroetsch. Are such genealogies merely impressionistic, or does the possibility exist that, like influential mid-twentieth century theories of the American Renaissance and its male-centered romance (well-known practitioners including Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Thoreau, Emerson), the Canadian literary renaissance of the late twentieth century is best figured in the female?⁵ And if this is so, then why the centrality of suffering, early-dying, or unfairly-neglected women writers?

This introductory chapter begins by examining briefly some well-known theories of influence and intertextuality in order to identify a point of departure for the main argument of biographical influence. The chapter then moves on to look in detail at one of the notions it takes for granted, namely that Canadian literature is somehow inimicable to influence and intertextuality. A brief detour through the extant examples of Canadian

criticism pertaining to influence and intertextuality, as well as through the recent minefields of canon-criticism, will round out this section. The intersection between influence and desire is discussed next, using Nancy Armstrong's influential Foucauldian reading of the rise of the novel as an analogue for a new argument about the rise of Canadian literature. The assumption that femininity and writing by women is central to Canadian literature is reconfigured in this section, and recent feminist scholarship that intersects with canon-criticism will be especially useful here. Finally the introductory chapter discusses and distinguishes the relationship between postmodernism, a literary genre that revels in fictionalizing the lives of writers, and the dynamic of biographical influence, which I will argue is both rightfully an integral part of postmodernism, and a separate phenomenon at the same time.

The introductory chapter is followed by four chapters that illustrate the argument of biographical influence. In the second chapter, I supplement the theory advanced in the introduction by reading several examples of what I call the "female literary myth explication monograph." These are books published recently that attempt to account for the mythic or iconic status of writers like the Brontë sisters, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath. The third chapter is devoted to a close reading of two important novels, Carol Shields's *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. These novels are significant because their main theme dramatizes the theme of this dissertation: the effect of one writer's life on another writer's writing. The chapter on Shields and Atwood provides a map, in a sense, that the final three chapters of the dissertation attempt to read. The fourth chapter on Susanna Moodie looks at the wide-ranging influence Moodie has had on late

twentieth-century Canadian literature. Gwendolyn MacEwen's foreshortened yet prolific career is examined in the fifth chapter, which pays particular attention to recent cinematic, fictional, and dramatic uses of the body of MacEwen. Finally, in the sixth chapter the life of Pat Lowther, the Vancouver poet whose career was brutally cut short by her sensational murder at the hands of her estranged husband, is read against various poetic, dramatic and fictional re-tellings of her life.

3.

Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* has cast an enormous shadow over the branch of literary criticism that is interested in the way texts and authors interact with each other. Despite its having fallen out of official favour in English departments in the twenty-five years since its articulation, Bloom's elegant and difficult theory continues to exert influence itself by virtue of the fact that it is based upon what most people would admit as a self-evident truth. Writers read other writers and either emulate them, learn from them, or else try to improve upon them.

The deconstruction of Bloom's theory by feminist, poststructuralist and African-Americanist critics among others, has proceeded along reasonable grounds. Among the commonly cited reasons given for Bloom's irrelevance are his ignorance of a female literary tradition, his unabashed valuation of writers and texts which leads to a hierarchy of strong writers and weak writers, and his inability to account for writing that is not part of the British tradition. A more speculative and perhaps cynical reading of the dismissal

of Bloom centers on the role of the critic in this literary equation. Bloom's is a hermetically sealed theory. It is solely a description of the relationship between two people, both of whom are writers. The "ephebe" reads the "precursor" and is influenced: this influence results in the ephebe's decision to do one of two things: either ignore the precursor (a decision Bloom does not really believe in), or instead engage the precursor by re-writing his work (Bloom 14-15). Presumably, the critic's job in such a scheme is to account for the way in which one poet has been influenced by the other. It does not require detailed investigation to realize that this apportioning of the hermeneutical pie will be more to the liking of some critics than others. Those who are inclined to see themselves as purveyors of a text's meaning (a nearly extinct breed) can derive benefits from Bloom's thesis, while those critics who see literary works as embodying and sanctioning interventions in the real world (and who today form the majority in the academy) are less apt to see usefulness in Bloom's methods.

Bloom's theory severely limits the availability of texts to interpretation, and the resultant backlash is well documented in a volume such as Jay Clayton's and Eric Rothstein's *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. While the title appears to grant a nominal equality to the terms "influence" and "intertextuality," and while Clayton's and Rothstein's diplomatic introduction would have us believe that the authors "do not intend to utter battle cries for either side" (Clayton and Rothstein 4), the contents of this collection belie any such generosity. The collection is, in fact, a concerted attack on the validity of influence as a literary theory. Clayton's and Rothstein's introduction sets the pattern for what is to come. Influence is described first, and then intertextuality.

This order is ostensibly a neutral reflection of the chronological appearance of the two theories, the first of which appeared in the late eighteenth century and culminated in the 1970s with Harold Bloom, while the second theory appeared in the late 1960s with various essays by Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. What this chronological presentation actually accomplishes, however, is a neutralizing of the first term. Influence is framed as dated, and intertextuality as the vanguard. Furthermore, influence is charged with propagating inequalities that have consequences in real-world terms, and then not defended against or allowed to answer these charges.

There is a larger irony that appears to have escaped proponents of both influence and intertextuality. Seen from a proper distance—something both camps have been loathe to do—the crisis between influence and intertextuality, or the attack of intertextuality upon influence, uncannily thematizes itself. For what else is the argument between these two camps but a very attenuated example of the Bloomian dialectic? In this case, proponents of influence such as Bloom can be read as precursors, and the various proponents of intertextuality become Bloomian ephebes, dazzled and dismayed at the same time, vowing to re-write the precursor's "poem." Of course the objection can be raised to this reductive reading that, in fact, many practitioners of intertextuality are not interested in influence, and are, in some cases, probably not even aware of Bloom's theory. Still, the point of adducing this irony is not to ascribe victory to Bloom in the war of influence and intertextuality. It is rather to demonstrate the impossibility of the elision that proponents of intertextuality take as a given, namely that texts appear in other texts (a short-hand

definition for intertextuality) without some form of organizing subjectivity making this decision.

And yet, as mentioned earlier, intertextuality has triumphed, if the reigning opinion in English departments is a valid measure. Bloom is simply not countenanced as a credible way of reading. Cultural capital in this area is firmly vested in intertextuality, a theory that has the double advantage of being politically advantageous, but also of being slightly nebulous, as far as its methodology is concerned. As an illustration of this point we might take one of the most common utterances in any English department, which is a variation of the following: "So-and-so did a Marxist reading of so-and-so," or "In Nancy Armstrong's Foucauldian reading of the rise of the novel..." or "I understand the job-talk today is going to be a new historicist reading of Marlowe." These phrases are taken for granted every day. Behind them, however, lies what I take to be the most fundamental paradox of contemporary literary studies. All work produced in English departments is increasingly predicated upon a readily-acknowledged knowledge of some intertext or precursor, at the same time as the reigning ethos in the English department continues to demand and reify originality, creativity and new insights (especially in the creative writers it studies). Interestingly, a number of the contemporary writers this dissertation discusses are also fascinated by this paradox, most often displayed in their satirical description of the current academy. In the sentence, "So-and-so did a Marxist reading of so-and-so," is it ever possible to glean whether Marxist theory (or indeed Marx) is an *influence* on the present-day writer, or simply an *intertext* in the web of many possible intertexts available? This debatable question means that the paradox of influence and

intertextuality is not finally where a point of departure for a theory of biographical influence will be found.

Dislodged as Bloom may be, his theory remains more important to this dissertation than any theory of intertextuality, for the fundamental reason that he valorizes relationships amongst writers. This fact is the first important premise in building a theory of desire and Canadian literature that uses biographical influence. By virtue of their reading of each other's work, by virtue of their own personal friendships or acquaintanceships, and finally, by their continued publishing of literary works, writers are in a position to form a unique nexus of reciprocal influence that is largely outside the purview of the critic. The astute reader may question at this point, "But what about Bloomsbury, the Confederation Poets, Paris of the 1920s? Are these not all instances of author-nexuses that have been well-documented, if not partially created, by literary critics?" How then can it be claimed that biographical influence is outside the critic's sphere of influence? The answer to this question involves formulating a more precise definition of the phrase "biographical influence." While literary critics have found fertile ground in naming various "movements" and "circles," this sort of criticism does not actually describe biographical influence. Biographical influence is a more specific subset of influence. In it, one writer undergoes the sort of influence described in the Bloomian formulation, but then makes a crucially different decision than Bloom will allow. Instead of re-writing the earlier writer's *work*, the biographically-influenced writer seizes on the earlier writer's *life*, and writes about that instead. A number of significant issues obviously stem from this statement. Why does one writer choose to write about another

writer? What ends does such a choice serve? Is this an important enough process to warrant sustained examination?

Another reason why Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* thesis is important for this proposed theory of biographical influence is because in its stark and unwavering claim that the anxiety of influence is a negative dialectic, a positive alternative becomes more readily—in fact inescapably—visible. Bloom's insistence that the precursor poet (e.g., Milton) is challenged by the ephebe poet (e.g., Wordsworth) in a negative dialectic where eventually one must win, begs for the articulation of its obverse. Plainly stated, in some instances, and under particular circumstances (the late twentieth-century Canadian instance being the one in question here), the dialectic can actually be positive. In other words, Susanna Moodie is not challenged by Margaret Atwood, so much as she is honoured and valorized and put to good use.⁶

Bloom's reasons for developing a singularly negative theory have largely to do with his most significant intertext, Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. Freud's familiar family romance, where desire is necessarily negative and destructive, is transformed by Bloom so that it is no longer the mother who is fought over by the son and the father, but rather, the poetic muse. Bloom's strict adherence to the Freudian triangle also ensures his current degree of unfashionableness.

This is because his simplistic Freudian model that takes the Oedipal family drama literally was long ago superseded by revisions to it such as Lacan's, Deleuze and Guattari's and various feminist deconstructions, which view desire not as destructive but instead as productive. In this way, this dissertation is in the difficult position of straddling

two irreconcilable views. It sides with Bloom's vision of a meaningful relationship between authors, but it cannot side with Bloom's outdated version of desire.

Intertextuality offers this cure: a complete lack of motivation. Texts simply circulate within other texts. Motivation is not an issue because texts are bereft of an authoring subjectivity. This perhaps too simplistic solution to the problem of how to account for the presence of one writer's work in another writer's work leaves the way open for consideration of a third alternative. Relationships between writers are not necessarily competitive and filled with anxiety, but potentially mutually beneficial and a source of satisfaction. Biographical influence is the embodiment of this third alternative.

4.

The substantial appeal of using biographical influence as a way to read Canadian literature lies in the fact that it enables us to read the literature as a political project. Nancy Armstrong's reading of the rise of the novel as part of a far-ranging political process (the rise and domination of the middle class) makes an excellent analogy in this regard. In her 1987 monograph, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong deftly argues that novel writing was the most important factor in the creation of the English middle-class subject, a subject who was furthermore and importantly, a woman. The paradigm shift signalled by Armstrong's argument—in essence that literature has the power to change the world and is not merely always a reaction or reflection of reality—has been extremely influential. Not only is Armstrong's argument decisive in eighteenth-century

English studies, where as Leila Silvana May shows, “nearly any book addressing gender issues in the eighteenth and nineteenth century has had to acknowledge the importance of Armstrong’s argument” (May 267), but it also stands as one of the strongest examples of a literary critic putting the theories of Michel Foucault to work.

Armstrong takes from Foucault the notion that “traditional modes of historical causality” must be questioned, not taken for granted, and that instead we must “focus our attention on the place of language and particularly writing in the history of modern culture” (Armstrong 10). Accepting this Foucauldian precept, Armstrong is able to show that the rise and dominance of the middle class in England stems from the *written* embodiment of this desire, the middle class woman. The theory of biographical influence will similarly allow us to see Canadian literature, especially its post-1960 phase, creating its own political reality.

Biographical influence is one manifestation of the desire, to borrow Armstrong’s terminology, of certain practitioners of literature in this country to create not only a tradition, but a female tradition. Among Armstrong’s most important insights is to cast the female subject represented in the English novel as a vehicle for “directing desire at certain objects in the world” (16) such as the middle-class nuclear family. This dissertation argues in a similar fashion that in Canadian literature, the female subject, represented—and this is vital—as a writer, has been an important vehicle for creating the desire for a national literature. At the same time, the female-writer subject in Canadian literature has also been the vehicle for creating the desire for a national literature in which women writers are central to the tradition.

It is the word “tradition” in fact, that lies at the heart of the seemingly strange mixture of intertexts (Armstrong and Bloom) underpinning my theory of biographical influence. At a time when, as Jonathan Kertzer has argued, “theoretical inquiry in Canadian literary studies” proceeds from an agreement about “how flimsy the ‘Canadian tradition’ is,” (Kertzer 3) this dissertation attempts to once again valorize the notion of tradition, although in a radically different way than has been previously attempted. Instead of a critic-fashioned tradition (the kind Kertzer argues is no longer *au courant* in Canadian English departments), I prefer to see an author-fashioned tradition. In this new tradition, relationships between authors are just as important, if not more important, than the relationship between the critic and her text. Furthermore, this new tradition, unlike the previous one, is expressly political, in the sense that it foregrounds its own desire for tradition as one of its major themes.

This political function of biographical influence is important because it allows us to view significant works of recent Canadian literature as implicated in their own success or failure. Two influential strains in Canadian literary criticism up to this time have been thematic and stylistic. Thematic criticism has proceeded from the assumption that Canadian literature must be considered against the better-known and historically prior traditions of British and American literature. In Northrop Frye this leads to the garrison mentality theory, while in Atwood it leads to the survival theory. Reacting against thematic criticism has been what I term stylistic criticism. Stylistic criticism is a more wide-ranging criticism which includes the work of critics such as Frank Davey and Linda Hutcheon, among many others, who have preferred to read Canadian literature using

language and genre as bases. Both thematic and stylistic criticism proceed from the unacknowledged assumption that the meaning of Canadian literature lies elsewhere, whether this be in reaction against American Manifest Destiny, or in embracing French poststructuralism. The theory of biographical influence, which reads Canadian literature as a consciously self-forming venture, allows us to look inside the Canadian tradition for a critical vocabulary.

It is somewhat ironic that biographical influence should be claimed in this dissertation as an intrinsically homegrown method of reading the country's literature. The fact is that Canadian literary criticism of the late twentieth century has steered far clear of the notion that one Canadian writer might be influenced by another. The reasons for this strict sense of constant "newness"—every novel comes out of a vacuum, or if not a vacuum, then a tradition that lies outside Canada—are not difficult to gauge. Two possibilities come quickly to mind: either it is true that Canadian writers do not influence each other, or else, it is not true, and literary critics have not paid enough attention to the phenomenon. Certainly the idea that writers could (and should) influence each other is not foreign in the realm of early Canadian literature. John Richardson admitted his debt to James Fenimore Cooper, and Isabella Valancy Crawford readily acknowledged the influence of Tennyson among other well-known poets. In the early- to mid-twentieth century, writers like Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan both demonstrated the influence of Ernest Hemingway, although in diametrically opposed ways. So far the pattern in these examples is clear: Canadian writers look elsewhere—chiefly to the American and British traditions—for inspiration.

A subversive strain of Canadian literary criticism, most forcefully espoused by the writer and critic John Metcalf, sees in the above examples evidence for the fact that there simply does not exist an authentic Canadian literary tradition. In his passionately argued essay "Freedom from Culture," Metcalf articulates this position forthrightly: "A country's literature is not a collection of books... A literature is a relationship between books and readers... A literature is those books which readers hold in their hearts and minds" (Metcalf 20). Starting with this assertion, Metcalf goes on to argue that by virtue of the fact that Canadians do not love their own books, the country has, in fact, an artificial literary tradition.⁷ According to Metcalf, Canadian literature before its nationalistic renaissance in the late 1960s was simply boring and bad. After the 1960s, interestingly, the country's literature has, to put it bluntly, become more boring and more bad. Metcalf points the finger of blame at Canada's system of subsidies whereby publishers receive grants from various governmental and quasi-governmental organizations to publish Canadian books. For Metcalf, such a system is bound to produce bad books. He would prefer to see a free market system where publishers compete on the open market, causing there to be fewer books being published, but necessarily, according to Metcalf, these books would be of a much higher aesthetic value.

Until quite recently, Metcalf's views held little if any sway with the Canadian literary establishments—governmental, journalistic or academic—and for obvious reasons. He is barely able to hide his contempt for scholars of Canadian literature, as well as for newspaper book reviewers and government bureaucrats. He argues vehemently that

these people have created and continue to prop up an empty tradition, full of novels and plays and poems that are made into classics by virtue merely of their existence.

In the academic world, Metcalf blames the existence of this phony tradition largely on Northrop Frye, who through his large influence over Canadian literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, established the doctrine that evaluation was not the appropriate method for analyzing Canadian literature. Although Metcalf often appears to be a lone voice, it is becoming increasingly clear that his views are percolating into the academy. The recent work of Robert Lecker and Jonathan Kertzer demonstrates the influence of Metcalf's ideas. Lecker in particular—one of the country's most prominent Canadianists—has begun to take a decidedly Metcalfian view of the country's literature in his recent writing. Beginning with his 1991 collection, *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, Lecker has become the main proponent of an explicitly evaluative criticism that seeks to uncover the reasons why we hold certain books more in esteem than others.

In the introduction to *Canadian Canons*, Lecker points out that Metcalf's criticism seems "to have fallen on deaf ears, despite the fact that [it offers] challenging insights into the values underlying the 'tradition' of Canadian literature and criticism" (Lecker 1991 9). In his next major work, the collection of essays entitled *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*, Lecker goes one step further and deconstructs Frye's famous "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* as the fulfillment of Frye's own personal desire as a critic for "redemption" (1995 193). Finally, in a recent essay entitled "The Canada Council's Block Grant Program and the Construction of Canadian Literature," Lecker comes out and squarely takes on what he,

and Metcalf, see as the chief inhibiting force in Canadian literature: the federally-funded Canada Council. Currently in its forty-fifth year of operation, the Council, through its Block Grant program, ensures the financial existence of dozens of small- and medium-size Canadian publishing houses. The argument made by Metcalf, and now Lecker, is that Canadian literature has been stuck in a no-win situation. Lecker asks, “Can artists and critics change their culture when they are required to engage in discursive activities that appeal to the Council and its jurors?” (Lecker 1999 467). Metcalf would unequivocally answer: No. Lecker, as befits his position of Professor of English at McGill University, is more cautious and circumspect. He allows the question—rhetorically posed, but pointedly unanswered—to speak for itself. Yes, Lecker implies, Canadian literature has suffered immeasurably in aesthetic value because writers and critics and publishers are beholden for part of their livelihood to an ideologically-driven government funding system.

Jonathan Kertzer is a less impassioned believer in the Metcalf view of things, though he accords Metcalf’s views a number of pages in his recent monograph, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada*. According to Kertzer, a careful reading of Metcalf beyond his well-known bombastic claims about the propagandistic nature of the Canadian literary tradition shows that Metcalf in fact “does not look beyond national literature but ahead to it” (Kertzer 5). Kertzer sees in Metcalf’s valorization of strict standards of literary merit a romantic yearning for a “fusing” of “spirit, language, and place” (5). As such, Kertzer is able to re-configure Metcalf not as the bad-boy he is usually taken to be but rather, like Lecker’s Frye, as the proponent of a

“Romantic historicism” which “regards language as the lifeblood of a nation, with literature at its pulse” (13).

Despite Kertzer’s valuable re-signification of Metcalf as not-so-radical, the combined power of Metcalf’s and Lecker’s desires for a literature that challenges, revolts, goes against the grain, and is commercially successful—as opposed to the one we currently have—becomes readily clear. The convolutions and paradoxes of their positions become apparent if we dig a little below the surface of the Metcalf-Lecker continuum. When his essay “Freedom from Culture” was first published, Metcalf was taken to task both personally and in print, for what was seen as gross hypocrisy. After all, Metcalf’s stinging criticism of subsidy-culture conveniently hid the fact that Metcalf himself had been the recipient of numerous grants, had sat on numerous juries, and was closely tied to at least two subsidy-publishers. In his collection of essays also entitled *Freedom from Culture*, published some years after the essay mentioned above, Metcalf responds to his critics by arguing that of course he has been hypocritical, but that he sees nothing wrong with this. “It’s perfectly true that I’ve accepted grants in the past,” he writes. “Rather a lot of them actually... And I’d advise other writers opposed to subsidy to do the same. But at the same time, I’ll continue to argue strenuously for an end to the system” (39). Furthermore, Metcalf does not have any scruples about publishing the book in which these comments appear, with a subsidy-publisher, ECW Press. ECW Press, it just so happens, is co-owned by Rober Lecker, Professor of English at McGill University.

This information would be an exposé if most people working in Canadian literature did not already know about it. Instead, the information is presented here to contextualize

Lecker's and Metcalf's decisions to critique subsidy-culture and equate subsidy culture with aesthetically inferior works. I would argue that as a result of his unwillingness to make as complete an unmasking gesture as Metcalf—which would be to correctly identify himself as a publisher, and therefore as someone with a say not only in the critical but also in the creative fashioning of Canadian literature—Lecker's academic work on the subject of Canadian literature is less rich.⁸

A more nuanced critique of Canadian literature comes from an embracing of all the interconnectedness and implicated-ness that makes up the field. Placing these facts in the open is only negative if one holds the view that great literature arrives out of nowhere (an idea even Bloom would not countenance). Rather, interconnectedness is an intrinsic and defining feature of the Canadian literary world and has almost always been so. The move this dissertation makes is to go the extra step of theorizing one specific branch of this interconnectedness, biographical influence. Biographical influence is the embodiment in creative writing of the interconnectedness of the Canadian literary institution.

5.

It would be negligent to advance a theory of biographical influence without at the same time examining feminist scholarship on the topics of desire and canon studies. There are two reasons why feminist theory should be consulted. First, because the examples of biographical influence offered in this dissertation all involve women, and this is far from coincidental. Second, some of the most provocative theorizing around desire has come

from feminist theorists who call into question the very suitability of the term as a theoretical category. Some feminist theory, then, would seem to contradict the very bases on which Armstrong and I build our theories of desire and literature. In this section I will look at two different types of feminist theories of desire, that of Catherine MacKinnon and Judith Butler. In distinguishing which of the two is more useful to the argument of biographical influence, I glance at the recent work of Misao Dean, a Canadian feminist critic. The point at which desire and canon formation intersect in Canadian literary studies will be examined with the help of Carole Gerson's work on mid-twentieth century canonization. Finally, I will look at a recent critique of Nancy Armstrong that calls into question the feminist credentials of that seemingly canonized feminist critic.

Feminist theory is conflicted on the subject of desire. In the work of Catherine MacKinnon, the legal scholar best known for drafting the MacKinnon-Dworkin anti-pornography law, desire is the "internal dynamic" (MacKinnon 4) of an unjust system designed to subjugate women. MacKinnon argues that "as the organized expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman" (3). Gender is necessarily a relation of unequals, and desire is the tool used by men to prop up this unequal system. Rather than viewing desire as "presocial, part of the natural world" as "unequal societies" (4) prefer to do, MacKinnon believes it to be crucial that we view desire instead as created. Feminism, according to MacKinnon, is a tool to expose "desire as socially relational, internally necessary to unequal social orders but historically contingent" (4). She is careful to distinguish her own definition of desire from that of

numerous French feminists like Cixous, Irigary and Kristeva who do not use the term “concretely... but abstractly and conceptually” (251n). MacKinnon also distances herself from the Freudian revisionists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose project is to liberate desire from its negative connotations in Freud and give it a life of its own as a positive expression because they fail to see desire as “gendered” (251n).

Significantly for the purposes of this dissertation, MacKinnon sees a possibility for change in the very process of exposing the workings of male desire. Feminism, she argues, recognizes the “male power to create the world in its own image, the image of its desires” but at the same time recognizes that “this process is as pervasive... as it is changeable” (118).

This dissertation will argue that in the field of Canadian literature a feminist change has in fact occurred whereby the desire of certain feminist authors for a female tradition has actually had an impact on if not taken over the previously entrenched male tradition. MacKinnon’s final remarks on desire, where she castigates the supposed champions of desire, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, for “enforcing the hegemony of the social construct ‘desire’... its product, ‘sexuality,’ [and] its construct ‘woman’ (129), seem to deal a problematic blow to the Armstrongian argument and its feminist credentials by aligning Armstrong with the three men MacKinnon has just derided.

MacKinnon does not allude to the work of Judith Butler on desire, but if she were to allude to it, it would no doubt be in a negative fashion. For like Cixous, Irigary and Kristeva, Butler’s influential critique of desire is abstract and conceptual. In fact, Butler is unabashedly conceptual, arguing at the outset of *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian*

Reflections in Twentieth-Century France that her monograph is “the philosophical narrative of a highly influential trope” (Butler xxi). Where MacKinnon was blunt about the power and gender relations that prop-up desire, Butler prefers to elide the real-world or experiential facets of desire in order to elaborate on the figure of desire. Indeed, we look in vain in Butler’s discussion of the philosophical rise and fall of desire for any mention of gender. In an ironic congruence of terms, however, Butler begins by tracing the history of the “domestication of desire” (2) as a necessary act for philosophers who could not otherwise grasp the concept. In her echoing of Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, and using language similar to MacKinnon, but for a completely different purpose, Butler shows how “because philosophers cannot *obliterate* desire, they must formulate strategies to *silence* or *control* it” (2 emphasis added). By domesticating desire “in the name of reason,” (2) philosophers like Spinoza and Hegel are able to articulate a model where “desire is essentially linked to self-knowledge... the pursuit of identity in what appears to be different” (7). This apparently innocent process of recognition is diametrically opposed—though once again ironically tantalizingly similar in its rhetoric—to MacKinnon’s view of desire as a manifestation of men’s power over women. Indeed Butler’s investment in desire as a trope appears to blind her to the gaping absence of gender in her own argument. When she claims that “the Hegelian subject *expands* in the course of its *adventure* through alterity; it internalizes the world that it desires, and *expands* to *encompass*, to be, what it initially confronts as other to itself,” (8-9 emphasis added) the passage simply demands to be read with gender in mind. Yet Butler does not allow us this option. When Butler, reading Hyppolite, begins to expand

the meaning of desire to include the desire for “that which is different, strange, novel, awaited, absent, lost” (9) we begin to see the usefulness of her argument to the articulation of biographical influence—a process of recovering what is absent or lost. Yet tracing the historical shift from desire as a mark of the integrity of the subject to desire as the “impossibility of the coherent subject” (6) in the work of Lacan, Deleuze and Foucault, Butler seems to close off the possibility that biographical influence—a reconstituted tradition of strong female subjects—is possible.

Both MacKinnon and Butler are useful in building a theory of biographical influence, although there are inherent weaknesses in each argument that make it problematic to adopt them unequivocally. For one thing, MacKinnon’s model makes it impossible to conceive of female desire, although this is obviously the end product she has in mind. Desire is always male desire in MacKinnon. Such a model will not work in the Canadian example where female authors desire other female authors. Similarly, Butler’s lack of interest in introducing gender as a term of reference in tracing the philosophical history of desire makes applying much of her theory to the Canadian process of biographical influence difficult. What is it about Armstrong’s argument that does allow it to be appropriated more easily into a theory of biographical influence? According to Leila Silvana May, Armstrong’s argument evinces the rare ability to “both subvert feminism and breathe new life into it at the same time” (May 267). May’s critique of Armstrong (the first sustained effort) reads into Armstrong the same positive and negative qualities I have observed above in MacKinnon and Butler. Armstrong’s “restoring of agency and authority to women” (268) ties her to MacKinnon’s overt

feminist, political, real-world argument, whereas her engagement with Foucauldian notions of power and discourse and language, and how they are mediated by desire, bring her closer to Butler's reasoning. To repeat: this dissertation engages Armstrong at the point where she claims that "the reading of fiction came to play an indispensable role in directing desire at certain objects in the world" (Armstrong 16). For Armstrong, the most important object is the middle class woman. For me, the central object is the Canadian middle class woman writer. May most trenchantly critiques Armstrong in regard to this central point. "I have looked in vain," May writes, "for a genuine argument in her book that demonstrates this claim." (269) May goes on to charge Armstrong with the crime of displaying her thesis instead of proving it, and, more fundamentally, of overstating her case when it comes to the Foucauldian notion of language's power in the real world.

These are serious charges that need to be kept in mind, for at the heart of this dissertation lies a quantifiably similar argument to Armstrong's: the desire for a female tradition in Canadian literature has caused some Canadian writers to use women writers as characters in their works. This has in turn created an alternate female Canadian canon. May's test of adequacy for Armstrong's theory is a tough one. She calls into question, for instance, Armstrong's claim that in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Pamela cannot be raped by Mr. B because she "is nothing but words" (269). A similar test might come into play with the theory of biographical influence if, for example, a critic were to ask: "Just because Susanna Moodie and Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther have appeared in dozens of novels, plays, poems, and biographies, does this mean they have been canonized?" The question, of course, comes down to the type of proof accepted. I would

propose skipping over the issue of evidence for a moment, to look at the way the contest over desire and gender has been played out by Canadian literary critics and theorists.

In Canadian literary studies, the work of Carole Gerson and Misao Dean uncannily reflects the MacKinnon/Butler divide on the topic of desire and gender. Gerson and Dean have provided some of the most sustained and sophisticated accounts of canonicity as it pertains to women writers in Canada (Gerson) and desire as it pertains to writing by and about women in Canada (Dean). Gerson, whose work is self-consciously written in the mould of the literary historian, argues persuasively that “the canon of English-language Canadian literature” has been “particularly arbitrary and malleable, governed less by cultural consensus than by the whims and agendas of certain individuals in positions of power” (Gerson, 47). Although her argument is MacKinnon-esque (men have created the canon by foisting their desires on the larger culture), Gerson does not use the word “desire” explicitly. The remedy Gerson offers for undoing the damage caused by modernist canonizers like F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith and their dislike for “domestic” (47) writing by women is to “un-write” this history” in order to “revalue” (56) the work of these ignored women writers. This injunction is complicated by the fact that Gerson ends her argument on a negative note, claiming that anthologies like Rosemary Sullivan’s *Stories by Canadian Women* and *Poetry by Canadian Women* are not enough of an “un-writing” to effect the necessary change. Gerson implies that a righting of the gender balance within the canon will not come from the use of forms perfected for the dissemination of male desire (the anthology), but from some other, not-specified action described only as “cultural consensus.” (47)

Misao Dean describes the work of critics like Gerson, along with a number of other approaches to the question of gender in Canadian literature, as beset by “intellectual poverty” (Dean 5). Ironically, both Dean and Gerson use the work of Jane Tompkins, the American critic, as a touchstone. Gerson quotes Tompkins approvingly on the topic of how the “valorizers of Hawthorne” (Gerson 46) marginalized his more successful female contemporaries, whereas Dean quotes Tompkins (from the same book) to claim that entry into the canon is always only “a political matter” (Dean 15) and therefore of dubious value. For Gerson, not only does the canon enshrine value, it is valuable in itself as a method of furthering feminist goals. For Dean, value in literature is merely “ideological” (15) and texts should be read following a cultural studies model, instead, where they are valuable because they demonstrate, again quoting Tompkins, the ways “a culture thinks about itself” (15).

Dean’s recent monograph, *Practising Femininity: Domestic Realism and the Performance of Gender in Early Canadian Fiction* is a rewarding Butler- and Armstrong-inflected re-casting of the work of a number of women writers of the nineteenth century. The “intellectual poverty” Dean claims as systemic in much Canadian feminist criticism lies in the fact that these readings have been satisfied to link the “material reality of women’s lives” to the genre of “literary realism” (5). According to Dean, such an approach is impoverished because it does not interrogate “historical texts” to show “how they function ideologically to produce and naturalize femininity” (6). We should pause here to note that Dean is in the curious position of arguing that exposing ideology is the proper goal of feminist criticism while at the same time claiming that according any value

to the works she considers is improper because it is “ideological” (15). Notwithstanding this incongruity, Dean makes some revelatory claims, based on her reading of Armstrong and Butler. For instance, Dean is persuasive on the need to view the femininity produced in nineteenth-century texts by women (and which leads in Armstrong to the legitimation of the middle class) as a consciously practiced production. This femininity, according to Dean, is “a fiction,” and not one women can choose either, but “the citation of a norm” (7). This citation in turn leads to subjectivity, but an ambivalent subjectivity implying “both active authority and passive submission: one becomes both the subject of one’s own story, and subject to, subjected by, the limited categories offered by ‘stories’” (8). Because this sort of subjectivity is hardly “a desirable feminist goal,” Dean goes one step further to argue that what she has uncovered in the nineteenth-century texts she reads are signs of “occupation, reversal, and resignification” (8) of female subjectivity. The resignifications in these texts occur at moments when “the contingencies of physical life (including class and colonial status) as well as the ability to make (limited choices)” (8) come to the fore. Laudable as is Dean’s re-casting of nineteenth-century writing by Canadian women as implicated in re-signifying femininity by grasping the power in that condition, the reading breaks down when we take into account material reality. What power actually accrues to these women writers, one might well ask, if no one is reading them? This is the question the practitioners of biographical influence, such as Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields, have asked. Their answer has been closer to the Gerson model: women need to be recognized by the wider community of readers as important, and only then will true power have been achieved. Gerson’s citation of Tompkins makes

sense because Tompkins has the evidence to show that Hawthorne's "female scribblers" were actually better known and more eagerly read than he was. Unfortunately, Dean is not able to provide similar proof for Catharine Parr Trail and Jessie Sime.

Between Gerson's hope for an inclusive canon based on cultural consent, and Dean's claim that a canon is not as important as exposing the complicating of normalized gender roles in texts by women, we are caught between two different (though by no means exhaustive) aspects of feminist critique in contemporary Canadian literary studies. In one, feminism consists in interrupting traditional male desires by changing the subject of those desires; in the other, male desires are ignored and instead female re-writing of that desire is examined. Both aspects are important, even if the former is generally viewed as a less radical form of feminist analysis than the latter. Yet despite its theoretical radicalism, as I have argued above, exegeses of women re-writing the gender norms assigned to them is admirable, but someone has to read them—they must have a public—in order for their work to be accomplished. This is especially so in the case of the early Canadian writing Dean treats. If we are to accord it a retroactive importance because of the Butlerian and Armstrongian tenets it evinces, is this sort of anachronism an ethical form of literary criticism? These issues are broached here because the notion of ethics as it relates to literary study is of concern to me as I end this introductory chapter.

What has been argued so far, both implicitly and explicitly, is that biographical influence—a Canadian process of feminist canonization mediated by desire and evidenced by the writing of actual writers into texts—is a synthesis of the impasse between the competing feminisms of Gerson and Dean, MacKinnon and Butler, and Armstrong and May. Ethics is of concern here because I am ascribing a great deal of power to the theory of biographical influence, in claiming it as a resolution to competing feminisms. Ethics are also of concern because I realized in the course of writing this introduction that an already-theorized model exists in Canadian literary studies which might make it appear as though biographical influence is not as new or radical as I would like to believe. This intertext is Linda Hutcheon's well-known theory of historiographic metafiction, and I would like, by way of conclusion, to draw some parallels between Hutcheon's argument and my own, at the same time arguing that the two theories are in the end quite different.

The similarity between biographical influence and historiographic metafiction is a similarity of subject matter. In biographical influence, the writer writes about another writer (e.g., Margaret Atwood's story "Isis in Darkness" about Gwendolyn MacEwen). In historiographic metafiction, the writer may also write about another writer (e.g., Mordecai Richler's novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and its evocation of A.M. Klein), but more often than not the canvas is larger, and the writer is dealing not so much with other writers as with other texts. Historiographic metafiction as a genre is marked by an interest in what constitutes "fact and fiction" (Hutcheon 68). Hutcheon claims that this interest is evidenced by the employment in various historiographic metafiction of

various intertexts that call into question the distinction traditionally made between the objectivity of “historical fact” (70) and the subjectivity of literature. Hutcheon also claims that historiographic metafiction underlines “the potential *power* of language, and of written language in particular” (71). Because writers who work in this genre arrogate to themselves (as historians did in the past) what Hayden White calls “the claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record,” (72) Hutcheon extrapolates that historiographic metafiction is necessarily an ideological genre where writers are “in a position of power... over facts... but also over readers” (72). A good illustration would be Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version*, where Richler appends mock-footnotes to buttress the ostensible facts of his novel.

If biographical influence and historiographic metafiction are in agreement on the “potential for ideological manipulation of readers,” (73) then precisely what is it that distinguishes them from each other? Two differences stand out. The first is that Hutcheon’s theory appears to be conflicted about the source of literary power: authors are manipulators of readers, but at the same time “literature is comprised of writers and readers” and the interchange “between them”(73). Alongside the paradoxical nature of these statements—which appear only a page apart in Hutcheon’s monograph—there is the question of Hutcheon’s willful underplaying of the category “critic.” For surely critics are first and foremost among those “readers” Hutcheon troublingly sees both as being manipulated by, and sharing literary powers of creation with, authors.

Biographical influence is less conflicted. It takes a pre-poststructuralist stance about the production of meaning in texts, whereby authors have real literary power. This is to

say, Roland Barthes' "death of the author" has not held sway in Canadian literature, despite the parodic demonstration of this fact in Carol Shields's novel *Swann*, and the very serious attempt by the LANGUAGE poets like Nichol, Marlatt, and Wah, and their critic-sympathizers like Kroetsch, Miki and Weir, to effect this change. Secondly, biographical influence differs from historiographic metafiction precisely at the point where Hutcheon's most stringent critics have aimed their criticisms: on the issue of Hutcheon's domestication of postmodernism. According to Lorraine Weir, Hutcheon's project amounts to a reinscription of "the conditions of communal understanding... in the face of deconstruction's assault on the liberal humanist subject" (Weir 194). Weir sees Hutcheon inaugurating a new tradition of "clarity in disguise" where "semantic referentiality," (195) the enemy of deconstructionists everywhere, maintains its aesthetic and institutional (in English departments) stranglehold. Biographical influence, instead of trying to normalize the subject, as Weir claims, performs gender-based work that is more akin to *changing* the subject. And while critics like Weir and Fred Wah have time and again tried to make the argument that only formally disjunctive writing can be properly construed as politically progressive by real-world standards, the net effect of texts written by practitioners of biographical influence is, I would argue, just as politically progressive as anything else in the Canadian context.

Another way of looking at the synthesizing function performed by biographical influence—somewhere between the new cultural consensus required by Gerson to achieve a gender-balanced canon, and Dean's eschewing of a canon in order to uphold the value of work done when the feminine subject is re-figured—lies the process of

versioning, as theorized by Brenda R. Silver in *Virginia Woolf Icon*. A hybrid between literary and cultural studies, Silver's book describes versioning as having dual roots, first in traditional textual criticism, where it is a method of comparing all published versions of a text in order to "challenge the authority of any one version of the work and, by implication, both the author's intention and the editor's authoritative final world" (Silver 13). Silver then contrasts this type of textual versioning with what she identifies as a more "popular" (14) form that comes out of traditional Caribbean music where the "collective voice" is privileged over the "individual voice." (14) This kind of popular versioning is likened to "a quotation in a book" where "every time the other voice is borrowed in this way, it is turned away slightly from what it was the original author... thought [s/he was] saying" (14). Silver concludes that versioning is both "subversive" and ultimately "democratic" but at the same time a form of appropriation, as in the example of numerous African American art forms such as jazz that were "versioned" by the larger white society.

Silver rescues versioning from its tendency to appropriate through her recourse to the work of eminent cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, who posits culture's meaning precisely in these moments of appropriation. Thus, Silver is able to comfortably treat the various journalistic, cinematic, theatrical, merchandise and high cultural "versions" of Virginia Woolf by seeing them as instances of Hall's optimistically progressive cultural "double movement of containment and resistance" (15). The question remains, though, as to where resistance to such appropriation (of Woolf for example) might come from, and even whether resistance is called for in the first place.

The chapters that follow, in which the various instances of biographical influence—the versioning of Susanna Moodie, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther—are examined, can be read as embodying the resistance (to the male canon) and containment (making writing by women the norm) of Hall's equation. Before simply accepting the progressive nature of such versioning through biographical influence, the second chapter critiques the new genre of criticism—female literary myth explication monographs—that seeks to explain the iconization of some women writers. While the possibility is entertained that this new genre provides a supplement to the theory of literary desire posited above, it is shown not to have taken into consideration important intertexts of its own. In the third chapter, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Carol Shields's *Swann* are read as fictional instances of “theorizing” about biographical influence. In these two novels, both of whose plots revolve around a once-neglected and now fashionably canonized Canadian woman writer, Atwood and Shields can be seen to be working out their own views on tradition, canonicity, feminism and gender. That both novels contain a healthy dose of satire at the expense of academics who study Canadian literature should alert us to the fact that Atwood and Shields are engaged in ideological work whereby the traditional job of the academic critic to interpret and create literary tradition is gradually usurped by the author. We may ask whether the “theory” put forward by Atwood and Shields in these novels is a self-serving one, as both writers are engaged, in others of their works, in the very process of biographical influence they deride when it is undertaken by academics.

In Chapter Four, the figure of Susanna Moodie, as she appears in various plays, poems, novels and works of non-fiction, is offered as the first important instance of biographical influence in Canadian literature. Both literally and figuratively a pioneer, Moodie has been the subject of biographical influence for almost fifty years at this point. This chapter examines the figure of Moodie as subject of biographical influence in the works of authors such as Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley and Carol Shields. The chapter proposes that the pioneer difficulties thematized in some of Moodie's literary works (e.g., the struggle to forge a civilized life in the harsh nineteenth-century backwoods of Canada) come to represent, through the filter of biographical influence employed by the later writers, the struggle of writers to forge a literary career in Canada.

Chapter Five takes the poet Gwendolyn MacEwen as its subject, and examines the various examples of biographical influence that MacEwen has engendered. In particular, the chapter examines the close relationship between Margaret Atwood and Gwendolyn MacEwen. Atwood's figuring of MacEwen as a writer who dealt in myth yet who tried not to mythologize her own life, is an ironic statement when read against Atwood's own myth-invoking in her treatment of MacEwen in the short story "Isis in Darkness" and more obliquely in the novel *The Robber Bride*. The mythical representation of MacEwen continues in Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, Linda Griffith's *Alien Creature*, and Claudia Dey's *The Gwendolyn Poems*, works that cast MacEwen as not of her own place and time. These myth-invoking instances of biographical influence, which have in common

their need to read MacEwen solely through the lens of her difficult personal life, have the effect of substituting the events of her life for the significance of her literary career.

The final chapter of the dissertation examines the biographical influence of Pat Lowther on contemporary Canadian writers. Lowther, like MacEwen, had her career foreshortened by an untimely death in early middle age. Because of the violent circumstances of her death, Lowther has become an icon for abused women. Her poetic output has been eclipsed by representations of her, as for instance in Keith Harrison's novel *Furry Creek*, and Gail McKay's poetry collection, *The Pat Lowther Poem*. Ironically, these representations tend to "disappear" Lowther the poet, reenacting repeatedly the historical event of her murder. A hagiographic aspect thus accrues to the biographical influence of Pat Lowther, similar to the mythologizing aspect of MacEwen's biographical influence. Taken together, the representations of Moodie, MacEwen and Lowther in contemporary Canadian writing demonstrate one thing above all—a powerful attraction to these writers' lives as opposed to their work.

Chapter Two

The Virtues of the Female Literary Myth Explication Monograph

1.

In the course of researching Canadian biographical influence, I came across four important recent books. Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2001), Brenda R. Silver's *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) and Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1993) are examples of a new genre I will provisionally identify as the "female literary myth explication monograph." These monographs are helpful to a study of biographical influence in Canada because they evince to varying degrees a particular theoretical savvy in a closely related field. This is the field that seeks to understand how it is that certain women writers have "acquired an iconicity that exists independently of [their] academic standing or literary reputation, of [their] perceived value as [writers] and the perceived value of [their] works" (Silver 9). At the same time as these books are helpful, they lead to larger questions about the articulation of biographical influence made in the previous chapter. For example, the conditions that hold in the Canadian context (the nationalist politics of the literary-critical enterprise being one example) do not hold in the British and American contexts these books describe. What motivation, then, do the authors of these monographs offer to explain the iconicity they critique? And once we understand these motives, can we

critique the logic inherent in their explanations in a way that will be beneficial or supplemental to the theory of biographical influence? The word "Virtues" in my chapter title has two meanings. I suggest that the female literary myth explication monograph has important virtues. At the same time, I imply that it may be overly virtuous, by which I mean it exhibits a willful naïveté about the full implications of its own arguments.

Before looking at the female literary myth explication monograph in detail, I would like to be clear that while I have, for the purposes of my argument, grouped these books together as a new genre, the individual texts I mention are in many ways quite different from each other. Miller's *The Brontë Myth*, for example, is a book of popular cultural and literary history. This is a genre that does not thrive in the Canadian context. Trade publishers rarely see a market for such a book, which would slip through the crack between what a trade publisher sees as marketable and what an academic publisher sees as worth publishing. The closest comparison in Canada would be Charlotte Gray's recent *Sisters in the Wilderness*, which mixes biography with very light reflections on the literary work of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. Both Miller's and Gray's books are short on reflection: they do not question the phenomenon, they describe its contours. On the other hand, Brenda R. Silver's *Virginia Woolf Icon* and Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* are definitely academic texts. This is so even though Rose's book was published by a trade publisher, and Silver's is non-traditionally academic with its numerous photos, untraditional chapter headings, and equal consideration of "texts" from popular culture and literary culture. Finally, there is Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, a hybrid of investigative journalism and biographical criticism. Originally

serialized in *The New Yorker*, Malcolm's book straddles the popular and academic divide. It contains no footnotes and little conscious rhetoric of argumentation, yet it is remarkably adept at dealing with complex literary, critical, and psychological issues, all within the framework of a strong implied argument.

Despite this variety of approaches, there are some basic common denominators to this sort of criticism. First, the subject is invariably a woman writer. The most prominent examples are of course the Brontë sisters, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Second, female literary myth explication monographs are necessarily influenced by, reliant upon for their theoretical terminology, and often in reaction against, a mixture of feminist literary scholarship and poststructuralist theory, whether it be cultural studies or post-Freud, post-Lacanian psychoanalysis. Finally, this genre of criticism has as its main goal the providing of an explanation for why there are so many appearances—why there is such a good traffic—in the woman writer in question. The vocabulary employed time and again in this criticism is myth, haunting, versioning, iconicity, and greed. The most salient point about this new form of criticism is its axiomatic self-involvement. It is always at pains to understand why it does what it does. As such, it partakes of a recent type of meta-criticism, described by Margaret Reeves in her reading of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, whereby critical narratives "can be fruitfully subjected to the kind of critical analysis normally applied to works of literature" (33). We will recall that Lecker's critique of Frye's "Conclusion" is another example of this kind of criticism.

As a result of their focus on deconstructing the narratives of criticism, I argue that this self-involvement can often limit critics' ability to correctly gauge and explain the

political nature of the creation of myths and icons. As I stressed in the introduction, a vital aspect of biographical influence in the Canadian context is precisely this subversive political work. In examining the Brontës, Woolf and Plath, these critics rarely make broad conclusions about for whom and to what end these female literary icons might be useful. While they do point the finger at various entities such as feminism, the media, and academics, in large measure these monographs fail to answer the question in a systematic way, as this dissertation attempts to do. Despite their cultural studies sheen, feminist values, and apparent innovativeness, these monographs studiously ignore obvious theoretical intertexts and explanations that might bolster their cases. These theories, readily available to female literary myth explication critics, include Roland Barthes' concept of myth and Sigmund Freud's comments on mourning and melancholia, as well as, of course, the Armstrong-inflected theory of literary desire I have offered in the introduction. Rather than simply offering exhaustive lists of iconicity's of many occurrences—a strategy particularly visible in Silver's and Miller's books—better explanations are what is required.

I foresee a potential criticism here of my treatment of these critics: the charge that I am setting up a straw man, in the service of making my own explanation look more appealing. In fact, the opposite is the case. The female literary myth explicators and their books are not my straw men. I view them as the necessary and useful precursors to the work this dissertation is trying to achieve. Not only are they precursors, they have in fact been very instructive, especially in the liberties they take with what is "fit" subject matter for cultural analysis. Also, in some cases, these books are helpful through the lack of fear

they evince when taking on the academy and the family members and friends who are left behind an icon such as Sylvia Plath. These aspects of Miller, Silver, Rose, and Malcolm are inspiring to me as a critic, in the same way that Atwood and Shields and all the other practitioners of biographical influence strike me as gutsy in their conscious appropriation of women writers as material to serve their own artistic and political ends. Furthermore, the point I shall be making below about the missing intertexts of Barthes and Freud applies just as much to my own theory of biographical influence as it does to the texts of female literary myth explication.

Another mitigating factor to bear in mind when we contemplate the usefulness of female literary myth explication to Canadian biographical influence is what I have referred to earlier as the endlessness of intertextuality. This endlessness means that the study of biographical influence and of female literary myth explication is by definition prey to a difficulty of precision. The large amount of intertextual references in the fiction, poetry, drama and criticism that make up this area of scholarly inquiry can begin to remind one of funhouse mirrors—the reflections are endless. Thus, Shields invokes Sylvia Plath on two occasions in *Swann*; Atwood derides literary influence in *The Blind Assassin* by having Iris balk at the jacket copy of the latest version of her sister's novel, which calls her a modernist and lists her influences as including Elizabeth Smart and Djuna Barnes; Lucasta Miller in *The Brontë Myth* anachronistically pays a debt of gratitude to Janet Malcolm, author of *The Silent Woman*, a book about the explication of the Sylvia Plath myth; Jacqueline Rose, author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, haunts in turn Brenda R. Silver's subsequent book about the versioning of Virginia Woolf, and

finally, the Brontë sisters appear obliquely in Rose's own book in her discussion of Plath's poem "Wuthering Heights." The fecundity of allusions is exhilarating but at the same time paralyzing. It becomes difficult to follow a hermeneutical path among the manifold reflections.

In this chapter, I attempt to walk down this path, with the full realization that, to re-phrase a statement Lorraine York makes in the context of Atwood's own iconicity, this sort of work might now be considered meta-meta-iconography. The usefulness of such a third-order discourse may be open for debate; however, my critique of the critiques that constitute female myth explication is not undertaken unseriously. A reading of Miller's *The Brontë Myth*, Silver's *Virginia Woolf Icon*, Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, and Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* will hopefully provide clues to help answer some important questions. Why do some women writers exert such a strong hold over the literary culture that comes after them? How have female literary myth explication critics theorized this phenomenon? Do the explanations offered by these critics add anything of value, or offer another explanation, for the Canadian phenomenon of biographical influence? Are there any other explanations in existing literary theory and criticism that might help shed new light on female literary myth explication criticism? And finally, what is it about Canadian literary culture that has still not allowed it to produce a sustained critique (like Miller's or Silver's or Rose's or Malcolm's) about one of its own iconic literary figures? To answer this final question I will consult Lorraine York's "Over All I place a Glass Bell": The Meta-Iconography of Margaret Atwood" in more detail, particularly as it resonates with Miller, Silver and Rose.

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Although Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* is the most recent study considered here, the subjects it treats are historically the earliest examples of female literary myth in action, Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Miller's book is intended to provide an answer to a question posed in the 1970s by Terry Eagleton: "The Brontës... are a literary industry as well as a collection of literary texts, and it would have been worth asking why this should be so and how it came about" (ix). Miller is much more successful at answering the second question than she is the first, but her brief considerations of the "why" of the Brontë myth merit a closer look. The first attempt to provide an answer comes at the beginning of her Preface when Miller notes the difference between the Brontë myth and other literary myths. "Unlike the authors of comparable modern myths," Miller writes, "Bram Stoker, say, who wrote *Dracula*—the sisters themselves... have become mythic figures in their own right" (ix). This statement is important because although it does so unconsciously, it is stating quite clearly that the Brontë myth is a female myth, and that its femaleness is an important constituent element.

The statement is also telling because within it Miller embeds an important (though we cannot tell if it is conscious) elision which the reader might not be aware of if he or she skims the passage quickly. By naming the sisters as authors of modern myths (the comparison with *Dracula*), Miller is in effect putting the "myth" of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* on par with the myths of their authors, Charlotte and Emily Brontë.

My contention is that this is an unproven assumption in Miller's monograph, and that in fact the myth of the Brontë sisters themselves (well-proven, ironically, throughout the rest of Miller's text) is in fact the only myth operating in the Brontë industry. While the novels are well-known classics, they are not myths in themselves. I would argue that Miller elides the quantifiable difference between the "myths" of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and the well-known myths of their creators, to provide a viable reason for why so many generations of readers and critics after the Brontës have taken such an interest in their work. By calling the works written by the sisters mythical, Miller may be attempting to deflect attention from the fact that in reality, interest in the works has stemmed just as often from interest in the sisters' lives.

Miller makes a more convincing argument in her genealogy of influence, showing how successive generations of women writers have used the Brontë myth to further their own goals. Thus Miller shows that Harriet Beecher Stowe's claim to have met the ghost of Charlotte Brontë during a seance can be seen as evidence of the "deep-seated emotional need shared by many women writers of the period to identify themselves with a female literary tradition" (89). The direct relationship of this statement to the practice of biographical influence in the Canadian context will soon become clear. Miller then demonstrates how Charlotte Brontë represented a martyr-heroine to an early twentieth-century novelist like May Sinclair. Next, she describes how the shifting needs of feminism between the 1850s and the 1890s—from the need for "heroines of renunciation" to "role models who symbolised female freedom from... social conventions" (216)—is paralleled by the increase over time in the popularity of the myth

of Emily over the myth of Charlotte. A final component of Miller's argument I find useful, both because of its congruence with what Brenda R. Silver will argue about Woolf and Jacqueline Rose and Janet Malcolm about Plath, and because it is an opinion not yet voiced in relation to the Canadian myths of Moodie, MacEwen and Lowther, is the extent to which the Brontës (especially Emily) may have been responsible for the construction of their own myths. For example, Miller quotes Muriel Spark approvingly on the notion that Emily dramatized her own impending death, and communicated to Charlotte her belief in a "self-styled superwomanism" which Charlotte would then "transmit... to the public" (246).

Brenda R. Silver echoes some of Miller's points in her study of Virginia Woolf's iconicity. For example, in her Introduction she asks rhetorically, "why is it that [Woolf's] being a woman may ultimately be the most significant factor in her conflicting iconic representations?" (10) Like Miller's argument about the Brontës fulfilling the different needs of an evolving feminism at various points in history, Silver sees Woolf's "contested appearances" as "located in historical periods characterized by major shifts in the status of women in society." (11) According to Silver, these periods of "feminization" of the culture can also be seen as periods of fear of feminism.¹ A good example of the evidence she provides for this claim comes in the chapter entitled "Virginia Woolf's Face." This chapter is an extended reading of the cultural significance of the numerous formal photographic portraits Woolf sat for during her life, including those by well-known photographers like Cecil Beaton and Man Ray.

Silver is able to show convincingly that during the 1970s when feminism was in its ascendancy, "Woolf's face—whether printed in newspapers, magazines... worn on T-shirts, hung on the walls of bedrooms and studies, or carried during political rallies—transcends the individual woman to become an image-sign, sending disconcertingly mixed messages into the cultural realm" (Silver 120). Among these mixed messages there is the well known T-shirt of Woolf produced since 1973 by Historical Products Inc. The "wearing of Virginia Woolf's image on one's chest," Silver argues, "becomes an act of both self-protection and defiance: a claiming of Virginia Woolf's powers, including her feminist agency, for one self" (146). Ironically—and this is the strength of Silver's "versioning" approach—she can also show how Woolf's face, in a series of *New York Review of Books* advertisements that have been running regularly since 1983, are a marker of civilized upper-class cultural literacy for the readers of that publication.

We should pause here to measure the applicability of Silver's argument to the argument of biographical influence, an important component of which is its historical genesis at a point in Canadian literary history where feminism and nationalism were perhaps uncomfortably sharing the limelight. While Silver's main point in the chapter on Woolf's face is that proliferating "versions" of Woolf seem to arise at the same time as feminism does, her ultimate argument is that culture has become so contradictory that these versions can be used to sell incredibly different viewpoints, such as feminist consciousness-raising or conservative snobbishness. In the case of Canadian biographical influence, I would argue that there is much less proliferation of such versions. In fact, biographical influence is by contrast a tightly controlled system of signification. As we

will see later in the dissertation, only Margaret Laurence's use of Catharine Parr Traill stands outside the typical employment of women writers in biographical influence as a contrary case.

Silver labels her methodology, through which she examines manifestations of Woolf in film, journalism and merchandising, as well as in more traditional literary areas like drama, an avowedly feminist approach. By this she appears to mean a feminism grounded in the material conditions of the culture she describes. This view of feminist criticism as synonymous with materialist critique is one that first appears in Jane Marcus's influential study, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*. Marcus discusses her disillusionment with traditional Marxist literary criticism:

I wanted to combine a close reading of women's texts with a pragmatic historical reading of their personal lives and political movements. I thought of this activity as Marxist until Marxist criticism... grew more sexist and formalist. This puzzled me... While it seemed to me an inherently materialistic activity to grub around in libraries reading drafts of novels, letters and diaries... Marxism was moving in quite other directions. I shifted my ground (Marcus xii).

Marcus's alignment of a "true" materialist critique with her chosen work of offering new readings of misunderstood women writers like Woolf is shared by Silver, who sees the act of accounting for the various "versions" of Woolf as a feminist act itself.

It is interesting to note that the theory Silver uses to underpin her study of Woolf's iconicity—versioning—is based not so much on feminist theory as it is on cultural studies theories of difference. Cultural studies, we should remember here, is a

field of scholarly inquiry born of mid-twentieth-century Marxist theories such as Raymond Williams's and Theodor Adorno's base-superstructure studies about city and country life, and music, among other cultural artifacts. Silver would like to see Virginia Woolf's iconicity as evolving between the axes of a subversive democratic impulse, and at the same time, as a form of appropriation (of Woolf's physical appearance, for example). Now if we dig a little deeper, the similarity between Miller's and Silver's arguments becomes clear. Both critics ground their arguments about why their subjects are mythologized and iconized in a vague and never quite well-justified materialist vocabulary. We will recall that Miller's book attempts to answer Eagleton's Marxist-inflected question about the Brontë "industry," while Silver's whole book is a study of how capitalism and its cultural manifestations (advertising, film, television) use women artists. We might then provisionally argue that the female literary myth explication genre is a hybrid offshoot less of feminist critique than of Marxist-inflected cultural studies. This argument is important because it contrasts starkly with the Canadian literary milieu which is almost completely bereft of such materialist analyses when it comes to explaining a phenomenon like biographical influence.

With the possible exception of Faye Hammill, who in her essay cited above, remarks forthrightly that "Shields and Atwood have... undoubtedly benefitted from [using Moodie in their own writing] since the raising of Moodie's profile naturally attracts an audience for their writing about her," (86) it has not yet occurred to literary critics in Canada that biographical influence may be a particularly obvious form of cultural capital operating among the country's artists. This cultural capital is directly

analogous to critics' own forms of capital such as publication in refereed journals, government grants, and tenure. Once again, the ascribing of motivation to writers is not countenanced; as critics we continue to subscribe to the formalist imperative that they must all be disinterested when it comes to their own work. This may be one reason why the naïve Canadianist who reads Miller, Silver, Rose, and Malcolm on the Brontës, Woolf and Plath—with their tales of “battles,” to quote Silver, and competing ideologies—may be somewhat shocked. All three critics view their female subjects as sites of fractious contestation.² I am intrigued, in stark contrast, by the complete lack of contestation around the process of biographical influence in the Canadian context. It is as if Moodie first, and more recently MacEwen and Lowther (and Pauline Johnson and Elizabeth Smart among others) have gained their mythical and iconic status without serious questioning from scholars of Canadian literature.

This lack can be explained in the case of Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther to some extent because of the newness of the phenomenon in those cases. Most works of biographical influence on these two writers are less than a decade old. What is surprising is the way the biographical influence of Susanna Moodie has been accounted for in theoretically unsophisticated terms. While the next chapter looks at the existing criticism on Moodie's biographical influence in more detail, here I would like to discuss briefly two intertexts that have been available to critics for many years, and which have not been used in the Canadian context. The first is Roland Barthes' theory of myth and the second is Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia. Predating the cultural studies model which Miller and Silver employ, yet coming long before the turn to literary ethics

that we glimpse in Rose's and Malcolm's work on Plath, both Barthes and Freud have a lot to say, potentially, about the particularly Canadian phenomenon of biographical influence.

Barthes' *Mythologies*, first published in 1956, has gained new currency in English departments because it is seen as one of the foundational texts of the new discipline of Cultural Studies. As Andrew Leak has stated succinctly, Barthes' chief concern in this important work is to demonstrate "how the organs of mass culture suck in the raw materials of everyday life and transform them into modern myths." (12) In other words, Barthes takes "everyday life" objects like, for example, red wine, and offers a way of reading these objects that shows how they are implicated in a larger language, hegemony, politics, or practice, in this case the concept of "Frenchness." Barthes moves away from older definitions of myth that link the idea to so-called primitive societies, and argues that myth is an integral part of industrialized and post-industrialized contemporary society. Myth is evident whenever we choose to read a collective representation as a sign-system, instead of just a random occurrence. In this way, I propose the many instances of biographical influence we will soon be examining as a collective representation.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes makes the astoundingly simple point, which is full of potential ramifications, that "Bourgeois ideology continuously transforms the products of history into essential types" (145). These types—like wine, like the tragic Canadian woman writer—are products of a series of seven rhetorical figures Barthes elaborates in his theory of myth. For Barthes, "myth is a system of communication" (93). Like any other language, it has figurative components wherein words are used to stand for or

embody ideas quite different than their literal meanings. The signal contribution Barthes makes in *Mythologies* is to ally this figurative language with the machinations of a capitalist world order that is out to "immobilize the world" (145). Such immobilization is vitally important because it is the primary way for capitalist hegemony to replicate itself with the consent of the world's population. As Barthes says, with considerable emotion, myths "are nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image" (145-6).

I would propose that critics of Canadian literature, if they agree with me that biographical influence is a quantifiable phenomenon, might want to use Barthes' ideas as a preliminary way of making sense of the appearance of figures like Moodie, MacEwen and Lowther in a growing number of contemporary works of Canadian literature. The argument is straightforward: some Canadian writers are propagating a myth, in the Barthian sense, a myth of the tragic Canadian woman writer. This is done in order to achieve a hegemonic consensus about what constitutes Canadian literature. The rhetorical figure these writers utilize most frequently to achieve their end is Barthes' "privation of history." The privation of history takes place when we are asked to consider an "object without wondering where it comes from" (140). As Barbara Godard has written, in one of the few feminist considerations of Barthes' theory, "myth is the confusion of History with Nature" (Godard 9). In the context of biographical influence, we can interpret this confusion as describing the way figures like Moodie and MacEwen and Lowther are deprived of their lived lives in the service of the iconicity they are made to embody.

Another intertext that provides a fruitful place to begin considering biographical influence as more than just a coincidence is Freud's well-known theory of mourning and melancholia. In a country with a pronounced strain of romantic conservatism (known as Red Toryism in political circles), and which has produced influential texts like George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, is it really so surprising that an obvious sub-genre of its contemporary literature should "mourn" repeatedly some of its deceased writers? Freud's differentiation between mourning and melancholia begins by offering an important similarity in the two conditions. They are equally reactions to "the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 164). Here we see a virtual mirror, in psychological language, of the literary phenomenon this dissertation describes. Writers like Atwood and Shields can be seen to "mourn" the loss of Moodie and MacEwen and Lowther in their works. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether the mourning is for the actual person, or for the "ideal" those women writers represent, in this case the ideal of a woman-centred Canadian literature.

More important yet is Freud's movement from mourning to melancholia. Melancholia, Freud argues, enters the soul if the rite of mourning has not been performed satisfactorily. We might therefore posit biographical influence as an example of literary melancholia. In such a formulation, a writer like Atwood could be described as not having performed satisfactorily the rite of mourning over her friend Gwendolyn MacEwen. As a result, a type of "literary melancholia" can be said to enter into Atwood's writings on MacEwen. According to Juliana Schiesari, who offers a feminist critique of

Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud valorizes melancholia over mourning partly because of its pathological nature. In melancholia, a subject "acts *as if* he were mourning some loss" (Schiesari 237). This sense of dissimulation in melancholia is of interest to Schiesari because in order to make her feminist critique, she must show how Freud understands melancholia as a source of male "intellectual and artistic creativity, precisely through its conversion of emotional loss into creative productivity" (238). Schiesari goes on to make a claim about melancholia which bears directly on biographical influence as it has been theorized above:

while Freud's text is remarkable for the distinction it draws between mourning and melancholia, it nevertheless stops short of understanding that a certain type of melancholic fixation can be read as being constituted through the desire to idealize loss as loss, to perpetuate and even capitalize on that sense of loss (238).

Schiesari's point synthesizes both the Barthian method of viewing biographical influence as a "myth" as well as my own view of biographical influence as a manifestation of certain writers' desires. Interestingly, the main thesis of Schiesari's essay is that melancholia in Freud is gendered (her example, like Freud's, is *Hamlet*), so that women cannot participate in melancholia from both sides. They can be the object of loss, but never the subject who identifies that loss. In the Canadian example, the opposite is seen to be true.

A lone attempt at providing a more considered critique of the kind of iconicity we have been looking at in the Canadian context is Lorraine's York essay on Margaret Atwood's iconicity, mentioned above. Just as Silver saw Woolf's iconicity balanced

between the competing poles of subversiveness and appropriation, for York the process of literary iconicity is a means to one of two ends: “canonization and witchhunt” (231). York’s stress on the functional aspect of iconicity, as opposed for instance to an aesthetic aspect, matches well with my argument about biographical influence as a willed process on the part of certain writers. However, her subsequent argument, which attempts to show how Atwood comments on herself by thematizing iconicity in her own fiction, does not account for what I see as the most important function of much of Atwood’s fiction. This is the ironic thematizing of iconicity not as a refraction of Atwood’s own career as *artist*, but the thematizing of iconicity as a refraction of her own career as *critic*. While underlining the importance of George Bowering’s unmasking criticism of Atwood in which he notes her “fracturing the artificial construct, turning the ‘I’ of the poem into Margaret Atwood” (245), York still comes down as do Cooke and Atwood, on the side of formalist conventions. Her judgment of Bowering, for instance, is that his critique raises “some philosophical problems, such as... the potential reduction of all artifice to autobiography” (245). Yet this judgment still leaves us looking at the paralyzing reflections of the funhouse mirrors. How do we usefully delve behind the taboo of the writer as implicated and see that it may in fact be a useful place from which to formulate critique?

Jacqueline Rose tries, as did York, to distance herself from the implication that the writer’s life may be of use in interpreting the writer’s work. Her well-known Preface to *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* claims on the one hand that interpretation “of a literary work... cannot be arrested at the point where it comes into conflict with how a writer sees

their depiction of others or of themselves,” but then cautions that “my focus is on writing... I am never claiming to speak about the life, never attempting to establish the facts about the lived existence of Sylvia Plath” (xi). This restatement of the formalist dictum we have encountered on numerous prior occasions is especially important and ironic in Rose’s case. Despite her best critical intentions, the notoriety achieved by her monograph is precisely attributable to the fact that she reads many of Plath’s well-known poems in controversial ways, all of which lead back to Plath’s own life.³ On top of this, despite “the difficulty... in analysing textual figures when these appear to refer to real persons,” (xii) Rose repeatedly and perhaps unintentionally blurs the boundary between these textual figures and real-world people in her numerous and pointed comments about the Plath estate’s executors, Ted and Olwyn Hughes.

The situation surrounding Sylvia Plath is akin to the situation I described in Chapter One as the “interconnectedness and implicated-ness” that make up the institution of Canadian literature. It becomes difficult to maintain the traditional boundaries between critic, writer, text, and biography. Rose’s solution for this entanglement is to make a distinction between writers “who live through the responses they give rise to, and those who—for want of such attention—fall into oblivion or merely die” (xiv). In this formulation, Rose is attributing iconicity solely to the writer’s ability to elicit responses. Presumably, Rose means that these responses are elicited by the writer’s work. As we saw with the Brontës, however, it is more realistic to admit that it is often the writer’s life (or the life as perceived through layers of subsequent texts which deploy biographical influence) which is responsible for this iconicity.

I find Rose's work on Plath more helpful in explaining biographical influence when she moves past the often-debated arguments for and against the biographical fallacy, and moves on to interpret (as did Silver with Woolf) the work performed by the figure of Plath in contemporary literary culture. Rose begins by stating that Plath "hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such" (1). This is an important statement in backing up the argument I made in Chapter One about biographical influence in the Canadian context as a method employed by writers to take back, in effect, critical power and canonizing authority, from critics. In the tragic woman writer, a number of critically-astute Canadian writers have found a figure for interpretation. Like Rose's Plath who is "endlessly present within the culture" but whose "presence also seems to open up a rent or gap in the world," the figures of Moodie, MacEwen, and Lowther play an analogous role in Canadian literature. They circulate widely in the culture at the same time as they point to the instability of the Canadian literary institution and its canons and traditions. Rose also notes the phenomenon whereby "it is technically impossible to separate Plath's voice from those who speak for her" (2). Here we should note once again the applicability of Rose's argument to the argument of biographical influence which is predicated upon one writer's ventriloquizing of another writer's life.

Another strength of Rose's critique of Plath and how she haunts the literary culture is her straightforward assertion that Plath's death is one of the important factors in this haunting. "Death in the shape of a woman, femininity as deadly," Rose writes, "we will see how these two come together in... critical appraisal of her work" (3). This is an

important assertion precisely because it has not been made in the Canadian context. It seems almost indecorous to claim, as this dissertation does, that it is not by chance that writers like Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther haunt Canadian literary culture. Their tragic deaths add cultural capital to their posthumous reputations, and the “trade” in these reputations (i.e., the various manifestations of biographical influence) is one of the fascinating by-products of contemporary Canadian literary culture.

Rose then adds a psychological dimension to her account of how Plath haunts the culture. She claims that the “pull of the Plath story is that it calls up a language of victimisation and blame with such force” and more to the point, that Plath is therefore “a symptom—or rather, responses to her writing become a symptom—of one part of the cultural repressed” (6). In the Introduction I did not advance a psychological reading of biographical influence, but we can readily tie the notion of a “cultural repressed” to the argument I made earlier. If we propose that the Canadian cultural repressed is not so much our interest in blame and victimization, as much as guilt over our lack of interest in our own literature, then we have a fairly convincing reason for the “pull” of biographical influence in the Canadian literary institution.

Rose concludes that Plath “is constituted as a literary object on the battleground of cultural survival” who becomes, for her critics, “an object of desire” (25). Similarly, the Canadian examples of Moodie, MacEwen and Lowther are evidence of our desire, via biographical influence, to alternately expose and hide our own repressed guilt about our lack of interest in our literary tradition. In the next chapter we will see how this dynamic is ironically fictionalized by Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields; ironically because

these two writers themselves are arguably the leading practitioners of biographical influence. Before turning to those examples, however, I would like to briefly a unique book among the female literary myth explication monographs, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*. This book is unique because it is the only one I look at in this chapter that consciously deflates the "project" of female literary myth and iconicity. While Miller, Silver, and Rose offer, with varying degrees of success, critiques of female literary myth and iconicity, only Malcolm effectively pulls the rug out from under our assumptions of impartiality and reason.

Malcolm's book is a detailed account of the goings-on behind the invisible walls of the notoriously private and difficult Plath estate. In *The Silent Woman*, we are treated to the side of the story the Plath iconizers do not have time for: that is, Ted and Olwyn Hughes' stories. Malcolm's implicit argument, which is constructed subtly and effectively, is that biography is an immoral art form. "The transgressive nature of biography," Malcolm theorizes, "is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography's status as a popular genre" (Malcolm 9). Where Malcolm writes "biography," we can substitute "biographical influence." Malcolm's is a highly ethical position. She builds her case by becoming the reader's confidante so completely that it is almost impossible to read the situation in any other way than the way she constructs it. The success of her rhetorical position as confidante in the text comes from her skillful deployment (and the conscious pointing out of her own deployment) of journalistic techniques like the one-on-one interview. Where the traditional biographer footnotes the fact that an interview is the source of this or that piece of information, Malcolm instead

tells us about her various train journeys across England—through rail strikes and snow storms—to meet the various actors (biographers, friends, neighbours) in the drama of Sylvia Plath. Each meal she has before an interview, each cup of tea, is discussed in detail, so that just like the various "set pieces" of the Plath biographies she so skillfully deconstructs, her own book is full of exactly the same authenticity-building set pieces.

The rhetorical tour de force that is *The Silent Woman* is achieved precisely because Malcolm does not see herself as any different than the mercenary academics that are the bane (and livelihood, to some degree, as Malcolm shrewdly points out) of Ted and Olwyn Hughes. Thus, in the following critique of Anne Stevenson, author of the Plath biography *Bitter Fame*, Malcolm is not excusing herself: "As a burglar should not pause to discuss with his accomplice the rights and wrongs of burglary while he is jimmying a lock, so a biographer ought not to introduce doubts about the legitimacy of the biographical enterprise" (10). The paradoxical notion that the Plath industry is both deeply unethical, and that the demonstrating of any ethical concern by the participants in that industry is somehow suspect, is just one of the daring insights posited by Malcolm.

We will see in Chapter Five how these kinds of ethical concerns creep, for example, into Rosemary Sullivan's biography of Gwendolyn MacEwen. For now, though, the more important fact to glean from Malcolm's book is that, unlike the three books I have just discussed, it is not afraid of imputing a motive for the phenomenon it describes. In fact, there are two, one clearly delineated, the other which we must figure out for ourselves. The clearly delineated motive is Malcolm's answer to the question of "why the dead have been chosen over the living" (57). Her answer is chilling: "We choose the dead

because of our tie to them, our identification with them. Their helplessness, passivity, vulnerability is our own" (57). Now if we apply Malcolm's reading of the motive for the Plath industry to the phenomenon of biographical influence, we get a useful tool for interpretation. The practitioners of biographical influence hone in on Moodie, MacEwen, and Lowther because something in the very "deadness" of these women writers speaks to a condition the very much alive practitioners of biographical influence are experiencing. This is their vulnerability and marginality as writers in Canada. The implied motive for the phenomenon Malcolm traces comes in the various letters of Ted Hughes she quotes (he did not agree, like Olwyn Hughes, to be interviewed for Malcolm's book). In these letters Hughes excoriates academics for their prurient interest in Plath. The tell-tale sign that Malcolm sympathizes with this position is the very shape of her book. There are no footnotes, there are no endnotes, there is no bibliography. Academic literary criticism is wholly complicit, according to Malcolm, with the worst parts of the Plath industry as catalogued in her book.

Chapter Three

Biographical Influence as Theme in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Carol Shields's *Swann*

1.

The epigraphs to this dissertation come from two poems by Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields. Written early in their respective careers, the poems demonstrate two slightly different attitudes towards biographical influence. In the Shields epigraph, the pioneers are nostalgically resurrected by the poet in order to stop them from “melting to myth.” The pioneers’ importance to the narrator lies both in their status as forebears, but just as importantly in their status as material for the poet’s own work. It is the poet, after all, who will provide the “proofs” that are required. In the Atwood epigraph, the subject of the poem’s scorn cannot be got rid of fast enough. He or she will definitely not be missed, and the poet is itching to put her Bloomian spin on things: “So I can write about it.” The subject’s importance to this narrator lies solely in his or her status as material. We might classify these two attitudes towards biographical influence as the respectful and the mercenary.

My inclusion and reading of these two epigraphs is not meant to imply that biographical influence as practiced by Carol Shields is solely respectful while that practiced by Margaret Atwood is solely mercenary, or even to imply that respectful and

mercenary exhaust the possibilities of why biographical influence exists. Rather, the epigraphs and my reading of them serve to underline the constructed as opposed to essential nature of biographical influence: it exists in Canadian literature as a consciously created phenomenon, for many reasons and in varying degrees. In fact this dissertation argues that despite the differences between them, most Canadian writers who participate in the articulation of biographical influence (Atwood and Shields being the most forthright) do so from one general motive: the creation of a Canadian canon populated by women writers. While there may be differences between the individual writers and their own particular motives for this creation—some of which we will explore in this chapter—the net effect remains the same.

There are at least two effects of having a number of Canadian women writers elevated to canonical status by their descendants. The first effect is the more obvious one. There is a rapidly growing number of works of art, whether films or poems or novels or plays or sculptures, which have as their subject a Canadian woman writer.¹ A cursory glance through the arts sections of Toronto newspapers over the past two years offers the following evidence: an opera has been commissioned and a biography has been published about Pauline Johnson, a play has been staged about Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, two plays have been staged about Gwendolyn MacEwen, a fundraiser has been held to help fund a sculpture of MacEwen to be housed eventually in a city park, and a film about Pat Lowther has been screened at a documentary film festival. The list is long and growing.

The second and perhaps less tangible effect of biographical influence is that it has become accepted, and arguably even emblematic or necessary, that in Canadian culture, artists should make use of Canadian women writers as their subject material. In contrast, we have not seen an equivalent efflorescence of works of art about Canadian women dancers, painters, musicians, or politicians. For some reason, the figure of the Canadian woman writer has accrued unto itself just the right valence in order for it to sustain whole works of art. As a Hollywood star is said to “carry” a movie, so Canadian women writers like Susanna Moodie, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther are now so well established as subjects that they can “carry” whole novels, plays, and films. It is important to distinguish this kind of broad popularity from the academic popularity accorded to a writer by publishing a collection of essays or holding a conference dedicated to her works. What is so telling about the pervasiveness of biographical influence is that it has managed to straddle both the academic and popular realms in Canada. This fact is evidenced by the broad success of Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and Shields’s *Swann* (1987), two novels that clearly thematize biographical influence in the context of Canadian literature.

The Blind Assassin and *Swann* are postmodern novels whose plots revolve around the creation of a myth or an iconic status—the phrases are used interchangeably as we shall see—based on a deceased Canadian woman writer. There are at least two important levels of irony (levels that I would argue are particular to the Canadian literary scene) that stem from the appearance of these two novels. First, both Atwood and Shields, in their works previous to the two above-mentioned, have been in the vanguard of practising

biographical influence. As Chapter Four of this dissertation demonstrates, the dialectical exchange over the past twenty years between Atwood and Shields, among other writers, around the persona of Susanna Moodie, has in effect canonized Moodie for future generations of readers and students. The irony therefore is that Atwood and Shields are not only the foremost practitioners of biographical influence, they are also in their later works, *The Blind Assassin* and *Swann*, its most accomplished critics. Second, through their own prominence in the field of Canadian literature, both Atwood and Shields are as mythic and iconic as the myths and icons they have created (Moodie) as well as those they have created as parodies and critiques of their own creations (Laura Chase in *The Blind Assassin* and Mary Swann in *Swann*).

If this sounds particularly incestuous or perhaps inhibiting as far as a basis for a literary hermeneutic is concerned, we need only repeat the often remarked upon fact of the smallness of the Canadian literary community. As discussed above with reference to the interplay between Robert Lecker and John Metcalf, and as has been remarked by scholars such as Helen Buss in her essay on Shields's *Swann*, there is not much that can be done about the fact that writers and critics and reviewers and professors and publishers in this country are often closely linked. By virtue of its small population, by virtue of the concentration of its cultural industries in the few large cities, and, I would argue, as a consequence of the simultaneously recent history of its publishing industry and many of its universities, it is almost inevitable that Canadian literature should engender a phenomenon such as biographical influence. As argued earlier in reference to Bloom and his negative conception of influence, I would like to state again that in my view

biographical influence is often a positive and not a negative phenomenon. What will help shore up this view, is, as Buss writes, to “be honest” about it. There is little point in pretending that classic Canadian literary works and canonized Canadian authors have gained their status through an organic process over time. In fact, it is the patently transparent constructedness of Canadian literature, evidenced in this particular instance in the biographical influence thematized in Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and Shields’s *Swann*, that makes it so fascinating to study.²

At the same time as we can confidently point out that biographical influence is specifically Canadian for specifically historical and ideological reasons, we also need to set this phenomenon in the larger context of world literature and theory. If we keep in mind the strengths and the shortcomings of female literary myth explication discussed in Chapter Two, we will establish both the uniqueness of the Canadian literary culture and at the same time its indebtedness to and relationship with trends and theories from other places. In order to accomplish this goal, I propose in this chapter to read Atwood’s and Shields’s novels as meta-instances of biographical influence.

2.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* is not the first novel in which the author thematizes the artistic life. Atwood has done this successfully in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye* and a number of her short stories. The difference between those earlier works and her latest novel is that the theme of the woman writer in Canadian society takes on a new

ironic edge in *The Blind Assassin*. It is not in dispute in *Lady Oracle* that Joan Thomas is a romance novelist, nor in *Cat's Eye* that Elaine Risley is an accomplished visual artist. In *The Blind Assassin*, however, it is most definitely in dispute whether Laura Chase is actually the author of the novel-within-a-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, or if someone else has written the novel. Where Atwood's earlier works foregrounded the essential constructedness of characters and their personas (as for example Joan Thomas' numerous aliases in *Lady Oracle*), the new concern—one which is mirrored as we will see in Shields's earlier novel *Swann*—is the constructedness of the literary reputation. We may ask at this point what has prompted Atwood's turn towards this particular form of irony?

As Nathalie Cooke argues in "The Politics of Ventriloquism: Margaret Atwood's Fictive Confessions," Atwood's oeuvre is characterized by the fictional "confession" operating as a "rhetorical and ethical *strategy*" (Cooke 208). According to Cooke, the characteristic unreliability of Atwood's fictional and poetic narrators is a consciously employed method which causes the reader to look "to the speaker not so much for the disclosure of events as for their production" (211). *The Blind Assassin* fits into Cooke's scheme because its narrator, Irish Griffen-Chase, is certainly unreliable throughout the bulk of the novel. As Cooke demonstrates, what is even more important than the fact of this narratorial unreliability is that the reader is prodded by Atwood into a level of sophisticated participation. The reader of Atwood's fiction expects the author's narrators to produce evidence of their own construction of events. It is as if the old dramatic and fictional tenet of suspension of disbelief has been thrown out completely, and a postmodern self-consciousness is being made to defiantly stand in its place.

The step that Cooke does not take, but which seems only logical given her vocabulary of transparency, confession, disclosure, and ethics, is to dispute the fact that Atwood is solely a master of “fictive confessions.” These fictive confessions, through which Cooke demonstrates that the *reader* is made to “recognize the illusory nature of the speaker and to concentrate on the issues she raises in and through the confession” (224) apply just as well, I will argue, to Atwood herself as the *author* of the novel. Confessing to an implicatedness in the “power politics under discussion” (225) has an effect not only on the reader, but also on the author. This is where the argument ties back in to biographical influence. In *The Blind Assassin*, the particular set of power politics in question has to do with the establishment of a literary reputation in this country, and by extrapolation, just how easily what Canadian literary culture has taken as a natural tradition is shown to be not that clear and not that natural at all.

Arguing against the implicatedness of the author, Cooke cites an interview with Atwood in which Atwood makes a distinction between “true confessions” and “craft” or “true confessions” and “writing a novel” (225). In her justification of Atwood’s somewhat suspect dichotomy, Cooke employs an unexpected moralizing tone: “Atwood *quite rightly* points out that her work is “craft” and not “true confessions” (emphasis added). On what basis is Cooke able to make this claim? Is it simply because the author herself feels this way in interviews? After all, Cooke’s essay is published in an anthology where the editor ends her introduction by quoting an Atwood poem about the impossibility of such surety: “There is no/either/or” (York 11). If we are to accept so easily Cooke’s restating of the formalist literary tenet that the author’s autobiography and

the author's literary output are automatically separate, then why should we be any more willing to accept the conclusion that Atwood's works "bestow upon [readers] the authority and the responsibility of witness?" (225).

Cooke's reading of Atwood places great emphasis on the ethics her writing engenders, but places this ethical responsibility squarely and solely on the shoulders of the reader. Her essay predates by almost five years the now-fashionable practice among scholars of English to pay attention to the intersection of ethics and literature, and may thus be excused for the one-sidedness it demonstrates in this regard. If, as Lawrence Bell argues in his introduction to a recent *PMLA* issue dedicated to ethics and literature, the turn to ethics in literature stems from a repressed guilt over the erasure of the author's agency in the production of meaning which took place via poststructuralism, then I will argue that *The Blind Assassin* and *Swann* provide significant evidence that authorial agency is alive and well in Canadian literature. Furthermore, we will need to formulate precisely what an "ethics of the author" might mean, with specific reference to Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields. Critics would like to be able to separate Atwood the novelist and poet from Atwood the critic, reviewer, and spokesperson for Canadian literature, when the reality is that this cannot and should not be done. Certainly, if the only reason this dichotomy is being upheld is to shore up the formalist idea that fiction is patently different from "true confessions" or biography, then I would claim that this is not a good enough reason. Not when the interpretation of a country's literature is at stake.

*

The Blind Assassin is a novel about two affluent women from a small southwestern Ontario town set between the beginning and end of the twentieth-century. It chronicles the sisters' different life-paths: the older one becomes an unhappy socialite in Toronto while the younger one is emotionally troubled, writes a masterpiece of Canadian modernist fiction called *The Blind Assassin*, and then commits suicide. Through a series of flashbacks as well as the voluntary admissions of the narrator, we learn by the end of the novel that the author of the masterpiece is not the woman we had assumed was the author. A carefully orchestrated set of bits of revealed information mean that Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* is in fact comprised of at least three other novels: *The Blind Assassin* by Laura Chase, *The Blind Assassin* by Iris Griffen-Chase and *The Blind Assassin* science-fiction and fantasy episodes written by Alex Thomas, Iris's lover. This series of repeated creations can be offered as evidence of Atwood's belief that literature, and by extension literary reputations, are completely constructed. In case we're in doubt that this is Atwood's opinion, *The Blind Assassin* contains important examples such as the scene where a young Iris wonders about the authorship of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Iris states that "Edward Fitzgerald hadn't really written it, and yet he was said to be the author. How to account for it? I didn't try to" (156).

A reading of interviews given by Atwood and some of her critical writing published over the last thirty years leads one to believe that like the young Iris, who wonders at the power of literary creation and reputation (and, significantly, who deliberately shies away from the idea that there might be personal motivation on the part of the author responsible for such literary creation), Atwood has seen herself as

responsible for the creation of a Canadian literary tradition. In her interviews and published essays and reminiscences, Atwood repeatedly discusses which Canadian writers were and which were not read during her high school and undergraduate years, and in effect sets herself up as the hero who will broach the void that is Canadian literature. This is not a completely new interpretation of Atwood's role in Canadian literature. Faye Hammill, for example, in an essay that will be more closely examined in Chapter Four, notes that "Much of Atwood's later writing betrays her consciousness of the part she has played in the shaping of Canada's national tradition" (Hammill 77). This dissertation goes the significant extra step of attempting to theorize "the part" Atwood and others have played, and giving it a name—biographical influence.

The Blind Assassin thematizes biographical influence, and going one step further, allegorizes Atwood's own career as creator of fiction, but also as creator of literary reputations. The novel begins appropriately and parodically enough, with the death of the author. Laura Chase drives off the St. Clair Avenue bridge, in the ravine-centered heart of Atwoodian Toronto. She will not be dead for long, however. Significantly, as soon as Laura's sister Iris, the novel's narrator, is informed of her sister's death, she begins to create the myth of Laura Chase. She tells the police officer who has informed her there will be an inquest into her sister's death that her "sister was never a good driver" (1). The notion that Laura's death is mysterious is the first important building block (the tragic death) in the myth of the celebrated woman writer (as in Woolf, Plath, MacEwen, Lowther). On the next page, Iris cements the second integral building block of her sister's myth. Looking for her gloves on the way to the morgue to identify the body, Iris cleverly

notices her sister's notebooks. We think nothing of it at this point (the second page of the novel), but we will later recognize chillingly that Iris is already planning, moments after learning of her sister's death, to use her sister as a vessel for her own literary ambitions. She will let it be known that she has found a novel scribbled in five school notebooks by Laura Chase. Like Atwood who has created Susanna Moodie, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther in her poems, novels and stories, Iris will create a literary icon in *The Blind Assassin*.

Iris's use of her sister leaves her plagued by a good amount of guilt. This guilt is not stated outright, but we glimpse it refracted through her increasing frustration and anger at the cult of celebrity (for which she is of course responsible) that has grown around her sister. Examples of Iris's frustration include the four instances where she describes with impatience flowers and candles being left at Laura's grave in Port Ticonderoga. Iris describes the reaction the publication of the novel has in Port Ticonderoga: "even after fifty years it retains its aura of brimstone and taboo" (39). She recounts the maliciousness of the town's residents upon the novel's publication in New York in 1947: "Why had I arranged for this piece of filth to be published?" (40). And most significantly, she underlines the chief interest of the town's population as being greedy curiosity: "they wanted to finger the real people in it." Atwood's strongly-held belief (as mentioned above) in the separation between "artistry" and "true confessions" is underlined here again. Her desire to delineate a space where the writer of fiction can be beyond "guilt" is always coming up against her (and Iris's) equally strong desire to participate in biographical influence.

Iris's claim later in the novel that "The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read" (283) can be read as an instance of what Glenn Deer has identified (quoted approvingly by Cooke) as an instance of Atwoodian *paraleipsis*. This is "the figure of verbal dissimulation... that critiques authority and on the other hand is complicitous with that authority, that feigns powerlessness in order to wield power" (216). That Cooke should quote Deer approvingly here and not make the connection between *paraleipsis* as a rhetorical figure and as a real-world practice is understandable given Cooke's reticence to ascribe motives to Atwood the novelist. I would argue that biographical influence necessarily expands and literalizes *paraleipsis* by turning it into a *de facto* feature of the plot. For example there is a scene where Iris describes (playing no doubt off very similar episodes in Shield's *Swann* as we shall see) "Laura's anonymous admirers" (45) who nevertheless will "nick anything... A year ago I caught one of them with a jam jar and a trowel, scraping up dirt from the grave" (46). Here we need to interpret Atwood properly as emplotting *paraleipsis*: Iris feigns powerlessness against the legions of Laura Chase's fans who desecrate her memory, while we know that she in fact has performed the greatest desecration of all—allowing her sister to be sacrificed (like the blind carpet-weaving children in *The Blind Assassin* sections of the novel) to her own literary ambition.

Not all of Iris's pronouncements on the fate of Laura Chase's novel are veiled in the rhetoric of *paraleipsis*. She becomes gradually clumsier, to the point where half-way through the novel she is outrightly asking for the reader's pity: "The book is now in the

public domain... you lose control. The thing is out there in the world, replicating itself in God knows how many forms, without any say-so from me" (283). Like the Susanna Moodie Atwood created in the early 1970s and who went on to bigger and better things as a canonized early Canadian writer, Iris's Laura replicates and mutates until she becomes (in the latest published version), one of the "Neglected masterpieces of the twentieth century." Atwood's jab here at publishing and its attendant marketing exigencies is once again executed so that the canny reader can make the connection between Iris's creation of the Laura Chase myth and Atwood's own substantial myth-making powers. The connection is that the latest published version of Laura's novel is to be published by "Artemisia press... it's English. I think they're the ones who wanted me to write an introduction." Iris's sneering at the vaunted feminist publishing house therefore signifies directly off the Virago Press edition of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* for which Atwood wrote an introduction in 1986.

At the same time as Atwood has in her later works admitted her complicity (a positive complicity, in my opinion) in the creation of a canon of Canadian women writers, there is an attendant "sneering" or at least ambivalent and challenging attitude towards the scholarly work of decoding this complicity. As I have argued in the Introduction above, the sense the careful reader of Atwood (and Shields) gets is that these novelists are arrogating to themselves the traditional (male) academic preserve of canon-formation. We see this most strongly in the generous amounts of satire levelled at academics in *The Blind Assassin* and *Swann*. Iris states that "There are more than a few scholars who'd like to get their claws into all this waste paper. *Material*, they'd call it—

their name for loot” (286). The metaphorical alignment of scholarly work with theft, which is so expertly made as we shall see in *Swann*, is amplified by Atwood when she includes a selection of “tersely worded replies” (286) Iris has written over the years to inquiring scholars: “Dear Professor Z: I have noted your opinion that a biography of Laura Chase is long overdue... But my co-operation in what you call ‘your project’ is out of the question... Laura Chase is not your ‘project.’ She was my sister.... Things written down can cause a great deal of harm” (287). So many of Atwood’s preoccupations with biographical influence are bound up in this fictional response that we need to unpack it carefully.

First, there is the issue of ownership. Iris strenuously denies the possibility that anyone other than she should “own” her sister and her sister’s novel. Hence her derisive comments about the scholars who try to steal pieces of Laura (metaphorically or literally, as in the comment above about the earth around the grave). Surely in this case Atwood is aware of the irony that the person who is decrying the attempts to steal parts of her sister is in fact the most culpable. And Atwood must be aware that after thirty years of writing repeatedly about Susanna Moodie and lately about Gwendolyn MacEwen, readers and critics will begin to notice and formulate their own theories about why this might be so. Next there is the issue of the power of “things written down.” As discussed above, Atwood uses the rhetorical figure of *paraleipsis*, by which she is able both to underplay the “truth” of what she writes at the same time as she holds on the power of being the author of truth. Though Iris may point the finger of blame at the would-be scholarly biographers (if they publish a biography there will be harm done because words are

permanent and distorting), then the obvious is that Iris herself caused *The Blind Assassin* to be published under her sister's name in the first place. Interestingly, in an interview Atwood has recently given, she disavows the ability to interpret her own work, claiming instead that she would rather not take jobs away from Ph.D. students, because that's what they're for. The challenge to any scholar from Atwood, the country's largest and most influential purveyor of biographical influence, is how to distinguish her non-fictional pronouncements as well as her fictional statements which seem to belittle and challenge academics, while simultaneously using all of this to enrich the study of Canadian literature.

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Where Atwood's novel can be read as an allegory of the discursive influence of Atwood herself in Canadian literary culture, Carol Shields's *Swann* is a more wide-ranging allegory of what has historically been the chief preoccupation of the Canadian literary establishment, the authentication of a tradition. That said, *Swann* has an Iris Griffen-Chase-like character in Sarah Maloney, whom we can choose to read as the stand-in for Shields in this novel, as I argue below. In *Swann*, the reader is exposed to the points of view that Atwood carefully leaves out of her later novel: *Swann* is a novel written in the distinct voices of five scholars and admirers who between them have created the poet Mary Swann. No one person "owns" Mary Swann to the same extent that Iris Griffen-Chase owns Laura Chase. While only one of these five characters actually met Mary

Swann when she was alive, all of them lay claim to intimate knowledge of her life and her poetic output after her death. Mary Swann becomes a literary superstar more than twenty years after her untimely death, yet by the end of the novel Shields has shown, as has Atwood in *The Blind Assassin*, that this reputation is based on the flimsiest of evidence. The self-evident irony is of course that both Atwood and Shields in others of their works (*Small Ceremonies*, "Isis in Darkness," *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, for example) have been prime practitioners of this sort of reputation-building.

If we agree to read *Swann* as an allegory of repeated attempts to create a Canadian tradition, then we must also explain the reasons why Shields makes Mary Swann a woman. In an interview, Shields has stated that in an earlier draft of the novel, Swann was a male poet, and the Proustian echo of the title character's last name made more obvious sense.³ In a subsequent re-write of her manuscript, Shields decided to make Mary Swann a woman. As I have argued in the Introduction, the figure of the woman writer has come to be central to the pursuit of an authentic Canadian tradition. The marriage of 1970s feminism and feminist scholarship with nationalism and nationalist literary criticism, evident for instance in an influential critic like Margaret Atwood, made it probable that in establishing a new canon this generation of critics (and those who have come after) use the female body. The argument of biographical influence, which Atwood and Shields implicitly advocate in their critical and fictional work, is that the woman writer and her historically accurate metonymic alignment with the difficulty of forging a literary career should be read allegorically as the difficulty of forging a literary culture in this country as a whole. Thus Shields and Atwood, among other writers, use the figure of

the Canadian woman writer in their work as a tool for directing desire towards a woman-centred Canadian literature. One of the more disturbing aspects of biographical influence is that it is a methodology largely based on pity, which we will see especially when we come to Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther. *Swann* is a fictionalized template of this process. It valorizes the significance of writers like Mary Swann, Susanna Moodie, Isabella V. Crawford, Pauline Johnson, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Pat Lowther, whose foreshortened or stunted careers have come to stand—through their proliferating appearance in poems, novels, plays and biographies—for a national literature that is always never achieving its potential.

Helen Buss has published a provocative essay on *Swann* that makes a similar connection between *Swann* and what I term biographical influence. In “Abducting Mary and Carol: Reading Carol Shields's *Swann* and the Representation of the Writer Through Theories of Biographical Recognition,” Buss argues that “*Swann* is a satiric critique of the economy of literary production and literary criticism in general... [and] particularly a critique of the biographical enterprise that attends the entry of such a figure into the canon” (427). Like Cooke, who was unwilling to stand outside the fiction of Atwood to see how the fiction allegorized the author's *own* literary and ideological machinations—and not just those of its characters—Buss goes only part way towards a full reading of Shields's novel. She is right to highlight the importance of satire and to use terms like “economy” to describe how biographical influence is essentially a system of value exchange, but she is unwilling to view Shields herself as implicated in this economy. Buss argues that through its various “biographers”—characters like Sarah Maloney and

Morton Jimroy—*Swann* is a prime example of what William Epstein has termed “biographical abduction.” Epstein’s process occurs when “biographers, while seeking to represent their subjects, must, by necessity, exclude and/or revise portions of the subject so that she can be “recognized” by current commodification standards” (428).

For the purposes of my argument, I see an intriguing similarity between Buss’s biographical abduction thesis and Glenn Deer’s reading of *paraleipsis* in Atwood’s fiction as discussed earlier. If we recall *paraleipsis* as the rhetorical figure of dissimulation whereby an author critiques authority while at the same time holding on to significant amounts of authority, we will see that the biographical abduction Buss ascribes to Shields’s characters is exemplified most forcefully by Shields herself. By writing an entertaining novel that is ostensibly about the instability of knowledge and impossibility of biography, Shields in fact vindicates knowledge and biography. Although the general impression has been that Shields is less of a political writer than Atwood (making fewer outright pronouncements on Canadian literature over the years, preferring to let her fiction—or her silences—speak for themselves), I would argue that her strategic use of biographical influence is just as pointed as Atwood’s. Buss’s argument of biographical abduction must be expanded (as we expanded the argument of *paraleipsis* to include Atwood’s own stake in her work) to include Shields herself as prime abductor. For in *Swann*, what she skillfully manages to do is to feign postmodernist instability and unknowability in order to more fully allow for the eventual triumph of traditional biography and knowledge, and by extension, the triumph of biographical influence.

As readers of Shields will know, this is a theme that recurs in her later work. Just as Atwood seems to have moved from a position of epistemological certainty (Joan Thomas and Elaine Riseley are the largely unproblematic creators of artistic works) to one of uncertainty (Laura Chase may or may not be the author of *The Blind Assassin*), Shields appears to be making an important opposite move beginning with *The Stone Diaries*. Whereas earlier novels like *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann* use the notion of theft to question the ability of any one artist to claim responsibility for the works ascribed to them, in *The Stone Diaries*, Shields moves closer to the idea that a life can be described and fully known.

The hints Shields drops in *The Stone Diaries* to this end would seem, on first inspection, to argue against the position I have just taken. For example, there is the scene where Daisy narrates the events of her own birth, which is underscored by a sense of the artificial nature of this narration. "I long to bring symmetry to the various discordant elements," Daisy says, "though I know before I begin that my efforts will seem a form of pleading" (Shields 1993 23). This comment inaugurates a long line of reflections embedded in the novel whose ostensible aim (like the use of theft in *Swann*) is to destabilize the pediment upon which biography as a genre sits comfortable and solid. Critics have not been slow to pounce on the clues Shields so eagerly throws their way. For example, Gordon E. Slethaung, in his essay on *The Stone Diaries*, concludes that:

As Carol Shields's key figure, Daisy represents our longing—and the provisional quality of that longing—for wholeness, coherency, and meaning and our worst

fears—and possibly joy—that we are fragmentary, provisional, and void of certain meaning (Slethaung 78).

My own feeling is that despite the postmodern clues Shields leaves strewn about *Swann* and especially *The Stone Diaries*, the true effect of their inclusion, as I will argue below, is not to give them credence. It is closer to the truth to say that a novel like *The Stone Diaries* is about overcoming the challenge to epistemological certitude life and art throw our way. The best evidence for such a reading is that try as she might, Shields never really strays too far from a traditionally realistic narrative (the exception of *Swann's* final chapter is discussed below.) In this traditional Shieldsian narrative, it is never really in question for the reader that Daisy Goodwill existed. The postmodern flourishes embellish but do not ultimately define the narrative. As Shields says to Eleanor Wachtel in an interview, postmodernism "gives you permission to let the story go in curious angles." (Wachtel 45) Like other well-honed techniques in the novelist's repertoire, postmodernism is less a challenge to traditional epistemological certainties, than an entertaining fictional device.

*

The epigraph to Shields's novel is a poem by Mary Swann that makes the relationship between the Canadian woman writer and the nation forcefully: "The rivers of this country/Shrink and crack and kill/And the waters of my body/Grow invisible" (Shields 1987 x). Here we can clearly see the alignment of the dying woman poet with the

murdering land. In Canadian literary history, this is an important trope, figuring in careers as different as that of Susanna Moodie, Isabella Crawford, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Pat Lowther. To a high degree it appears that once the pattern of biographical influence is decoded in a novel like *Swann* or *The Blind Assassin*, the possibilities for intertextuality become endless. For example, we might argue that Shields's *Swann* re-writes at one remove, the life and death of Pat Lowther. Like Mary Swann, Pat Lowther was murdered by her husband, and like Swann, her posthumous career has flourished, albeit always and seemingly inescapably inflected by the circumstances of her death. At the same time, and as has already been argued, we might choose to see *Swann* as a rewriting, as has Clara Thomas, of Susanna Moodie: Swann and Moodie having many characteristics in common including where they lived in Ontario and the initials of their names. If we accept *Swann* as a rewriting of Moodie, then we might read the epigraph quoted above as a particularly sly parody of Atwood's poems in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. In such a reading, Shields can be seen to trouble the easy analogy between the woman and the nation.

Swann has attracted its fair share of critical attention since it was published in 1987, and it has just as often been misread. As Tim Walters demonstrates in an unpublished paper entitled "Rereading Swann: Subjectivity and Textuality in Carol Shields's *Swann*," critics have dealt with the most important theme in *Swann*—the unknowability of a life, the fickleness of all epistemologies—largely by ignoring it. Is this because the critics have not believed Shields's rendition of postmodernist uncertainty, or is it because the novel's satire makes any such conclusion shaky? According to Walters, critics have concentrated instead on feminist interpretations that focus on the

oppression of Mary Swann at the hands of a patriarchal literary institution. I am in agreement with Walters' reading, which ends by noting the paradox of the novel: that Mary Swann exists "only in the fictive world of this text, and not... there at all" (Walters 18). Still, my own reading of *Swann* requires that we rescue the novel and its elusive heroine from postmodern concerns, which I take less literally than do Walters, Cooke or Buss.

My contention is that just as it satirizes academic work, so too does *Swann* satirize, and not reify, postmodernist fiction. The fracturing of epistemology is certainly a theme in the novel, but this theme is overshadowed by the overwhelming sense that readers have of Mary Swann, whether or not she actually "exists" in the novel. Shields recognizes this by naming the novel after the title character, and by framing the novel with poems written by the main character. Postmodernism has proven time and again that it is the least convincing of genres: it argues for the unknowability and inconsistency of what is written and who writes, yet consistently does this in novels about strong and interesting characters, who are often writers and academics. When the movie version of the novel was made, for example, the reading offered in the screenplay by playwright David Young eschewed postmodernism and concentrated instead on the overwhelming desire of Sarah Maloney to pin down her version of Mary Swann. Despite the movie's ultimately unsuccessful translation of the novel, it is interesting to note that the transition to screenplay necessitated and/or distilled the "truth" from the novel, without the postmodern uncertainties of the novel. Shield's recent prize-winning biography of Jane Austen, as well as her further interest in biography in the novels *Small Ceremonies* and

The Stone Diaries and in her M.A. thesis on Susanna Moodie are other hints that despite the inclusion of postmodern concerns in *Swann*, Shields herself fully believes in the centrality of reconstituting women's lives.

This desire to reconstitute lives is precisely why the importance of “dailiness” is so pronounced in *Swann*, and in the rest of Shield’s fiction. Whereas the dogma evidenced in Cooke’s attitude towards Atwood, of under no circumstances reading similarities between authors and their characters, is a well-policed one in English departments, I would like to risk the argument that the deconstructive lever (a phrase borrowed from Buss's essay) in *Swann* is precisely Shields's inability to write a convincing Sarah Maloney. Instead, what the astute reader picks up on is an anachronistic maturity in this supposedly 27-year-old academic that sounds a lot more like Shields herself than Sarah Maloney.⁴ Sarah’s well-developed notion of dailiness as the marker of a life well-lived is the best evidence here.

Her vital linking of this notion of dailiness to Mary Swann—“Dailiness... has its hard deposits of ennui, but it is also, as Mary Swann suggests, redemptive” (22)—suggests to me the strong possibility that biographical influence is a literary reworking of the psychological phenomenon of transference, whereby desire for something difficult to attain (here we can recall Freud's concept of mourning) is transferred onto a more easily available object (as in the condition of melancholia). In the case of Sarah Maloney and *Swann*, the actual desire is for a strong tradition of female writers; while the transferred desire is for the dead woman writer.

And so we come back to the notion of desire, which I see as operating in the following way in *Swann*. Each of the novel's main characters is beset by a desire that they cannot admit to, and which becomes replaced by a desire for Mary Swann. This displacement of one desire for another is the pattern that underpins biographical influence, where the desire for the writer stands in for the desire for a national literature. The most important thing to note about this pattern is that *literature* takes on the power to mediate desire, not reasoned critique or high theory, but good old-fashioned literature. This reinforces the argument made by Nancy Armstrong, who, following Michel Foucault, argues that modern desire is entirely dependent on writing. Shields embeds a number of hints towards such an interpretation in *Swann*. Mimi Russell, a biographer and friend of Frederic Cruzzi, states that literature is a "a kind of godly oxygen that binds one human being to the next" (225). The first section of the novel, which describes Sarah Maloney's life and work, is full of further clues that point to Shield's vision of literature as a medium for transmitting a specific kind of desire.

Sarah Maloney's feminist scholar veneer is carefully chipped away by Shields to the point where we realize, if we are reading carefully, that Maloney's chief hidden desire is to become a mother. We see this in her thinly-veiled jealousy when one of her graduate students gives birth to a baby, we see it in the scene where she studies intently a pregnant woman on a Chicago city bus, and we see it even more clearly in her ambivalent relationship with her mother. When Sarah muses about the male-centred nature of theories of literary influence, for example, she wisely concludes that "clever men create themselves, but clever women, it seems to me, are created by their mothers" (52). In the

space of a few pages, she will go on to mention Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, as will one of the audience members at Morton Jimroy's Stanford lecture on biography. In the same chapter, Shields drops hints, like Mary Swann's growing up in Belleville, where Susanna Moodie lived, as well as in the use of the town name Elgin, the same as the town in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*, all of which build a strong circumstantial case for the importance of female progenitors and specifically Canadian female progenitors in the life of the country's literature.

Sarah goes on to claim that "women carry with them the full freight of their mothers' words" (53). Her musings here are triply ironic, first because she has distanced herself from her own mother in real life, second because she has replaced her actual mother by her literary heroine-mothers—"Some days Virginia Woolf is the only person in the universe I want to talk to" (11)—and finally because she is herself, in a sense, the mother of Mary Swann, having given her a birth into the world of literary fame. The desire for the mother, and to be a mother, works on a number of levels here as we find that Maloney's literary motherhood to Mary Swann has been paralleled by a just as strong, though underplayed, need to mother a child. "In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her," (30) Sarah states categorically near the beginning of the novel. Despite the fact that as in *The Blind Assassin*, the narrators of *Swann* are all unreliable (e.g. Sarah's hiding of the fact that she was married to Olaf Thorlekson), and despite the similar prevalence of greed and ownership among scholars (e.g., "Mary Swann's notebook is mine" (30); "I know real wealth lies in the realm of the spirit, but still I'm a person who can... be roused by the rub of a cashmere scarf in my

fingers.”(11)), we feel instinctually as readers that these sentiments are less satirical of academic pomposity, than actual feelings of motherhood.

Sarah Maloney’s birthing instinct is placed in important relief in the section of the first chapter where we read about Sarah’s mother’s unborn twin sibling. In an episode uncannily reminiscent of the Margaret Atwood short story from her collection *Wilderness Tips* (and which once again goes to the point made above about the profusion of biographical influence once it is unleashed) about a woman who carries inside her a ball of nerves, flesh and teeth, Shields treats us to a very similar, heavily symbolic story. Sarah’s mother has just had a “compacted little bundle of bone and hair” (64) removed from her body. Shields’s strong hint that we may all—or at least all women—be carrying around with us a child/sibling, resonates strongly for the reader in a novel where everyone is carrying, so to speak, their own Mary Swann.

Unlike in *The Blind Assassin*, where Iris Griffen-Chase is the only guilty party in the creation of the myth of her sister, in *Swann*, Shields makes sure the blame is shared equally by a number of characters. Thus while Sarah Maloney’s motives are perhaps the most fleshed-out, the other three characters that create Mary Swann—Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch, and Fredric Cruzzi—are also worthy of discussion. Like Sarah, all three of these characters harbour motives for creating the myth of Mary Swann, and all these motives are shown, in the end, to be pretexts for their true desires, which often have to do with a sense of personal loss.

Part II of the novel is devoted to the biographer Morton Jimroy. This section of the novel has clear resonances with Shields’s earlier novel *Small Ceremonies* and her later

novel *The Stone Diaries*, both of which call into question the foundations of biography, only, as I have argued, in order to re-inscribe them more forcefully. Jimroy's ostensible motive is to be the first person to publish a scholarly biography of Mary Swann. His ridiculously convoluted scholarship—"It is highly probable that Swann read Jane Austen during this period" (145)—and his stealing of one of two extant photos of Swann from the Nadeau museum, are in the end covers for the loss Jimroy has suffered. His ex-wife Audre, whom if "he had waited, been kinder... might be here now" (143) is the true cause of his need to find Swann. Swann replaces the large hole his last marriage has formed in his life.

A similar dynamic of desire transference is at work in the Rose Hindmarch section of the novel. As in the Jimroy section, where we learn of his loss right at the beginning, so too do we learn of Rose's lack at the beginning of her section. Though she is a "woman of many hats," (151) including town clerk and local history museum curator, in the end Rose has "the nagging suspicion that beneath the hats is nothing but chilly space or the small scratching sounds of someone who wants only to please others" (155). Here we recognize a similar pattern to Jimroy's. As with the biographer, Rose Hindmarch uses Mary Swann to build up the emptiness in her own life, including her lack of sexual fulfillment. The scenes where Rose takes her neighbour Jean in for the night—and into her bed—after Jean has had a blow-out with her husband, and the scene when Jimroy comes to Nadeau and takes Rose out to a restaurant, are both full of sexual tension. Jimroy "looked into Rose's eyes at last" (186) and Jean's visit "didn't happen again, but

even now, after two years, Rose spends her Friday nights reading and waiting" (169) are good examples of the unfulfilled desire in Rose's life.

The fourth conspirator in the creation of Mary Swann is Fredric Cruzzi, who published her *Swann's Songs* posthumously in Kingston, Ontario. The lack in his life is two-fold: he has lost his only son at a young age as well as his beloved wife Hildē. His life consists of working on his weekly columns for the Kingston *Banner* and with pleasant visits with his numerous friends. Unlike Morton Jimroy and Rose Hindmarch, however, it is not these obvious personal losses he is trying to fill by creating his Mary Swann. His innermost desire is to keep an important piece of information secret, to retain an aura of goodness and ethical correctness when he knows that he has perpetrated the biggest "creation" in the whole Mary Swann saga. The secret Cruzzi now "must carry alone" (229) is that through an accident whereby Swann's poems were taken for garbage and mixed with the slimy entrails of a recently-consumed fish, he and his wife in fact re-wrote Swann's destroyed poems and published them under her name. Cruzzi is, in a fashion, Mary Swann, and his desire is for people to not find this out. Thus, in the correspondence between Cruzzi and Sarah Maloney leading up to the Swann Symposium, when Sarah bemoans "the loss of a few shreds of paper" to do with Swann, Cruzzi self-interestedly tells her to be philosophical about her loss, reminding her that "there are other things to spend your grief on" (242).

The reason why I have argued above that despite Shields's dabbling with postmodern uncertainties, she does this only in order to place into relief her greater re-inscription of the fundamental knowability of human experience, is perfectly captured in

the final scene of *Swann*. As Clara Thomas has written, the scene involves Sarah, Rose, Jimroy, and Cruzzi, "the most disparate individuals imaginable," in a classic recognition scene where they "join in a voluntary act of community, even of grace" (Thomas 203). The characters resurrect a poem of Swann's of which they each know a little piece. This "ceremonial act" (396) as described in Shields's final director's note, takes us back to the small ceremonies of family life which Shields consistently sees (in *The Stone Diaries* as well) as the bedrock on which the dissembling wor(l)ds of biography and academe are allowed to shift. I therefore read the reconstituted poem, "Lost Things," not as simply as Thomas does, as a reflection of loss and sadness which "all the participants" including Sarah, Rose, Jimroy and Cruzzi, "know the meaning of" (Thomas 203). I see in it a moralizing encapsulation of the project of biographical influence. The "moments of shame" with which the poem ends, take place precisely because of the "larger loss" activities such as biographical influence represent.

Chapter Four

Manufacturing Moodie

1.

Anyone who has been ensnared by the Brontë myth and has made the pilgrimage to Haworth in Yorkshire, can probably attest to the fact that even his or her keen interest in the Brontës is slightly put off by the rampant commercialism to be found there. Not only are there the things one would expect to find in Haworth: the tasteful and subdued museum, the bookshops selling posters and bookmarks, the trails leading to the probable site of Wuthering Heights. There are also, one soon finds, pseudo-quaint restaurants like the Vilette Café, but also mountains of jams and chocolates and tea cozies for sale with the likeness of the famous sisters printed thereon. The list of products is exhaustive and surprising: one either admires the business savvy of the locals or despairs of crass commercialism out of all proportion. Enthralled or aghast—and one can certainly be both—the pilgrim inevitably comes away with at least one small souvenir. What is significant and perhaps liberating is that there is no shame attached to participating in the posthumous commercialization of the Brontë sisters: the town, the county, and the nation make it clear in their tourist publications that literary tourism is a valued part of the country's economic and cultural life.

There are no outright shrines like Haworth in Canada. Our most pronounced period of literary canonization—the late 1960s and early 1970s—coincided with the advent of the ironic turn to postmodernism, which appears to be inimical to veneration (perhaps one day a Leonard Cohen historical site will change this reality). We do have the federally-funded national historic sites of Green Gables in Prince Edward Island, Haliburton's house in Windsor, Nova Scotia, and the Leacock Museum in Orillia, Ontario. And there is the Margaret Laurence House in Neepawa, Manitoba, the Pauline Johnson House near Brantford, Ontario, and a large number of historical plaques dedicated to our literary forebears. There is a strong sense in which the Canadian literary tourism industry is sanctioned from above—despite the continued veneration and reading of the *Anne of Green Gables* books—and not inspired from below.¹ This is analogous to the way in which, as Metcalf and Lecker would argue, the Canadian literary canon itself has been consciously and hastily created by critics, publishers and educational institutions in the past thirty years, instead of emerging from an overt and long-held interest by the general populace. In addition, while the well-developed British literary tourism industry operates on a relatively strict correlation between a writer's critical importance and the pilgrimage-value of places associated with that writer, Canadians appear to operate in the obverse fashion. Canadian literary tourism fetishizes an immensely popular writer—Montgomery—who as a culture, we don't actually take that seriously (except for a handful of academic specialists). Meanwhile, it virtually ignores the writers that have been elevated to high-canonical status by our literary critics, including John Richardson

and Isabella Valancy Crawford and Sara Jeannette Duncan. Susanna Moodie is an important case in point of this neglect.

While the town of Lakefield and the city of Belleville do have their discreetly elegant National Historic Site cast-bronze plaques devoted to Moodie and her sister Catharine Parr Traill, the experienced literary pilgrim will search in vain for a T-shirt, mug, baseball cap or lollipop with the Moodie silhouette imprinted on it. By chance one summer day four years ago, I happened upon a bed and breakfast in Prince Edward County (about twenty kilometres south of Belleville) which was arranged and decorated following a literary principle. Each of the establishment's three rooms was devoted to one early Canadian literary woman writer. The Moodie room had pride of place, and was decorated in an old-fashioned style attempting to simulate mid-nineteenth-century furnishings (Rose Hindmarch's Mary Swann Room in Nadeau came to mind, of course). There was a well-worn copy of Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* tantalizingly placed on an embroidered cushion just inside the front door. On subsequent visits to the county, I have noticed that the literary bed and breakfast is no longer in operation. I regret not having taken a picture when I first stumbled upon it, nor having interviewed the owners and asked how business was going and why they had opted for the literary angle. I like to think that their no longer being in business notwithstanding, the proprietors' insights might have given credence to my belief that there is profit to be had from turning more Canadian literary heroes and heroines into tourist attractions.

Biographical influence is one solution that one segment of the population—our authors—have undertaken to right this imbalance. This is not a completely new insight,

as we will see from our review of the critical literature on the Moodie-Atwood relationship. Up until now, however, critics have been satisfied to propose a variety of relatively simplistic answers—almost platitudes—as to why contemporary Canadian writers are using other writers as characters in their fiction. Conversely, this chapter, and the dissertation in total, always returns to the important question Lucasta Miller takes from Terry Eagleton (what explains the Brontë industry?), and tries to arrive at a more materialist-inflected answer. I define a materialist reading philosophically, rather than along Marxist dialectical lines. Like Jane Marcus, I valorize a "close reading of women's texts" coupled with "a pragmatic historical reading of their personal lives and political movements" (Marcus xi)—or in this case a pragmatic historical reading of what has been *done* with their lives. Miller never satisfactorily questions the idea that the Brontë "myth" and the Brontë "industry" might be intertwined. I view the identification and explanation of this intertwining as a materialist reading. Jacqueline Rose's psychological reading of Plath means she is not interested in looking at the Plath industry from this angle either. Brenda R. Silver comes the closest in her exhaustive critique of the various versions—or material incarnations—of Woolf (t-shirts, plays, movies, ad campaigns) but once again, she does not impute any systemic motives or draw any conclusions about the literary culture as a whole, and its relationship to capitalism for instance.

It seems necessary to me that the Canadian phenomenon of biographical influence, where a number of women writers have been fictionalized time and again in subsequent writers' work, begs to be read materialistically. It also seems necessary that we re-introduce the notion of motive into literary studies. When Northrop Frye explained

the "motive for metaphor" in his Massey lectures, published as *The Educated Imagination*, he was perfectly within his rights to claim a motive for literary writing. Interpolating some strategies from Cultural Studies into a strict English reading here will go some way to dislodging any easy answers to the question of the motive for biographical influence. Why contemporary writers "use" deceased writers in this way is not just because they feel a sense of duty, or because they are captivated by the mythical qualities of the deceased writers' lives. We need to begin thinking in terms of "hegemony" and "fetish objects" as well as "profit" and "industry" and "cultural capital" more than we have ever done before. The creation of Canadian literature is not a divinely-inspired event. It is a daily workaday event that happens when conscious choices are made by, in this instance, some specific writers.

2.

Recognized by the government of Canada as a Person of National Historic Significance, with an elementary school named after her in Belleville, Ontario and an annual literary festival in Peterborough using her as its source of inspiration, Susanna Moodie's biography is well known. It has been most recently summarized by Michael Peterman (1996) and given an extended treatment in Charlotte Gray's bestselling book *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1999). Despite this seeming surfeit of both popular and academic knowledge about Moodie I would like to argue in this brief biographical section that some of the seminal facts of her life are much more obscure than they should be.

Ironically, this obscured knowledge or outright lack of knowledge about some important parts of Moodie's life seems to have made her a more valuable candidate for biographical influence than any other Canadian writer.

As her Historical Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque in Belleville succinctly states, "Born in England, Mrs. Moodie immigrated to Upper Canada with her husband in 1832. They farmed near Cobourg for two years and then moved to the wooded Rice Lake area near the frontier of the colony before settling in the more urban environment of Belleville in 1840."² The interplay between "wooded" and "frontier" life and the "urban" respite of Belleville is an enduring dichotomy in Moodie criticism and biographical influence. My contention is that subsequent authors almost always overestimate the degree of loneliness inherent in Moodie's frontier years. She had, after all, a brother and a sister also resident not very far from her in Upper Canada, and out of a fifty-three year existence in Canada, her seven years spent in the "bush" are often overemphasized. This is especially true if we remember that *Roughing It in the Bush*, one of the seminal books that fostered Northrop Frye's influential garrison mentality thesis of early Canadian literature, was actually published thirteen years after Moodie's seven-year frontier experience.

More than just Moodie's overemphasized feelings of loneliness and disillusionment, however, the frontier/civilization dichotomy the official government plaque memorializes has the effect of silencing the reality that during her seven frontier years, Susanna Moodie was in fact attempting to and succeeding at working as a writer. While the need to farm in order to feed themselves and their children was the immediate

reason for the Moodies' move to the Rice Lake area, during their years in the bush, Susanna Moodie attempted, as regularly as conditions permitted it, to write and publish. As Michael Peterman (2000) has recently shown, Moodie was in regular correspondence with newspapers and the few periodicals that existed in the 1830s in Upper Canada, and on a number of occasions, her work was accepted for publication. She wrote throughout the rest of her adult life, except for a period, as Charlotte Gray has shown, when she was depressed and overburdened with taking care of her ailing husband.

The fact that in the false paradise of Canada, Moodie also managed to be a prolific writer both of poetry and fiction is only acknowledged grudgingly, if at all. It is as if because late twentieth-century readers and critics are not enamoured of novels like *Flora Lyndsay*, *Geoffrey Moncton*, and *The World Before Them*, that somehow this career of Moodie's never existed. Only the two non-fiction books, *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life In the Clearings*, are seen as classics. Like the parlour romances of John Richardson which are not allowed to come into critical interplay with his Canadian classic *Wacousta*, Moodie's *Flora Lyndsay*, for example, is discussed very rarely, even though there are clear thematic and biographical links between this work and her canonized *Roughing It in the Bush*. The elision and underplaying of Moodie's writing career is vital to my reading both of Moodie's posthumous career, and more importantly of the phenomenon of biographical influence in general. While the tacitly understood sentiment among Canadianists is that we read and teach Moodie's *Roughing It* and *Life in the Clearings* because they have something to say to us today and because they are aesthetically superior to the later novels, I have yet to see this sentiment supported by any evidence. In

fact, my suspicion is that the suppression of Moodie's later fiction, and the valorization of her non-fiction, is an intrinsic part of fashioning Moodie's suitability for use as a figure of biographical influence. This phenomenon takes as its unstated primary assumption the notion that a woman writer's life (hence the interest in the non-fiction) is of more value than her actual career as a writer (represented for example by the novels Moodie published in New York and London).

Another thing the Belleville plaque elides but which has fascinated writers like Robertson Davies and Rick Salutin, is Moodie's political allegiances. Here I refer both to her well-known malleable Toryism that turned to Liberalism after the union of Lower and Upper Canada, but also the personal power politics, in the Atwoodian sense, between herself and her family and friends. While writers have seized on the villainous aspects of Moodie's Tory sympathies during the rebellion of 1837, they have paid little if any attention to what I would call Moodie's just as compelling and paradoxical personal politics. For example, Moodie's amanuensis role in the publication of two ex-slave narratives (those of Mary Prince and Ashton Warner) in London in the early 1830s has not been of any interest to scholars of Canadian literature. Likewise, authors of texts of biographical influence (with the exception of Davies, who sees Moodie as having an English past) have not been interested in the least by the fascinating portrayal of black characters in *Roughing It in the Bush*. They have also steered clear of the anti-slavery heroine in *Flora Lyndsay*, though they have had comparatively a lot to say about Moodie's stereotyped treatment of Irish servants. Furthermore, even critics like Peterman and Gray who have noted Moodie's anti-slavery work, fail to make any critical

connection between the treatment of black characters in *Roughing It in the Bush*, the anti-slavery heroine of *Flora Lyndsay*, and the fact that Moodie had a difficult relationship with her own part-black daughters in law.³ Why has no one thought to write about Moodie's working out of her frustrations and ambivalence over the anti-slavery cause in her writing? Is it because the existence of fissures in Moodie's life besides the obvious Atwoodian immigrant bout of disillusionment, take power away from the Moodie story as they want it to be told?

3.

Questions like the ones above about what gets into the canon and what does not are inextricably linked to the figure of Susanna Moodie. If there is a talisman in Canadian literature—a point around which critics and writers demonstrate their love of the tradition or their contempt for it—it is Moodie. The literary criticism that has been produced on Moodie, and especially on the use of Moodie by writers like Margaret Atwood, is becoming voluminous. In this section I would like to look at some of the interesting ambiguities and shortcomings of this criticism, before turning to the specific instances of biographical influence in which Moodie plays a central role.

Just as Moodie's edenic phase of literary production in England before moving to Canada is overemphasized, the fact that her Canadian writing was well-reviewed by contemporaries is just as often forgotten. Michael Peterman goes a long way to rectifying this imbalance by including a lengthy description of these nineteenth-century reviews in his monograph *This Great Epoch of Our Lives: Susanna Moodie's Roughing It in the Bush*. Peterman's conclusion that "the supportive reaction of most reviewers reflected the degree to which the book was successful in reaching the genteel audience it addressed" (22) is still qualified, however. Peterman shows how one negative review which singled out Moodie's apparent anti-Irish bias was reprinted in a Montreal newspaper and influenced her Canadian reputation. He also tempers our reaction to the overwhelmingly positive contemporary reviews by arguing that contemporary reviewing was a "genteel exercise" (22) with little in the way of "close analysis" (20).

For most of the twentieth century, Moodie was more or less not considered an author in the sense of "literary author." Peterman attempts to prove that "a consensus was slowly emerging that [*Roughing It*] was a book of classic stature in the national record and literature of Canada" (25), but as evidence he adduces three examples from anthologies in which Moodie's importance is instead deemed to be "mainly historical." For Peterman, the real canonization of Moodie begins in the 1960s when the editorial work of Carl Klinck, the theorizing of Northrop Frye and the close readings of Clara Thomas made Moodie into a literary author. This is the point at which I would like to challenge Peterman's otherwise insightful critique. In his desire to see the work of Klinck, Frye and Thomas—academic critics writing for an academic audience—as so

influential that it “colours the wide variety of responses that Moodie’s text has prompted over the last three decades,” (27) Peterman loses sight of the fact that most people who read and write about Moodie today, whether in the academy or not, do so largely as a result of Margaret Atwood’s 1970 collection of poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

A brief digression into the importance of the writer as critic here may be worthwhile. An examination of the proceedings of the Future Indicative conference held at the University of Ottawa in 1986, which was specifically designed to bring Canadian literature up to speed by forcibly introducing theoretical perspectives into it, shows in fact that what bedevils the assembled writers and academics is actually the question of a Canadian tradition. Let us consider two exchanges between George Bowering and Robert Kroetsch which are transcribed at the beginning of John Moss’ edited collection of papers from the conference, *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*.

George Bowering: Frank Davey was despairing several years ago... that nobody seemed to want to write about the amazing changes that had been made in Canadian writing, and it looked as though Canadian writers were either going to have to do it themselves, or come back as ghosts to read the stuff written seventy-five years later...[Bowering goes on to valorize the new theoretically-inflected criticism over old-fashioned thematic criticism as practiced by Frye and Atwood among others.⁴]

Robert Kroetsch: ... I even find myself liking Susanna Moodie all of a sudden.

They've got me worried now!

This exchange is fascinating for a number of reasons. Kroetsch, almost by reflex it would seem, uses Susanna Moodie as an example of a Canadian writer previously to be disparaged, but who might be salvageable if "theory" is applied to her writing. Is it going out too far on a limb to suggest that what Kroetsch means by "theory" here is simply the intervention of writers who think the way he does? Behind Kroetsch's statement is an already-tacit acknowledgement that he shares with his audience, namely that Susanna Moodie is somehow an embarrassing writer upon which to build a Canadian tradition. Bowering is in complete agreement with Kroetsch in his claim that because its critics have let it down, the Canadian tradition might have to be created by writers instead. A participant at the conference then asks Kroetsch whether he feels himself to be consciously creating a tradition, and Kroetsch responds with a fascinating theory about how because of its lack of a true period of modernism, Canadian literature could "discover" something new in the 1960s—theory:

But I think you could draw another parallel with the mid-nineteenth century, when something was happening in American literature which is happening here now: a discovery of theory. The nature of the theory that's being discovered changes enormously from time to time, but just as the great Renaissance poets were mad on theory, and their writing is full of it, I hear the discovery in Milton,

and in Hawthorne, and in a curious way this flowering of Canadian writing since the sixties is also full of theory (18).

If we bear in mind that both Bowering and Kroetsch are practitioners of what I call biographical influence—Bowering in his collection of poems *Craft Slices*, and Kroetsch in "F.P. Grove: The Finding" in *The Stone Hammer Poems*—then we can argue that in their exchange at the Ottawa conference, the two writers are providing legitimacy for a species of biographical influence. Kroetsch goes on to claim that a literary tradition can be textually-based or ideas-based. He says that "In the American model, the life of the poet often becomes in large part the tradition" (23) and cites Sylvia Plath as a prime example. He ends by musing about whether or not "Margaret Laurence's remarkable life" will become instructive in the future. Like Peterman's shying away from the truth about Moodie's significance, I believe we can see Kroetsch as shying away from an important truth here. In fact, the Canadian tradition *is* an ideas-based tradition, largely propagated by writers since the 1960s. One of the important ideas propagated is biographical influence: that the lives of some of our earlier writers are instructive, for one reason or the other, for our understanding of our literature as a whole. Why Kroetsch shies away from admitting this may have to do with his own investment as one of the chief spokespeople for a formalist interest in Canadian writing over an ideas-based tradition such as Frye and Atwood represent. Nonetheless, the evidence is almost completely to the contrary.

Sherrill E. Grace, for example, is one of the critics who has picked up on the tendency of contemporary Canadian writers to use the lives of deceased Canadian writers

as material for their writing. Anticipating the later work of Linda Hutcheon, Grace notes the attraction of Canadian writers to “mythologizing the past” (78) and distinguishes a particular form of this mythologizing which she calls the “literary-past poem,” another term for biographical influence. Grace’s essay on Moodie and Atwood is subtitled “Notes on a Literary Reincarnation,” which is fitting considering the almost spiritual connotations biographical influence takes on in the Canadian context. Another critic, David Staines, will use the words “resurrected” and “recalled” (Staines xiii) to explain Atwood’s achievement in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. We should not be dismissive of the near-biblical overtones of the criticism around the Moodie-Atwood relationship. It is difficult to give a precise definition of biographical influence—where one writer calls a dead writer back to life—without lapsing into this sort of vocabulary. Grace’s explanation for the prevalence of “literary-past poems” in Canada is not entirely satisfying, however. She stops short of claiming any special power for Atwood, and claims instead that this phenomenon occurs so that contemporary writers may “emphasize not only how the past speaks to them, but how it continuously speaks through them to us now.” Her final word on the situation is that through Atwood’s poems, Moodie “lives on, a touchstone... a signpost... a myth” (78).

It should be clear by now that this positing of biographical influence as a way to write “myths” is not entirely satisfactory. Like Miller’s failure to explain the “myth” of the Brontës further than simply naming it a myth, Grace and other critics have shied away from the deeper function of biographical influence. Michael Peterman, for instance, citing the work of Eva-Marie Kröller approvingly, contends that biographical influence happens

because contemporary Canadian writers are “seeking cultural roots and indications of something definitive in the Canadian experience” (28). While this is undeniably true, as I have argued in the Introduction, there is a more vital aspect to Canadian biographical influence than simply going back time and again to Susanna Moodie and Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther because they were *here*. The truth of the matter is glimpsed at by Kroetsch and Bowering above. Through their choice of who to use in their writing of biographical influence, writers are theorizing a particularly feminist Canadian literature—and even more than this, I argue, they are waging a battle over canonicity with critics.

The critic who has come closest to understanding biographical influence in a way similar to how I understand it is Heather Murray. Murray’s essay “The Woman in the Preface: Atwood’s Introduction to the ‘Virago’ Edition of Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*,” makes the following astute observations about Moodie and Atwood:

Each is seen as a ‘mother’ of English-Canadian literature. Each, in fact, can be seen to have ‘mothered’ the other...equally as Moodie ‘made’ Atwood, then, we can say that Atwood ‘made’ Moodie, being responsible in no little respect not only for Moodie’s popularity and status as a foundational cultural figure, but for the ways we now read her... Further, the placement of Atwood and Moodie as the alpha and omega of the English-Canadian canonical line raises the issue of the perceived centrality of women writers to the tradition, and questions of why this should be so (93).

What is interesting here is that while Murray comes tantalizingly close to stating what I have argued and will argue—that Atwood herself has done the “placement” Murray

writes about—she would rather shift the agency for canon formation away from the woman writer herself. Instead, Murray offers three possible (and highly reductive) answers to why women are central to the literary canon in Canada. Women are central to the tradition because their “psychic flexibility allows adaptation to a harsh and changing land”, because they are “well-placed to write on modes of colonial oppression and from a marginal position”, and because they are “thought especially suited to a literature which is both about nature-culture mediation and itself does the work of nature-culture mediation, which is seen to be, for better or worse, the traditional, transactive work of women” (93). At this point I would like to be blunt and ask what it is about Canadian literary criticism—feminist Canadian literary criticism included—that will not allow it to claim forthrightly that Atwood has the ability to canonize? As a result of her great talent, popularity, accrued influence within the culture as a whole, and most importantly, because her main topic—the lives of contemporary women told from a feminist perspective—has fit the cultural zeitgeist of the past thirty years like a glove, Atwood has been a more important canonizer than any Canadian academic critic.

The evidence for Atwood's canonizing power is partly in the backlash against Atwood's popularity, which—and I don't think anyone has noted this yet in an academic context—is quite similar in many ways to the Moodie backlash displayed variously by Robertson Davies, Robert Kroetsch and Rick Salutin among many others. The Atwood backlash is also evident in an academic context in some of the reactions to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Fellow poet A.W. Purdy's review, entitled "Atwood's Moodie," in an early issue of *Canadian Literature*, marks the beginning of the ambivalent relationship

between Atwood, her reading public and her critics, in regards to the Moodie poems. Purdy's reaction to Atwood's poems is structured around an unresolved dichotomy: Atwood is a very good poet, but she is also a poet without a heart. What Purdy admires about Atwood is her ability to get inside Moodie's head, but at the same time he distrusts the poet's usurping of Moodie: "reading the poems both the Moodie and Atwood personae are inescapable," and, "I believe in Atwood-Moodie" are just two examples of Purdy's difficulty in separating out Atwood from her creation. While admiring the aesthetic power of the book, he is troubled by the real-world consequences of the alignment of Atwood and Moodie that *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* engenders.

A similar unease with Atwood's rendering of Moodie is demonstrated in Laura Groening's "*The Journals of Susanna Moodie: A Twentieth-Century Look at a Nineteenth-Century Life*." Groening's argument is that Atwood's take on Moodie is largely anachronistic." Any divisions in Mrs. Moodie's perceptions can be explained," Groening argues, "in concrete objective terms that have nothing at all to do with paranoid schizophrenia" (167). Groening's distrust of Atwood echoes Purdy's: she critiques Atwood along almost ethical lines, claiming that "one must object to an interpretation [Atwood's] which bears little resemblance to the actual books [Moodie's]" (169). The question of verisimilitude is an important one, for even though it is tempting to dismiss Groening's criticism of Atwood as simplistic—Atwood does not reproduce Moodie's "true" sentiments, and therefore is guilty of misrepresenting Moodie—the issue of verisimilitude is at the heart of my argument of biographical influence.

To claim, as I do, that the appearance in works of fiction, drama and poetry, of characters based on actual Canadian writers is an important phenomenon in contemporary Canadian literature, one must first grant that a correspondence exists between these characters and the real-world people they refer to. Most critics make this assumption tacitly, while some deny the assumption by evoking various postmodern hermeneutics grounded in Foucault's notion of the "author-function" from his well-known essay "What Is an Author?" Moodie biographer Charlotte Gray writes confidently of "Atwood's long and productive relationship" (xii) with Moodie, echoing the statement quoted earlier by Faye Hammill, who has no qualms in claiming that "Shields and Atwood have... undoubtedly benefitted from" their use of Moodie, because "the raising of Moodie's profile naturally attracts an audience for their writing about her."

On the other hand, a critic like John Thurston has argued on numerous occasions that "Susanna Moodie did not write *Roughing It in the Bush*... Moodie and *Roughing It in the Bush* are interchangeable titles given to a collaborative act of textual production whose origin cannot be limited to one person" (1986 195). Thurston's application of Foucauldian and Bakhtinian theories to Moodie's text is provocative, but his argument unravels time and again as he imputes motives to Moodie and relies on her letters, for instance, as authoritative tools for reading her works.⁵ It remains to be seen where the creative writers, Davies, Atwood, Findley, Shields, among others, who have taken up the figure of Susanna Moodie, come down on this issue. My own readings of various examples of biographical influence these writers have published, falls more naturally into the Gray/Hammill camp than the Thurston camp.

4.

In their 1997 documentary, *The Enduring Enigma of Susanna Moodie*, Patrick Crowe and Keith Clarkson capture visually the phenomenon of biographical influence I am explaining in this dissertation. The documentary is structured on three levels. The first level has an actress dressed in Victorian period costume acting the role of Susanna Moodie as narrator of her own life. This level sticks to facts, and the actor's lines come directly from Moodie's texts. The second level is a film-within-a-film. Crowe and Clarkson interpollate a fictional "Upper Canada Motion Picture Company" silent movie filmed in the style of the 1920s silent movie with black and white film, exaggerated gestures on the parts of the actors, and cue cards with select pieces of dialogue. This level of the film has the effect of injecting some humour into the Moodie myth, which is not often done. The final level of the film is what I call the exegesis. Here, Crowe and Clarkson use interviews with Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, and Carol Shields, along with the scholar Michael Peterman, to lend perspective to the first two fictional levels of the documentary.

The structure of the film reproduces the phenomenon of biographical influence as I see it operating in the world of Canadian literature. The three writers, Atwood, Findley and Shields, are set up as the authorities in the film. It is their commentary that is allowed to shape the viewer's impression of Susanna Moodie and her works. This authority is

signaled in two ways: visually and in what the writers say and do not say. The filmmakers achieve visual authority by having the three writers filmed in close-up, with their figures dominating the screen completely any time they are featured. This technique aligns the three contemporary writers with the actress playing Susanna Moodie in the first "level" of the documentary, who is also shot in close-up, dominating the screen each time she appears. On the other hand, the two critics that are featured in the film, Michael Peterman, the Moodie scholar at Trent University, and Northrop Frye, the influential mid-century critic who coined the phrase "garrison mentality" with Moodie and Richardson in mind, are presented with much less visual authority. Each time Peterman is on screen, he is framed in a box and set off to the bottom-left hand side of the screen. His head is about one-third the size of the Atwood, Findley and Shields figures. Similarly, the one time that Frye is shown on screen is in a similarly-sized frame. What the viewer takes from this visual subtext is undoubtedly the fact that Atwood, Findley and Shields are the authorities on Moodie, and that the literary critics are adjunct figures, who serve merely to provide background information.

The unequal ratio of the visual authority ascribed to writers versus critics in this documentary is just as obvious in what is said in the film. The filmmakers cleverly edit their interviews with Atwood, Findley and Shields to highlight what I would call the author-nexus that is the necessary first step in the full-blown phenomenon of biographical influence. By author-nexus I mean the fact that writers read other writers' work and use their readings of these works to inform their subsequent work. Thus, both Findley and Shields acknowledge in the film that their own work on Moodie (Findley's novel

Headhunter and Shields's dissertation *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* and her novel *Small Ceremonies*) are influenced by Atwood's telling of the Moodie myth in her 1970 collection *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. What is compelling to me, because of the argument I am making, is that writers themselves appear to have few qualms about noting their debts to other writers, while critics (see Murray above for example) have been unable to take that step. My conclusion is that the cultural capital that is lost by a critic acknowledging that the country's literary tradition is formed more by writers than literary critics is a lot greater than when another creative writer makes the same acknowledgement.

This is not to say that the relationship among creative writers in Canada is one of unmediated bliss. In fact the contrary is often true. We witness this first-hand in the documentary when Carol Shields criticizes Frye and his formulation of the garrison mentality, which she claims is an absolutely misguided way to encapsulate Moodie. It should not come as a surprise, then, that a barely hidden subtext of the third level of the film I describe above, the exegesis, is an almost formulaic playing-out of what has often been seen as Canadian self-defeatism when it comes to the country's culture. In a film that is dedicated to the enduring enigma (which I read as "relevance") of Susanna Moodie, each of the three authority figures called upon (Atwood, Findley and Shields) denies the aesthetic value of Moodie's work. In my titular play on Noam Chomsky's idea that the media in contemporary society manufacture the consent of their viewership, I similarly argue that in this film (and in their works of biographical influence) contemporary Canadian writers manufacture their audience's consent to the idea that

Moodie is important, but not because of her writing. What these contemporary writers do suggest is that Moodie's value lies instead in her ability to be utilized by writers such as themselves. The film's almost biblical thrice-voiced denial leaves the viewer feeling absolutely reconciled to the fact that Moodie is not so much a writer, as a tool for *other* writers to create a tradition. Biographical influence in a nutshell.

*

Before Atwood, Findley and Shields were writing about Moodie, there was Robertson Davies. His 1950 play *At My Heart's Core*—a candidate for most unjustly neglected piece of mid-century Canadian writing in my opinion—offers a reading completely different from that of Atwood, Findley and Shields. Perhaps this is why it has been neglected in later criticism, typically misread by Moodie scholar Michael Peterman as a "bristling and oddly myopic" (15) view of Moodie. In fact, *At My Heart's Core* is possibly the only example of biographical influence around Moodie that actually takes her life as a writer seriously. Whereas Atwood, Findley and Shields will play up the themes of doubleness, schizophrenia and madness as it relates to Moodie, Davies uses her instead to propound a fairly complex argument about the place of art in a colonial society, and the place of desire in a woman's circumscribed life. He succeeds in writing a successful play, with its attendant requirements of a believable yet action-driven plot and lifelike characters. He also succeeds in inaugurating a debate about Moodie that, while

blunted by the psychologizing uses she is put to by Atwood, Findley and Shields, survives in some of the more interesting work being done on Moodie today.

Davies's achievement in this play is to recast (although chronologically his was the first casting) the well-known dichotomy of Moodie as torn between her love for Canada and her hatred of Canada, into an aesthetic dichotomy. Davies views Moodie as an artist who has compromised her career twice over. Her first compromise is to write badly about popular topics and suitable topics (for example, the 1837 rebellion and Moodie's overly-patriotic poems on this theme). Her second compromise is to write badly because of a misguided allegiance to her husband and the woman's role society has given her to play. Two characters test Moodie's resolve on these points. Phelim Bradley, the Irish squatter and drunk who acts as a foil to the more proper British characters in the play, challenges Moodie on the difference between his abilities as a popular storyteller in the oral tradition and her own writing skills. She responds that "I think that there is a difference between the productions of an educated and disciplined taste and a rigmarole of memorized fairy tales!" (25). It is obvious from what happens subsequently that Davies is not in agreement with Moodie's view here.

In fact, Davies is quite negative about the usefulness of art in general in a colonial society. As Phelim later says to Moodie, "ye must see, surely, that a country that has no need for my stories has no need for yours" (29). The irony in the play—which is the irony of biographical influence discussed in the Introduction—is that we are learning of this uselessness of Canadian writing precisely in the watching or reading of a play by Davies about Moodie, written and staged a hundred years after her publication of *Roughing It in*

the Bush. What this fact suggests is that it may be Davies himself who is conflicted about the power of art in a colonial society. He is writing in the early 1950s, a time when there is still little indigenous publishing and reviewing in Canada, and well before the nationalist outpouring of the late sixties that would see the small press movement and the launching of careers like Atwood's and Findley's. The character Cantwell, a Byronic tempter figure who disrupts the placid lives of Moodie, her sister Catharine Parr Traill, and their friend Frances Stewart, is especially important in this context. He arrives out of nowhere and proceeds to test the resolve of the three women:

Cantwell: Ah yes; you are in your sister's position. You must play second fiddle to the incompetence of Lieutenant Moodie.

Mrs. Moodie: How dare you speak so!

Cantwell: How dare you, madam, pretend to me that wifely loyalty is more important than your very considerable talents as a writer!

Mrs. Moodie: You are impertinent.

....

Mrs. Moodie: You should not press this discussion; it is unmanly to take such advantage of me.

Cantwell: Humbug! You talk like a foolish girl being kissed in a corner. We are not man and woman, Mrs. Moodie, but artist and connoisseur—a vastly more delicate relationship—and I tell you that you may strangle all your children in their beds, murder Moodie with the cleaver, trample the British flag under your feet and Almighty God will find some mercy for you; but if you refuse, for an

idiotic scruple, to write your best He will put you into hellfire and I, a critic, will applaud His judgement. Do you understand me?

Mrs. Moodie: You make my scribbling seem very important.

Cantwell: Do you suppose that the importance of literature is diminished because nobody hereabout understands it? (56).

In this important exchange, Davies sounds very much like John Metcalf, only twentieth-five years ahead of his time, and with a healthier dose of self-deprecation. Davies predicts a time when Moodie will be disparaged by critics (recall Kroetsch's assumption of Moodie as a bad writer) because of the acute lack of aesthetic value in her works. What interests me more, though, is the conscious use on Davies's part of language—"wifely loyalty," "unmanly," "foolish girl," "man and woman"—which casts the question of biographical influence in gender-based terms. I have argued earlier that biographical influence in the Canadian example is a two-tiered process. There is the bringing back of dead writers in contemporary writers' works in order to forge a non-critic-formulated canon. But there is just as importantly the valorizing of the woman writer's place in this non-critic based canon. The reason I have given for the significance of this valorization of women writers is metaphorical. The woman writer in Canada, by her perhaps stereotypical alignment with the difficulty of forging a literary career, stands in turn for writers as a whole in a country which for one reason or another, cannot valorize its writers. The exchange between Cantwell and Moodie can be seen as inaugurating this dynamic.

Cantwell is able to "make fools of us" (79) as Moodie remarks late in the play, by forcing each woman to confront her innermost desire. Cantwell correctly ascertains that Moodie's desire (and we must remember this is Davies's rendition of Moodie) is to be a full-time professional writer, and not a full-time pioneer and a writer on the side. He is able to force this confrontation upon Moodie by making the argument that it is an injustice suffered by women that they must first carry out their duty to their husbands and their families before they may fulfill their own desires. It is easy for the audience of this play to get carried away with Cantwell's very polished argumentation skills and we may in fact begin to believe that it is all Moodie's fault that she did not become a better writer. In other words, Cantwell cants so well, uses rhetoric so subtly, that we may make the judgment made by Atwood, Findley and Shields in the film described earlier. But Davies is one step ahead of us here. He provides us, as Helen Buss would say, with a "deconstructive lever" in this play, which is Cantwell's own failure. First there is his name, which signals to us that no matter how persuasive his utterances, they are actually "cant" and not truly meant. Second, while he spends the better part of the play tempting the three women by forcing them to confront their hidden desires, he neglects to mention that his actions have been prompted by his own desire for revenge. His actions in the play, we are told in the end, stem from the fact that the Moodies, Traills and Stewarts did not accept Cantwell and his wife into their society to his satisfaction.

In the end, I would argue that Davies's is a much more compelling dramatization of Moodie than that produced by the writers who came after him. This is especially true of the three other dramatic representations of Moodie: Rick Salutin's *1837* (1976), Beth

Hopkins' *Daughter by Adoption* (1981), and Molly Thom's *The Bush Ladies* (2000). In these plays, Moodie is either a figure for ridicule (here I am in agreement with Peterman's critique of Moodie as "comic and shrill" (27) in Salutin's 1837), or else a locus for the audience's sympathy and good humour, as in the plays by Hopkins and Thom. All subversion is taken out of Moodie in these plays. In Davies's play, on the other hand, biographical influence (which we can define as a subversive act) around Susanna Moodie can be said to begin in earnest. We can say this because the ostensible aims of the writer are actually overtaken (as they are time and again in works that exhibit biographical influence) by a larger truth. Davies's ostensible aim is for Moodie to represent the colonial writer who fails to generate great literature by not attending to the true exigencies of art, including concentration and seriousness. What he ends up achieving is actually the opposite. The audience's realization that Cantwell's rhetoric is specious, and that Moodie's existence is truly difficult, her place in that existence truly circumscribed, has the effect of actually magnifying her accomplishments. When she "bursts into tears" (87) at the very end of the play upon finding out her husband has attained a government post, the fact that Moodie has succeeded in producing any writing at all is driven home, and the mythologizing of Moodie begins.

*

A number of critics who have considered the Moodie-Atwood relationship in detail have concluded that for most readers, both academic and non-academic, Moodie is inevitably

read through Atwood. As Murray puts it succinctly, for an "English-Canadian audience, 'Atwood' is already the preface to Moodie: we are always reading back through her" (93). As I have noted above, and as Faye Hammill also notes in her already-cited essay, both Findley and Shields acknowledge the fact that they have come to Moodie through Atwood. It seems, therefore, to be a matter beyond dispute that Atwood is responsible for the canonized position in which Susanna Moodie finds herself in late twentieth-century Canadian literary studies. This dissertation seeks to push beyond simply pointing out this well-known fact. Picking up on the hints dropped by Heather Murray in her earlier-cited essay about the centrality of women to the Canadian tradition, I posit a more complex argument. The conjunction of the following four factors: the centrality of nationalist and feminist discourse in the period 1967-1974; Atwood's publication of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* in 1970; the enormous popularity and influence of this book and of Atwood's subsequent books including *Survival*; and the exponential growth in university-level courses on Canadian literature in the period 1970-1980 has led directly to the canonization of Moodie, and to the centrality of women in the Canadian tradition.

Among the factors listed above are material factors such as the growth in Canadian literature courses and the good reviews and sales of Atwood's books, and the more intangible literary factors such as the aesthetic quality and rhetorical prowess demonstrated in Atwood's books. Biographical influence obviously falls into the second category of literary factors. As Hammill has implied, however, and as I attempt to argue strongly throughout this dissertation, we are now getting to the point where biographical influence of Canadian women writers is so well entrenched that the lives of Canadian

women writers actually sell books, sell tickets, and attract government funding. In other words, the intangible literary factors have begun to impinge on the material real-world factors.

As an example of this, take the often-quoted section of Atwood's "Afterword" to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* where she explains the genesis of the poems in a dream she had: "I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie" (62). Notice the fact that Atwood is careful to say it is an opera *written* by her. It is her writing of the opera that is key. It is her agency in the Moodie story that is key. She could have written "I dreamt I was watching an opera about Susanna Moodie," but she carefully chooses not to. Alongside this piece of canonized Atwoodiana, I place a recent *Globe and Mail* article, "The Persistence of Pauline," which uncannily echoes the Posthumous Praise of my title, where we learn that "Atwood has written the libretto for an opera about [Pauline Johnson], commissioned by the Canadian Opera Company. The project, which was announced earlier this year, has been shelved, however, because as a character, Johnson wasn't, well, operatic enough" (Martin D2). If we are in any doubt about the ability of one well-known Canadian writer to influence the entire tradition and canon of our literature, we need look no further than this article. After rescuing Moodie, and MacEwen and Lowther as we will soon see, and having also made a contribution to the canonization of Pauline Johnson, it appears that only Marian Engel, the novelist who died in mid-career in 1985, has eluded the canonizing reach of Margaret Atwood.

These facts aside, it is still the burden of this chapter to show how the literary quality of biographical influence is at work in Atwood's writing on Moodie. I intend to do

this through a brief close reading of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Alias Grace*, the two best-known of Atwood's works which feature Moodie. A necessary ingredient in the particularly Canadian phenomenon of biographical influence being described here is its interest in the lives of Canadian women writers who live tragic lives. Thus MacEwen and Lowther, because of their early and some would say tragic deaths, come under the purview of the dissertation. Moodie, however, lived a long, eventful, and not particularly tragic life for the nineteenth century, and it is certainly not her manner of death that makes her a candidate for biographical influence. It is instead through the degree and potency of Atwood's deliberate casting of Moodie in a psychologically disenfranchised role that Moodie's suitability as subject of biographical influence is achieved. This achievement takes place both on the level of poetic plot and of poetic structure. On the level of plot, three distortions stand out in Atwood's casting of Moodie as psychologically disenfranchised (and thus ripe for biographical influence). There is Atwood's emphasizing and blowing out of proportion of the sad events of Moodie's life in Canada such as the death of a number of her children; her deliberate creation of a fundamental incompatibility between Moodie and her husband (something the biographers and editors of Moodie's letters have demonstrated was not true); and her deliberate underplaying of Moodie's career as a writer. On the level of structure, I would argue that Atwood's deliberate and neat division of the book in three equal parts constructs a dialectic which devalues Moodie's subjectivity and makes her instead into the solution to her own "problem."

The first section of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* contains three poems that undermine Moodie's husband's stature. This emphasis on Moodie's husband's ineffectualness, while not without its source in Moodie's own work (see for example Moodie's novel, *The World Before Them* (1868), where the male partner is seen as not able to cope with reality) is largely a creation of Atwood's. We see this in the second poem in the collection, "Further Arrivals," where the husband is described as "shadowy" and as hearing "malice in the trees' whispers" (13). The myth of Moodie as a woman who has to go it alone as her less-than-useful husband dithers in their new forest home is convenient in building the psychological drama *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is justly famed for, but it sidesteps the fact that the Moodies co-wrote many portions of *Roughing It in the Bush*. It also sidesteps the reality that, as Michael Peterman has recently shown, Moodie's husband acted as her agent to the literary world and was perhaps responsible for a good part of her nineteenth-century renown as a writer. The poem "The Planters" continues the diminution of John Dunbar Moodie's stature by casting him in the role of the doomed farmer who does not want to admit the desperation of the situation in which he finds himself. Along with two other men, Moodie's husband is described "weeding the rows/of string beans and dusty potatoes." Together, the men "deny the ground they stand on,/pretend this dirt is the future" (16-17). Not only is Moodie's husband deluded, but his delusion ironically leaves him unable to access "the dark/side of light" (17) that Moodie herself has found in the Canadian wilderness. Atwood's denigration of Moodie's husband is less about his shortcomings as a pioneer, and more about his inability to access a level of perception available to his wife, one where the wilderness is alive and menacing.

An overwhelming sense of Moodie alone (not literally, but figuratively of course) in the wilderness is one that Atwood must necessarily illustrate beyond a shadow of a doubt. This is because unlike MacEwen's or Lowther's tragedies, which have to do with these writers' relationships or lack of relationships with other people, Moodie's tragedy is an interior tragedy. It involves her separation from her selves—her English self, her wifely self—brought on by her apprehension of another order of existence in the bush, that makes her a prime candidate for biographical influence. This psychological disenfranchisement is perhaps best illustrated in the fascinating poem, "The Wereman." This is the poem that memorably caused Al Purdy to call Susanna Moodie a "bitch" in his 1970 review of Atwood's collection. The source of Purdy's indignation, it seems, is a pedestrian reading of the poem that takes Atwood's description of Moodie's husband, "an X, a concept/defined against a blank" (19) too literally. Purdy appears to be reacting against the silencing of Mr. Moodie, whereas a reading more in tune with my interpretation of the two earlier poems concentrates on Moodie's inability to interact with her husband normally. The poem's plot line about Mr. Moodie entering the forest and undergoing a change wherein he "blends with the under/growth" and takes on animal characteristics, is obviously a symbolic transformation. The fairytale aspect of the human-transformation-in-a-forest is simply Atwood's entry point for a more significant transformation which has nothing to do with the forest *per se*. This is a transformatoin whereby Moodie is no longer able to "read" her husband correctly. The key statement in the poem is therefore "At noon he will/return; or it may be/only my idea of him." We

understand that the change wrought in her husband in the forest is actually a shift in Moodie's own mind.

The affecting poem "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" is an important component in Moodie's availability to biographical influence. It makes the death of Moodie's son a central part of the Moodie myth, and by implication, makes death of central significance. The metaphorical compactness Atwood is justly famed for is brilliantly carried out in this poem, where the son is "hung in the river like a heart," and the final lines, "I planted him in this country/like a flag" do not fail to impress the reader with their pathos. Moodie gives up her son, and gets a country instead, and Atwood implies that the bargain is not a fair one. The poems "Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter," and "Charivari" likewise foreground suicide and murder, as if to say that violence is a central part of Moodie's experience in Canada. We might usefully invoke the *Globe and Mail* article cited above, where we read that the Pauline Johnson libretto is "shelved" because "Johnson was interesting and sad, but she wasn't wicked enough. 'If only she had murdered somebody.' Atwood says with a laugh." The interplay between literature and subject matter fit for literature is a not often remarked-upon phenomenon, but I think it is fair to say that in order to more fully dramatize Moodie's experience in Canada, Atwood devotes more space to poems about death than would constitute a fair representation of Moodie's actual lived life. In "The Deaths of the Other Children" Moodie is frightened of her dead children as they "catch at [her] heels with their fingers." (41) Undoubtedly, the fact that Moodie lost some of her children is much more suited to developing a myth of Moodie, than is the prosaic fact, well-detailed in Charlotte Gray's recent biography, that

the four children who did survive into adulthood had difficult and strained relationships with their mother, to say the least. The good, grieving mother, is more to Atwood's taste (and Findley's, and biographical influence's) than the bad mother.

A final distortion wrought upon Susanna Moodie in Atwood's poems comes about as a result of the ironic tension between the reader's knowledge that Susanna Moodie was a writer and Atwood's concerted attempts to thwart this truth at every turn. While the publisher's back jacket copy identifies Susanna Moodie as "the author of several books," the reader would not know this by reading the poems themselves. The character in the poems is robbed of her historical existence as a relatively successful mid-nineteenth century novelist. We would not know from this collection of poems that Moodie published five novels after moving to Canada, and that while still in England she had published numerous genre novels, two transcribed ex-slave narratives, and a collection of poems, among other publications. Even if Atwood was unaware of these publications (rather unlikely considering that in the Afterword, she names *Roughing It* and *Life in the Clearings* as Moodie's "two books about Canada," (62) signalling she is aware that there are other books), her two references to Moodie's writing in the poems are singularly disparaging.

In "Later in Belleville: Career," Atwood sarcastically acknowledges (as briefly as possible, it seems) that Moodie did in fact have a career as a writer. Atwood belittles Moodie's career, however, picturing her sitting by a "bitter candle/of oil and braided/rags" writing "verses about love and sleighbells" (47). Atwood's decision to emphasize the fact that Moodie sometimes wrote on subjects that seem trite by late twentieth-century

standards is curious. The obvious implication is that Moodie's writing career is a prime instance of the "paranoid schizophrenia" (62) Atwood diagnoses as the central fact of Moodie's life—and of Canada's as a nation. Atwood is so certain that Moodie should really have been writing about hardship and disillusionment (instead of love and sleighbells) that she blinds herself to the obviousness of her own poetic project. One might ask whether by reaching back into the nineteenth-century and plucking Susanna Moodie out of the woodwork and re-shaping her into a mythic ancestor of the Canadian condition, Atwood herself is not engaged in the same kind of wilful obfuscation she ascribes to Moodie? Surely the idea Atwood puts into Moodie's mouth at the end of the poem, "There is no use for art," is one not shared by Atwood herself. Why, then, give it to Moodie to say?

After all, it does not take a literary critic to notice that whenever Moodie mentions her own writing in *Roughing It in the Bush*, it is with relish, with pride, and with genuine concern. Writing was incredibly important to Moodie. While *Mark Hurdlestone* and *Geoffrey Moncton* may be written off as genre romances written to pay the bills, *Flora Lyndsay* and *The World Before Them* are certainly valid enough nineteenth-century literary creations, as far as technique and theme go. Should they, and all the rest of Moodie's artistic creations, be discarded wholesale just to fit Atwood's theory that Moodie's writing was forced and untrue? "I constructed/desperate paragraphs of praise," Atwood has Moodie say in "Thoughts From Underground," "and then set them up at intervals...flat as highway billboards" (55). Fundamentally pessimistic, Atwood's programmatic view of Moodie's writing career ironically comes back to haunt her as she

engages, fittingly enough, in her own programmatic late-twentieth century task of biographical influence.

The distortions on the level of poetic plot that are necessary to mould Moodie into a fitting subject of biographical influence are subtly echoed on the level of poetic structure. It is rarely noted that *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is a supremely neat book. There are three sections, called Journal I, Journal II and Journal III. In turn, each section contains nine poems. In section II there are three poems that are called Dreams. While the usual critical framework used to discuss Atwood's poems takes as a given the importance of the backward glance (Atwood going back in time to find an important truth about the current cultural situation), it is in fact the strong *forward* motion of this collection that interests me. The book's symmetry is not benignly aesthetic. I propose to read Atwood's strategy as the poetic emplotment of the classical Hegelian/Marxist dialectic. In this dialectic, Atwood pits the innocent Susanna Moodie (Journal I) against the experienced Susanna Moodie (Journal II), and ends with a synthesized ghostly Susanna Moodie who haunts Canadian culture by means of the elegant convenience of her Atwood-inscribed doubleness.

Contrary to Atwood's claim in the Afterword that "the arrangement of the poems follows, more or less, the course of Mrs. Moodie's life," (63) I believe it is closer to the truth to say that among the events of Mrs. Moodie's life, many positive and many negative, Atwood chooses a specific series of events that echo each other—usually events surrounding loss—which she then turns "inside out" (63) in order to imbue them with an anachronistic quality of distilled hauntedness. For example, the first poem in Journal II is

"Death of a Young Son By Drowning," which ends with the line "I planted him in this country/like a flag" (31). Two poems later, in "Dream I: The Bush Garden," the child's accidental death is recalled in the lines "I should have known/anything planted here/would come up blood." This example of synecdoche, the understanding of Moodie's reaction to Canada through her grief at the death of her children, mirrors the larger dialectical movement of the book, where examples of death (her children) and loss (her English life) and haunting (Brian the Still Hunter's haunting of Moodie in her old age) are all preparations for the synthesis that Atwood so famously and memorably erects. Susanna Moodie is among us still, and her example is as important today (possibly more so) than it was in her own time. The kind of imposed inevitability that is inherent in dialectic (which represents its great strength as a method of argumentation), while compelling, is, I would argue finally misleading. We do not get a balanced portrait of Moodie in Atwood's poems, but instead a dramatically satisfying portrait.

Atwood's version of Susanna Moodie is the best-known example of biographical influence in Canadian literature. It inaugurates a tradition of its own which this dissertation in turn tries to document. It is important here—near the beginning of my laying out of the evidence for the existence of this phenomenon—to record the fact that there exists an alternative to the prevailing example of biographical influence. In other words, there is at least one powerful example of a writer who follows the pattern of biographical influence I theorize only so far, and then veers off in a completely different direction. This prime example is Margaret Laurence, whose last novel, *The Diviners*, was published three years after Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. The novel's

portrait of Catharine Parr Traill, Moodie's older sister, demonstrates a completely different attitude towards the use of Canadian women writers as characters, and I would like to briefly explain the difference here.

Three things stand out in Laurence's treatment of Traill in *The Diviners*. The first is that Laurence has Morag engage Traill in conversation directly. The characters are seen to be on an equal footing, thus interrupting one of the foundational aspects of biographical influence, which is that the practitioner of biographical influence is always in a position of control, "using" the figure of the prior woman writer, but not engaging it. Laurence's Traill is the opposite. Her feistiness, as for example when she criticizes Morag, "You, if I may so so, oftentimes see imaginary dangers" (331) has the effect of deflating Atwood's Moodie, who exists solely as a channel for grief and suffering. Second, Laurence's treatment of Traill is remarkable for its humane irony, sarcasm and humour, all of which are notably missing in all the other examples of biographical influence this dissertation describes. The humour often arrives as a result of Laurence's mock stage directions in the three Traill scenes, such as "summoning ghost" or "voice distant now and fading rapidly" (331-332) which in fact serve an important thematic purpose. They underscore the artifice in the process of "using" or "calling back" the dead woman writer, which biographical influence takes seriously and for granted.

The third and most important aspect of Laurence's treatment of Traill is the way in which it ironically does not signify. Traill is not a figure for angst or guilt or psychological burden in *The Diviners*. In itself, this fact positions *The Diviners* (much like Shields's *Swann*) as a potential parody of Atwood's highly-serious psychologizing

version of literary foremothers. Although most critics of Laurence's novel feel compelled to account for the presence of Traill—knowing full well, of course, that her famous sister Moodie is freighted with meaning in texts like Atwood's—they rarely come up with a better explanation than what is obvious to a reader from reading the novel. Jill Franks, for example, concludes that "The very simplicity of [Traill's] advice appeals to Morag, who sometimes becomes mired in the plurivocality that is a natural response to the more complex era she lives in" (107). Similarly, Dick Harrison remarks on Traill's function as "both a reassurance and a spur to Morag" (147). Traill's presence in *The Diviners* is thus not a rescue effort. It is included, in quite sharp contrast to the various inclusions of women writers in examples of biographical influence, as a marker of Morag's ability to move on confidently into the future.

Despite the "corrective" of Laurence's *The Diviners*, a quarter century after the publication of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood revisits Susanna Moodie in her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*. Faye Hammill argues that Atwood has undergone a sea-change in her view of Moodie in the years between the publication of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Alias Grace*. Her evidence is a reading of *Alias Grace* that views the novel as undoing the Moodie myth propounded in the earlier poems. Just as Groening reads Atwood's poems literally in order to find evidence that Atwood's Moodie is an anachronistic and over-psychologized distortion, Hammill looks for evidence that Atwood discredits Moodie in *Alias Grace*. Hammill marshals this evidence in order to prove the somewhat suspicious point that twenty-five years later Atwood is attempting to de-mythologize the myth she herself created in her earlier book. Hammill's evidence is

that in *Alias Grace*, "Atwood includes quotations from the most dubious parts of Moodie's text, thus allowing her to condemn herself out of her own mouth" (74). What Hammill does not properly take into account is, first, that this kind of speaking out of both sides of the mouth is precisely what the myth of Moodie Atwood created in the earlier book is all about. We will recall for instance, how in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Moodie's dubious artistic decisions are repeatedly called into question as she is shown by Atwood composing "uplifting verse" (42) when the dire situation of frontier life might have called for something altogether different.

Hammill also fails to account for the fact that *Alias Grace* is deliberately structured on a principle of multivocality, like Shields's *Swann*, where numerous discourses compete for "authority." There is Grace's retelling of her own story, Simon Jordan the psychologist's interpretation of her story, the official record reflected in Atwood's numerous epigraphs (a healthy portion of which are from Moodie's *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*), among others. By definition, this sort of multivocality means (as it does in *Swann*) that there is no one absolute truth. In this sort of fictional postmodern world, "dubiousness" is actually a positive characteristic, and much less a hindrance. Countering Hammill, we might argue that in fact what *Alias Grace* does is re-mythologize Moodie—this time as a paragon of postmodern uncertainty—precisely because of the liberties she takes with Grace Marks' story. Atwood's earlier-mentioned comments about Pauline Johnson are instructive here: a good story needs a murder, needs grisly details. While the men of science in *Alias Grace* may disparage Moodie and associate her writing with hysteria, as Hammill rightly points out, this does not mean that

Atwood agrees. As Grace states clearly, "Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God's truth" (257). *Alias Grace* continues Atwood's project of biographical influence of Susanna Moodie, shifting the focus from Moodie's psychology to her writing, and as we will see below, this focus on her writing is one of the things that Carol Shields finds most compelling.

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The genesis of Shields's 1976 novel *Small Ceremonies* is shrouded in almost as much self-generated myth as the dream that led Atwood to write *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Shields has told the story of how when her M.A. thesis was successfully submitted, she still had a lot of material left over. She carefully notes that the material left over was of the speculative or subjective variety that she felt she could not include in her thesis. Already, this creation-myth leads the critic's mind towards possible interpretations of the novel. We should also keep in mind that Shields has claimed similar academic-mythic origins for her subsequent novel *Swann*. During her research for the M.A. thesis, Shields says she learned that some Moodie papers had been stolen from the library at the University of Western Ontario. Her subsequent wondering at what might happen if someone were to "monopolize this market" in Moodiana led her to write *Swann* (quoted in Wachtel 34-35). Here we can see that Shields and Atwood, and the critics and interviewers who ask them to provide this information, are fascinated with the notion of

origins. Origins, like the author-nexus I spoke of earlier and as we shall see in *Small Ceremonies*, are an integral part of biographical influence.

In *Small Ceremonies*, Judith Gill, a biographer who has met with "relative success" (6) in her first two books, decides to write her third biography on Susanna Moodie. "Most people have at least heard of her," (6) Judith claims. So begins a novel that, like her later novel *Swann*, is very much about notions of what makes good writing. Shields thematizes this concern by having four books produced in this one novel: the novelist Furlong Eberhardt's *Graven Images*, the biographer Judith Gill's Moodie book, her novel *The Magic Rocking Horse*, and the academic John Spalding's novel *Alien Interlude*. The complex and often humorous interconnections between these books are how Shields points out the foibles of the institution of literature. For example, while Judith is an accomplished biographer, she has nagging doubts about the ethics of her craft: "What I am doing is common, snoopy, vulgar...I am setting out to exhume her, searching, prying into the small seams... invading an area of existence where I've no real rights" (33-4). Still, in the scene where Judith makes fun of Furlong's new novel, because it will inevitably be formulaic like his other nine novels, Judith's daughter Meredith takes offence, claiming that "It's not supposed to be real life. It's not biography" (28). Meredith gives "that last word a nasty snap" and Shields is therefore able to establish the question of whether biography is an ethical pursuit.

The overt similarity between the un-ethical nature of biography and the un-ethical behaviour of the novelists in this novel is quite clear. Shields makes this blatantly obvious when she has Judith state that "The task of the biographer is to enlarge on

available data" (35). Indeed, Judith, along with Furlong and John Spalding will "enlarge" on the data at their disposal, which is often—and this is where the humour enters, as it does in *Swann*—because the data is stolen. Similarly, on the day Judith's children watch the televised proceedings of Princess Anne's wedding, Judith tells them the story of how she and her husband watched Princess Margaret's wedding almost twenty years earlier. The children are entranced by the story and Judith muses about how "The genes are true; my children are like me in their lust after other people's stories." This admission of the centrality of desire in literature, ties in, of course, to the way in which I see biographical influence working in Canadian literature. We need only tie this desire in to Moodie to see how Shields accomplishes the work of biographical influence this thesis describes.

Where Atwood is interested in Moodie's psychological victimhood, and then her status as writer, and where Findley, as we will see, is interested in her role as symbol of the healing power of literature, Shields has a much more personalized relationship with Moodie. For Shields, Moodie is a figure of comparison for the contemporary woman writer: Moodie wrote, raised children, and ran a household here before everyone else, and she is thus important in and of herself. Shields acknowledges Moodie as a writer of purple prose, and as worthy at least of a biography, but her real value lies in her having been in this place and lived her life. We see this most clearly in the exchange between Judith and her son Richard on the power of naming. Richard wonders why his penpal calls her parents by their first names, and Judith tells him about how Moodie called her husband by his surname, not his first name. Richard wonders why this is so, and when Judith does not have an answer, Richard says it might depend on "how she said it" (53).

This insight leads Judith into a page-long disquisition on the limitations of biography, concluding that even if biography is often two-dimensional, she would rather write two-dimensional biography than the "whorish" genre of "biographical fiction" which has no aesthetic value. Shields must know that she is writing biographical fiction in *Small Ceremonies*, and the self-consciousness of her act, her participation in what Furlong calls the "devil's work, a web of lies" (20) is part of what makes the novel so successful.

Another instance where Moodie is invoked in order to offer a comparison to Judith's own life is in the scene where she describes the pivotal letter Moodie wrote to Sir George Arthur, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, pleading for her husband to be given a government post. The fact that she kept this letter a secret from her husband is important to Judith because it offers a point of comparison for her own husband Martin, who is keeping secrets from her. Similarly, when Judith begins to suspect some sort of strange relationship between her daughter Meredith and the thieving novelist Furlong, she invokes Moodie again, and her ability to find "her own way out" (123) of desperate situations. There is a sense in which Judith is demonstrating her thanks to Moodie for her usefulness in times of crisis by writing her biography. The language Shields uses is instructive here. "I am putting the finishing touches on Susanna Moodie," (152) she remarks towards the end of the novel, and later Furlong asks Judith, "How is Susanna Moodie these days?" (173). The assumption that the book and the woman are the same thing, as if by a figure of rhetoric Judith may be said to be creating not just Moodie's biography but Moodie herself, is Shields's brand of biographical influence. This becomes apparent in *Swann*, where Mary Swann is literally created by scholars and admirers.

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At the end of Atwood's book of poems, Susanna Moodie rides a bus along St. Clair Avenue. This is a talismanic locale in the Atwood corpus, as we saw earlier in *The Blind Assassin*. In others of Atwood's works, this street is invoked because of the numerous psychiatric offices that once lined it near Avenue Road. This street is equally associated with the ravine that lies underneath it at its eastern end near Mount Pleasant Avenue. These two components—the ravine and the street above it—are parts of an oft-repeated equation in the literary geography of Toronto.⁶ Ravines equal madness and irrationality, and the street equals rationality and what is proper. In *Headhunter*, Timothy Findley employs a similar equation, summoning Susanna Moodie in another talismanic Toronto location well-known to readers of his and Atwood's fiction: The Queen Street Mental Health Centre. The ravines are also present in Findley's novel, and the city's literary geography is further refined to account for the difference between back alleys where madness reigns and streets proper where madness is repressed. What is instructive is the overarching trope of mental illness, which Atwood invokes in her Afterword, and upon which Findley builds his entire novel.

The protagonist of *Headhunter*, Lilah Kemp, is a schizophrenic ex-librarian who has the ability to summon forth characters from literature into the real world. Her latest escapee is Kurtz from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The plot of the novel turns on the coincidence that the Director of the Parkin Institute, the city's leading mental health

research centre, is also named Kurtz. Findley's alignment of the novelist's art with the delusions suffered by schizophrenics points towards the pathological nature of biographical influence, which I mentioned briefly in the Introduction. As the narrator of Findley's novel notes, speaking of Moodie: "Up to that moment, she had been contained in the books she had written: *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*" (42-3). Now, however, Findley and his character Lilah Kemp summon up Moodie for their own purposes. She is transformed from a writer whose "books had come to be accepted as classics of their kind" (43) and becomes a living conduit to the past.

In a novel that is about the evil desires rampant in contemporary society (pedophilia, child abuse), it is instructive that Findley makes the case for the power of literature to combat this evil. Marlow, the "good" doctor in this novel who will eventually bring down Kurtz the "evil doctor," uses a unique approach with his patients, "literature as psychotherapy" (131). Findley brings together the schizophrenic heroine in the novel, Lilah Kemp, with her ability to summon literary characters of the past, and Marlow, a rational man of science who likewise uses literature to help cure the mentally ill, into a species of detective duo. This thematization through character of the relevance of art to science is one of the ways Findley makes the case for the overwhelming relevance of literature in a world that often views it as a byproduct, an unnecessary frill. Thus the importance in *Headhunter* of Nicholas Fagan, the Irish literary scholar (and possibly thinly-veiled version of Northrop Frye), who tells Lilah when she is his student that "Life and love... are twin ephemera—but words can tell of them forever" (191). In this

Findleyian universe, it comes as no surprise that Susanna Moodie should be invoked and enlisted in the battle against evil.

Running as a counterpoint to the theme of evil in the novel is a manifold representation of motherhood. Varieties of mothers in this novel include Eloise Wiley, the regretful mother; Olivia Price, the undecided mother-to-be; Eleanor Farjeon, the den-mother to the traumatized children; Lilah Kemp, metaphorical mother with her baby carriage as prop; the unnamed ghost mother who haunts Marlow's house looking for her dead son; and of course Susanna Moodie, who lives underground at the Queen Street Mental Health Centre, also searching for her drowned son. What Findley is suggesting by providing so many different examples of motherhood is its profound importance and at the same time the profound pain to which it often leads. We may at this point want to recall the arguments made earlier by Heather Murray about the importance of women in the Canadian tradition. I think the relevance of Susanna Moodie to *Headhunter* is precisely the type of motherhood she represents. She represents a motherhood that refuses to be regretful. In this stance, she becomes an embodiment of Findley's view of fiction, which he puts into the character Marlow's words:

This way, he thought, we write each other's lives—by means of fictions.

Sustaining fictions. Uplifting fictions. Lies. This way, we lead one another toward survival. This way we point the way to darkness—saying: come with me into the light (438).

Findley's theory of fiction—that it describes what is worst in us in order to enable us to grasp what is best—is moral in the extreme.⁷ Unlike Davies, who views art as a

laudable goal on its own, Atwood, who views art as a means of obfuscation, and Shields, who shows art also to be a means of complicating rather than simplifying our lives, Findley holds out for a transformative view of art. By virtue of having survived the pioneer experience and the death of her son and having lived to write about it, Moodie becomes for Findley a prime candidate for biographical influence.

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In conclusion, I would stress once again that Susanna Moodie's canonization via biographical influence is not the traditional canonization one expects to find in literary studies. Traditional canonization is achieved through the perceived and demonstrated aesthetic merits of a literary work over a significant period of time. Canonization in the Canadian context, as practiced by most of the writers discussed in this chapter, is completely different. In the case of Moodie, her writings themselves are only a pretext for a canonization based on the lived facts of the woman writer's life. In this sense, canonization through biographical influence is akin to hagiography more than to literary canonization. Susanna Moodie, a woman, lived here and wrote here, and for Davies, Atwood, Shields and Findley, among others, that is distinction enough.

Chapter Five

The Triumph of Life Over Art: The Case of Gwendolyn MacEwen

1.

November 30, 2002 is a cold late autumn night. It is also the fifteenth anniversary of the death of Gwendolyn MacEwen. In a small west-end Toronto art gallery, located less than a ten minutes' walk from the site of the house in which MacEwen grew up, I am participating in a slightly macabre, though apparently celebratory event. The gallery has organized an evening of readings and a silent auction in order to raise money to fund the casting of a bas-relief of Gwendolyn MacEwen. The sculpture will eventually stand in the Gwendolyn MacEwen parkette on Walmer Road in the Annex neighbourhood MacEwen called home for many years. Attending the event are poets and writers I recognize; members of the current Toronto literary scene. Tonight's event, headlined by playwright Claudia Dey and poet Christian Bök, is one of a series of fundraising events culminating in a black-tie auction later in December, at which MacEwen biographer Rosemary Sullivan is the featured speaker.

There is a claustrophobic atmosphere in the two-roomed gallery. On one wall hang photos of MacEwen taken by her friend Mac Reynolds, whose iconic photos of the poet grace the cover of Sullivan's award-winning biography, *Shadow Maker*. On a facing wall is a portrait drawn in pastel by well-known Canadian artist Charles Pachter.

Margaret Atwood hovers about the room, not literally, but as a presence through three of her books that will be auctioned off. Though not donated by Atwood, their very presence signals an important acknowledged relationship between MacEwen and Atwood which will be discussed below. Most eerie of all, just beneath the window that faces Dundas Street is a glass case that holds two pairs of MacEwen's earrings. In case those of us in attendance are unsure about the authenticity of the earrings, two photos are placed directly behind each pair of earrings. In each photo, MacEwen stares out at the viewer, wearing the earrings in question. Capping off the flood of authenticity, the auction list states that documentation on the earrings is provided "upon request." The donor of the earrings is the author's estate. In fact, the overall effect of the event is not unlike an estate sale. We are here to bid on bits of Gwendolyn MacEwen, even as she stares at us from the walls that surround us.

The combination of the fact that the event is held on the anniversary of the poet's death, with the overly-familiar tone of the auction's literature and publicity material—MacEwen is referred to variously as "Gwen" and "Gwendy"—leads me to an unmistakable conclusion. It is that a tone of expiation of guilt lurks over the room. By holding this event, the feeling in the room seems to say, we can assuage our collective guilt over the fact that Gwendolyn MacEwen is dead, and that we did not accord her her due while she lived. This conclusion does not really come as a surprise, either, as all my readings of biographical influence featuring MacEwen—in Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Rosemary Sullivan, Linda Griffiths and Claudia Dey—have pointed in the same direction; have left the exact same tone. The challenge of this chapter and of my readings

of examples of biographical influence featuring MacEwen comes back to the same set of questions each time: how does one write critically about an author whose life story verges on hagiography? How does one re-instate criticism when criticism has been hijacked by biography? How does one account for the fact that there is so little criticism to begin with? And how does one explain the gulf between the great amount of importance ascribed and reverence paid to the life, and the relative paucity of interest accorded to the art?

These are troubling questions, and this dissertation does not ask them lightly or rhetorically. I hope to provide at least partial answers to all these questions in this chapter. Some basic facts will be in order before we begin to look at the career of Gwendolyn MacEwen and the posthumous examples of biographical influence that have recently made use of her. A recent check of both leading Canadian retail book Web sites, Amazon and Chapters-Indigo, reveals that there are fewer than four books by MacEwen currently in print.¹ None of these are MacEwen's works of fiction. The only easily-accessed books that make MacEwen's work available to the reading public today are the two volumes of poetry published by Exile Editions in the 1990s. Subtitled *The Early Years* and *The Later Years*, these editions impose, through their titles as well as their editorial apparatus, a framework of biographical influence upon MacEwen's work. The publisher of Exile Editions, Barry Callaghan, himself a friend of MacEwen's, chooses another friend of the poet, Margaret Atwood, to provide the introduction to the first volume. The introduction to the second volume is written by MacEwen biographer Rosemary Sullivan. MacEwen's work is thus presented to the reader in the careful— one

might venture to say the official—context that has come to be the only context she can be presented in: the biographical.

A similar search of the Modern Language Association's bibliographical index and the University of Toronto's library catalogue yields the somewhat startling fact that there are only between ten and fifteen citations (depending on how one counts)² over the past thirty years, to critical works on MacEwen. The amount of critical work done on MacEwen is incredibly small. It is much smaller, I argue, than might be reasonably expected, given the amount of interest in MacEwen's life, as evinced by the examples of biographical influence we shall be examining below. A closer look at the critical work that does exist reveals another important fact: critical interest in MacEwen appears to be fixated solely on the earlier mythological poems. Her dramatic writing and iconoclastic fiction have not been examined by academics in anywhere near the same amount of detail. The fact that the vast majority of MacEwen's work is out of print can be explained to some degree using economy of scale arguments about the Canadian publishing and book retailing industries. It is much more difficult, however, to rationalize away the critical void in which MacEwen, the well-known subject of biographical influence, finds herself floating somewhat mysteriously.

2.

Gwendolyn MacEwen was born in Toronto in 1941, and died there forty-six years later. Like Moodie, she too has her memorials. The parkette mentioned above, inaugurated in

1996 by the City of Toronto, stands in official recognition of her place in Canadian literature. It is interesting to note that in the same neighbourhood, about three blocks away, is another literary memorial, bp Nichol Lane. The two poets were contemporaries, and Nichol died of cancer only one year after MacEwen's own death from a rapid withdrawal after a bout of binge drinking. The geographical proximity of the memorials is of less interest to me than the subtle but significantly different reaction to the respective poets' deaths these two memorials stand for. The Nichol monument is metonymically linked to the writer's own work: it is truly a fitting memorial. The imbedded brass letters in bp Nichol Lane off Huron St. are of a piece with that poet's career: one is forced to walk on them, to interact with them, in the same way his poetry forced a reaction by its very concreteness. In contrast, the standard-issue City of Toronto Department of Parks and Recreation parkette sign that reads "Gwendolyn MacEwen Parkette" is anything but fitting. It lacks individuality and it does not engage with the populace at all, located as it is in a patch of land that pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists alike zoom by on their way somewhere else.

MacEwen's parkette is, however, of a piece with her *posthumous* career. Nichol's posthumous reputation is muted to say the least, consisting of the reprinting of some of his works in new editions, and the far-from-mainstream academic scrutiny of a few of his friends and fellow poets who are also academics.³ MacEwen's posthumous reputation, in contrast, is close to eclipsing the popularity she enjoyed at the high points of her career when she was alive. I read the City of Toronto parkette symbolically, therefore, as one of a series of other very public, very well publicized stamps of approval MacEwen has been

accorded by some of the heavyweights in the Can Lit pantheon, including Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, and Rosemary Sullivan, among others. An even finer distinction must be made, however. Not only is MacEwen's posthumous reputation significantly better publicized than Nichol's, but also the channels through which this reputation is solidified are significant. Nichol's posthumous reputation can be said to be congruent with his career while alive: small-press based and alternative. MacEwen's posthumous reputation on the other hand has taken place on a much more commercial level than her career while she was alive. Well-known actresses star in plays about MacEwen, broadcasters commission documentaries, large publishing houses publish biographies. What factors have caused this change?

In this chapter I argue that the main factor in causing this change is MacEwen's gender. It is her femaleness that has made her posthumous reputation so great. Our brief foray into Susanna Moodie's biography foregrounded some deconstructive levers where we could see the official biography glossing over significant parts of her life in order to create myth. This dynamic is at work just as pervasively in MacEwen's official biography, by which I mean not only the Sullivan biography *Shadow Maker*, but also as in the works of biographical influence in which MacEwen appears as a character. These works tend to simplify, gloss over, magnify or ignore significant aspects of MacEwen's life in order to create the mythical figure of the woman martyr-writer.

A review of Claudia Dey's recent play *The Gwendolyn Poems*, published in the Toronto weekly alternative newspaper, *eye magazine*, is particularly telling in this vein. Reviewer Kamal Al-Solaylee acknowledges in the first line of the piece that the

MacEwen story is mythical, and that this myth is artificially created: "Even when mired in alcoholism and poverty and surrounded by death, the life of a poet has an intrinsic (if misleading) romantic appeal." Al-Solaylee's opinion that such myths are "misleading" leads him to label Dey's play "an intellectual exercise in deconstructing the mythology of MacEwen."⁴ Ironically, in a profile of the playwright published in the same magazine two weeks before the play's opening, Gord McLaughlin informs his readers that Dey's inspiration was the poet's biography, not her writing. "Dey first read about her life in the biography *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen*, by Rosemary Sullivan," McLaughlin writes, "Only afterward did she begin to read the poet's work." Dey resists this opportunistic reading of her interest in MacEwen by claiming that in fact her reading is based on "the work before the life."

The language McLaughlin subsequently uses to describe Dey's defense of her artistic motives is fascinating: "Dey... wanted to resist any Plath-of-least-resistance urges to reduce MacEwen's story to tragic melodrama." He then quotes Dey: "I would never want [MacEwen] to fall into that camp of poet. It's too easy. Her aspirations, her imaginings were much more expansive than that." In a subtle and easily overlooked rhetorical move, McLaughlin has managed to align MacEwen with Plath, and at the same time, by letting Dey's opinion go without comment, has managed to denigrate Plath, presumably because her poetry is seen as secondary to her tumultuous life. That the mythological quality of MacEwen's posthumous existence should become such common knowledge as to become the focus of a weekly entertainment tabloid is telling. While Al-Solaylee and McLaughlin both bemoan the existence of the "myth" because it gets in the

way of the more important consideration of MacEwen the poet, they do not once question why the vehicle for what they claim as Dey's deconstruction of the myth, has to be a biographical play.

This extended detour through one example of the way MacEwen's "myth" has been purveyed is by way of proposing a way out of the trap of seeing MacEwen solely through her biography. We could do this by deconstructing the received biography to show that it is not "love-crossed and booze-soaked" and full of astonishing singularities, as McLaughlin aptly sums up in his piece on Dey, but rather, that it is a typical twentieth-century writer's biography that has gained currency only because the poet has died, and is missed. Where the deconstructive levers in the case of Moodie included her under-examined writing career and personal politics, I would venture that MacEwen's unhappy family life and upbringing, as well as her vivid dream-life, are exaggerated for effect in her popular biography.

3.

The pro forma publisher's disclaimer contains particular irony, or perhaps poignancy, in the case of Margaret Atwood's 1986 collection of short stories, *Wilderness Tips*. The disclaimer states that "characters in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons... is coincidental" (iv). Even a cursory reading of "Isis in Darkness," however, puts the lie to this statement. One might argue that readers, having become so inured to the legalities of such disclaimers in the age of the internet, celebrity and reality TV, are

no longer equipped to understand clearly the distinction implied in the disclaimer. One might also propose that the correspondent "disclaimer" that holds sway in English departments, about the absolute necessity of separating fiction and real life, is similarly in question these days. For doesn't Margaret Atwood allow herself to be quoted in Rosemary Sullivan's biography of Gwendolyn MacEwen (discussed below), as saying that "The story was written as a thinly disguised tribute" (102)? What are the pedagogical and epistemological implications of the paradox of this situation? Do we believe the disclaimer or do we bypass it as an arcane formality that no one believes anymore anyway? Do we believe Atwood's statement about the singularly biographical genesis of the story, or do we teach it to our students instead as an example of the late twentieth-century Canadian short story? What is more right? What is more useful?

What saves these questions from being merely rhetorical is the fact that "Isis in Darkness" is not only a prime example of biographical influence—the fictionalizing of a woman writer's life in the service of her posthumous reputation. It is at the same time a story that calls into question a specific type of dominant epistemology: that which is perhaps stereotypically practiced in the university English department. Richard, the main character in Atwood's story, is a university professor who teaches at an unfashionable suburban campus, has a miserable publishing record, faces daily the threat of being fired, and enjoys a dreary personal life to boot. In other words, he is prime Atwood (and Shields) material: a male figure of humour and pathos who can be used not so subtly as a ventriloquist's dummy to propound the author's own ideas about the morass of contemporary academic and literary culture. Naturally, as a novelist and artist Atwood is

not a critic (as she is always at pains to remind her interviewers and readers⁵), and so we must (we are told) treat stories like "Isis in Darkness" as fiction, and the ideas propounded therein solely as those of the narrator and characters. Hopefully it is clear by now that like the "fiction" of the publisher's disclaimer, this separation between author/artist and critic, is of the most artificial variety. One could in fact argue, as has Faye Hammill, that Atwood's signal contribution to Canadian literature is a set of highly entertaining fictions and poems that are structured around an ongoing commentary about Canada's literary culture. Agreeing wholeheartedly with Hammill, I want to go the extra distance and ask what the implications of Atwood's fiction-criticism are for those of us who consider ourselves professional critics of Canadian literature?

The character Atwood creates in "Isis in Darkness" that might help us answer this question is Richard. Richard is a spectator to the life of Selena, the poet who is Atwood's thinly disguised "tribute" to MacEwen. Richard's profession of professor of English is summed up by Atwood in this description: "Dead poets were his business, living ones his vice" (65). The meaning is clear: the professional study of literature is a vampirical activity. Richard's dissertation and the two essays he manages to publish in his not-quite stellar academic career have titles that play on this vampirical quality.⁶ His dissertation is on "graphic imagery *in* John Donne," (65) and his papers are on "witchcraft *as* sexual metaphor" and "The Pilgrim's Progress *and* architecture." (66 emphases added) The syntax Atwood employs to describe these academic projects is telling: literature is always conjoined or subsumed by some construct that the academic foists upon it. Like the academic vultures that descend on Laura Chase's grave in Atwood's most recent novel

The Blind Assassin, in this earlier story Atwood is already seen to be working on what we might fairly call a stock character in her later fiction, the disenchanted academic.

The disenchanted academic is an important bit player in the larger drama of biographical influence, for he or she allows the author (whether it's Atwood or Shields or Findley) to comment on the construction of literary tradition and reputation while still maintaining the guise of "artistic" objectivity. The convolutions that are necessary in this sort of stance are full of irony. Shields's construction of a Moodie biographer in *Small Ceremonies* is willfully ironic, when we consider that Shields herself had just finished her own academic thesis on Moodie. Atwood's construction of a Selena/MacEwen academic in "Isis in Darkness," is just as willfully ironic, considering that Atwood herself was one of MacEwen's earliest academic critics, as well as possibly the most pre-eminent among the people who "will have a place in [MacEwen's] mythology" (73) as she sarcastically writes of Richard. What interests me here is precisely the double standard propounded by these novelists that says that when critics write about writers, it's vampirical and greed-filled and hollow, but that when novelists and biographers do the same thing, it's a "tribute" or an elegy or a token of respect. The double standard is complicated by the fact that a number of Canadian writers who employ biographical influence in their creative works have also at some point in their careers participated in the same project only wearing the cap of the academic.

Just as Timothy Findley will claim that MacEwen issued warnings about her imminent death in *Inside Memory* (see discussion below), Atwood has Selena/MacEwen relay a warning about her imminent death to Richard: "'Change and decay in all around I

see,' she said, smiling in a way he did not like at all. 'I'm not prepared for eternity'" (72). These warnings, like the prognostications of female seers in a Shakespeare tragedy, become one of the stock elements in the nexus of biographical influence on MacEwen. It is as if the guilt that Rosemary Sullivan describes MacEwen's friends and fellow writers as feeling about her early death and the lack of recognition paid to her during her life, becomes focused in the singular act—an act laden with literary/rhetorical power—of MacEwen warning people about her death. The inability of anyone to do anything despite these warnings—"[Richard] wanted to shake her, enfold her, lead her to safety, wherever that might be" (72)—leads to a numbing paralysis. One of the ways out of this paralysis, as we have seen time and again, is to write about it. Thus the ending of "Isis in Darkness" is particularly telling. Richard decides that he will write about Selena, not "to cover his professional ass" but "because she's the one thing left he still values, or wants to write about. She is his last hope" (73). Selena/MacEwen is the *deus ex machina* that allows Richard's empty life to have new meaning.

It is unclear whether Atwood actually believes such redemption is possible. In a story full of ironies, is not the ultimate irony that we find out about Richard's life-affirming decision to write about Selena/MacEwen, in a story that is *already written about* Selena/ MacEwen? In other words, Atwood valorizes Richard's proposed writing about Selena/MacEwen because it will not be for academic gain. At the same time, his epiphany takes place in a story that has already patently exploited the myth of MacEwen to achieve its aims. Atwood's sly comments at the end of the story about how Selena has "become newly respectable" now "that she's dead" (73) are once again ironic. They are

ironic not only because Atwood is the writer who inaugurates biographical influence on MacEwen (as she did on Moodie), but also because in others of her works (for example *The Blind Assassin* and her review of Plath's *Johnny Panic and the Book of Dreams*) she writes damningly about the insatiable need of academics to build shrines to the life of dead women writers. The fundamental artistic dishonesty in Atwood's position is simple: as an artist she wants to be able to write about dead writers, but she wants to prohibit non-"artists" (i.e., academics) from exercising the same prerogative.

Possibly Atwood had read one of MacEwen's late poems, "You Can Study It If You Want," which rather one-sidedly exudes utter exasperation at the scholarly pursuit of the study of poetry. "You can study it if you want," writes MacEwen, but "Poetry has got nothing to do with *poetry*./*Poetry* is how the air goes green before thunder,/is the sound you make when you come, and/why you live and how you bleed, and/The sound you make or don't make when you die" (*Afterworlds* 35). MacEwen's exasperation is echoed in the next poem in the collection, "Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear," where she warns, "Do not think for one minute it is the Poem that matters./It is not the Poem that matters./You can shove the poem./What matters is what is out there in the large dark/And in the long light,/Breathing" (*Afterworlds* 36). Clearly what is being set up here by MacEwen is a violent duality between "first-hand experience" and "vampirism." MacEwen values the doing of poetry, the living of life, whereas those she writes against want only to value the end result, the poem on the page. In a similar manner, Atwood, as the foremost representative of biographical influence, wants to valorize creative above critical or academic writing, solely, it would seem, to bolster her own claims to truth

when it comes to figures like Susanna Moodie and Gwendolyn MacEwen. The irony that both MacEwen and Atwood were and are in their own way inveterate scholars of poetry, is disregarded.

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The thread of biographical influence runs visibly through Timothy Findley's 1993 novel *Headhunter*. Not only is Susanna Moodie brought back to life there, but Gwendolyn MacEwen also inhabits the novel, in the character of the mad poet Amy Wylie. An important antecedent to Findley's novel is his 1990 book *Inside Memory*, a memoir-cum-scrapbook in which he reminisces about important people, places and events in his life, especially about fellow Canadian writers. Findley writes about the death of MacEwen with particular poignancy. The language he uses is carefully chosen: "she had stripped her life to the bare essentials—her poverty was absolute and, having given fair warning in her last book, *Afterworlds*, she made her final moves and gestures, went into the dark and died there."⁷ (295) Findley's skillful triple implication is that MacEwen chose to end her life, that she left clues to this fact in her poetry, and that in her death she resembled the animals—"went into the dark and died there"—she cared for so much. From this passage in *Inside Memory* we can conclude that Findley approves of the notion that there exists a direct link between MacEwen's poetry and her life. As we will see in our subsequent readings of examples of biographical influence that use MacEwen, Findley's and Atwood's acceptance of this idea becomes a virtual template for all the writers who use

MacEwen. The pretense involved in distancing the author's work from the author's life that was so important to Atwood in the discussion earlier involving her own celebrity, is seen to fall apart when it comes to discussions—even by the most highly-regarded scholars—of MacEwen. With MacEwen the life *is* everything.

In an earlier section of *Inside Memory*, Findley is interviewed by his partner William Whitehead. Whitehead asks Findley about an important theme in his work, that of madness. Findley tells Whitehead that the preoccupation with madness stems from a childhood incident where a well-loved female relative was institutionalized. This woman's importance in Findley's life and work comes down to the fact that "the 'mad'... don't tell lies. So this is why I seize so often upon these people as the heroes of my work... they have this straight, flung-out connection through the mind to some kind of absolute clarity" (181). The ironical use of the mad as purveyors of the ultimate truths is not of course an invention of Findley's. However, I would propose that the alignment of this madness to the figure of the woman, and thence to the figure of the homosexual, is Findley's signal contribution to this well-known literary trope.⁸ The clarity Findley speaks of in relation to the mad has its correlation in *Headhunter* in the figures of Amy Wylie and the double Findley creates for her, her gay cousin named Icarus, who kills himself because of the pressures of homophobia in his life. Subjected in one scene to a new invasive psychological test by her family, Amy says she is "learning to fly" (392). Doctor Marlow then makes the connection between Amy and her cousin clear: "the image of Amy flying was attached... vividly to the image of Icarus, her cousin. Both, now, went climbing in his mind and one of them would fall" (392).

A deconstructive lever found in Sullivan's biography will be useful in explaining the significance of the aligning of Amy and her homosexual cousin. In a section of her biography on MacEwen's brief relationship in 1960 with Joe Blumenthal, Rosemary Sullivan remarks that there was a hotel around Bay and Queen streets where "Gwen would go to meet her transvestite friend whom she called Shelley, though his real name was Gordon" (77). On the authority of Blumenthal, Sullivan then concludes that MacEwen was "oddly fascinated by homosexual culture" (77). What fascinates me in turn about this casually mentioned, but never again taken-up revelation, is the position of homosexuality as rhetorical figure in the MacEwen biography, in the Findley novel *Headhunter*, and in biographical influence more generally. By casting it as a rhetorical figure—not unlike euphemism or synecdoche—I am pointing to homosexuality's convenient malleability. Amy's cousin Icarus does not have to be fully fleshed out as a character by Findley because the presupposition on the author's part is that homosexual equals suffering. Thus, Findley's comparison of Amy to Icarus subsumes any integrity that the category homosexual might itself have, and transfers that valence to the subject of biographical influence. Homosexuality and the implied suffering inherent in that category becomes a building block in Findley's toolshed of biographical influence.

In both Findley's novel and Sullivan's biography, homosexuals are not accorded character status. We never hear from MacEwen's friend Shelley, but we do ironically learn a lot from Joe Blumenthal, Charles Pachter and Timothy Findley, the biography's "invisible" gay men. These shadowy homosexual presences ironically mirror the very world Findley is describing in *Headhunter*: a city of homosexuals (as well as sexual

predators and deviants) hidden behind the silencing walls of Rosedale propriety. After Sullivan's singular early mention of MacEwen's fascination with homosexual culture, the only other inference of homosexuality in the biography comes in the passage where Sullivan describes the end of the Blumenthal-MacEwen relationship. We are told, primly, that "theirs was never a sexual relationship" (79). Sullivan will not venture any further than to claim homosexuality as a fascination of MacEwen's. The secrecy with which homosexuality is treated is doubly ironic in a biography that makes a great deal out of the various "secrets Gwendolyn hoarded" (Sullivan xv). The ironies are, first, that homosexuality—arguably the most obvious of secrets—should remain secreted in this biography, and second, that all the other "secrets" Sullivan discovers (alcoholism, promiscuity, madness, possible sexual abuse) she subsequently names and discusses in minute detail. Even Sullivan's brief mention of bisexuality in reference to MacEwen's early novel *Julian the Magician*, for instance, has more to do with Jungian psychology than with the experiences (Shelley the transvestite friend) Sullivan has brought up earlier.

The fact that homosexuality should be so stubbornly and obviously nebulous—for instance, well known homosexuals Charles Pachter and Timothy Findley are mentioned and quoted repeatedly by Sullivan without any reference to their sexuality—and so present at the same time—homosexuality is a "fascination" of MacEwen's—is my evidence for reading homosexuality as a profoundly unstable category.⁹ In turn, the reason why the availability of homosexuality for comparison and substitution signifies so importantly in the world of biographical influence I have been describing, is that it represents on a micro-level precisely what biographical influence accomplishes so well

on a large scale. That is, one way of reading the incessant "writing in" of Susanna Moodie and Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther into contemporary fiction, poetry and drama, is to read these attempts as rhetorical interventions—substitutions—in the larger narrative of Canadian literary tradition and canonicity. In this argument, the desire for a Canadian literature where neglected women writers are given their due, is profoundly ironic, because the way in which this desire is fulfilled is through the wholesale appropriation of the actual historical figures themselves, into works of literature. We will see in the next chapter the ethical dilemmas this has created for some writers. Figures like Moodie and MacEwen and Lowther are substituted, as in euphemism and synecdoche, for a different truth.

Findley's alignment of MacEwen and homosexuality in *Headhunter*, against a fictional background where secrecy is the major theme, is more than just ironic, it is instructive. This alignment is a good example of the power of literature to reduce everything in its path through subtle comparisons and metaphors. The important comparisons involved in *Headhunter*, I argue, are between the figure of biographical influence (MacEwen and her stand-in Amy Wylie) and the homosexual (Wylie's cousin Icarus). There is just as important a comparison, however, between the figure of biographical influence and the novel's various victims (abused children and stray animals). The common denominator, as mentioned above, is that the figure of biographical influence equals suffering. Homosexuals, abused children and stray animals just happen to be Findley's comparisons of choice. The novel is structured upon three major plots. First, there is the secret cabal of powerful men who drug children and force

them into performing sexual acts while they watch and take pictures. Next are the secret goings-on at the Parkin Institute, Toronto's preeminent psychiatric facility, where a cover-up happens when the children from the first plot are supposedly being taken care of, but actually being further victimized. Finally, there is the frame-story of Lilah Kemp, a schizophrenic ex-librarian who gives us the clues we need to solve the mysteries and unearth the secrets, using classic works of literature such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as her tool of deduction.

The purveyors of biographical influence who use MacEwen, including Findley, are conscious of this power that literature has to create through comparison. Consequently, these writers fall into three camps: they either approve of this power of literature, as in Findley and Atwood; they try to criticize and resist it, as in Griffiths and Dey; or else they sit on the fence, as in Sullivan—aware of the power, yet unable to let it go. The transcendental quality Findley ascribes to literature, its ability to heal, its ability to right wrongs, is concretized in the plot line involving Amy. Unlike all the other examples of biographical influence on MacEwen, where MacEwen or the MacEwen-character dies in the end, in Findley's *Headhunter*, Amy does not die. She comes home from the Parkin Institute, on her own terms, and returns to her life of saving stray cats and poisoned birds. In a sense, Findley's fictional ending is the most truthful. Like MacEwen, who cannot die by virtue of her constant reincarnations via biographical influence, Amy Wylie continues to live in the Toronto that Findley created and which will also not go away as long as his books continue to be read.

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A number of literary biographies published in Canada in the past two decades have attracted a large amount of popular as well as scholarly attention. Elspeth Cameron's *Irving Layton: A Portrait* (1985) became surrounded in controversy when its subject, Irving Layton, publicly stated that Cameron's book misrepresented him. James King's *The Life of Margaret Laurence* contained the secret information that one of Canada's best-loved writers had committed suicide. Perhaps only Rosemary Sullivan, in her Governor-General's Award-nominated biography of Gwendolyn MacEwen entitled *Shadow Maker*, has had a more lasting effect. Not only has her biography gone on to inspire a documentary film, but two playwrights, Linda Griffiths and Claudia Dey, have stated their gratitude to Sullivan in print in the published versions of their hit plays. It is not a far-fetched claim to say that Sullivan's *Shadow Maker*, like Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* to Susanna Moodie, is now the most common way in which readers come to know MacEwen. As a corollary, Sullivan has become a figure of authority for anyone who deals with MacEwen.¹⁰ The ethical questions that arise in biography, and which are well detailed for example in Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, are especially pronounced in Sullivan's *Shadow Maker*, and in the general situation surrounding MacEwen's posthumous place in Canadian literature. Taking to heart, perhaps, the ending of Atwood's "Isis in Darkness," where Selena/MacEwen is seen to generate a wave of academic opportunism through her death, Sullivan makes sure to pepper her

biography with asides and passages where she carefully meditates on the pros and cons of the project in which she is engaged.

I read the main tension (and the main attraction) in contemporary literary-critical biography as being between the need to provide details about and interpretations of a writer's life, against the knowledge that too much prurience, too much make-believe, inevitably backfires. Flashpoints in this debate have included the numerous biographies of Sylvia Plath, where a veritable battle between the author's estate and the author's many biographers has erupted, as well as the controversial fictionalized biographies of Peter Ackroyd, where "fact" is supplemented by fiction.¹¹ In a literary culture that thrives on prurience, but which censors it at the same time, what this means is that the perfect subject of literary biography is often the same as the perfect subject for biographical influence: the woman writer who can be seen as victim. When murder and other tragedies (to paraphrase Atwood in the Sandra Martin article quoted earlier) do not figure prominently in a writer's life, does this not automatically mean that that writer's life is less prone to being canonized by virtue of being less amenable to biography? Just as important as these questions about the ethical status of literary-critical biography, I would argue, is the fact that these questions obscure the declining importance of criticism in critical biographies. In the no-doubt difficult editorial discussions between biographer and publisher over what can and what cannot be said (e.g., Sullivan never comes out and calls MacEwen's death a suicide, even though all the examples of biographical influence, and her publisher's own jacket-copy writers, seem to think so), interpretation of the actual writing is often left out or greatly diminished. Certainly, as I will argue below, in

the case of Sullivan's *Shadow Maker*, the biographer's critical responsibility suffers at the expense of MacEwen's life.

Sullivan's biography opens with an Introduction that is actually a hybrid of authentication-text and *apologia biographica*. By authentication-text I refer to that species of critical writing which, like the opening paragraph of this chapter, uses the first person singular, and more importantly, somehow allies the subject matter of the criticism at hand (MacEwen) to the critic's own life.¹² Where I chose to discuss the silent auction I attended as an *entrée* to my examination of the way biographical influence works in the case of MacEwen, Sullivan chooses to discuss her acquaintance with MacEwen dating back to the early 1980s. While it is not my intention to be cynical about what I call authentication-texts, I do want to point out that we need to be alert to the fact that they are *texts*, with decipherable motivations and meanings. While the authentication-text is deployed in the guise of the anecdote, in fact what it is intended to do is to accrue authority to the critic. I will make a number of criticisms of Sullivan below, but her skill at accruing authority with her readers is not to be questioned. Phrases like "the last time I saw her was in the late spring of 1987" or "then the story surfaced of her last appearance... at a November poetry reading at The Bamboo Club on Queen Street in the middle of a Toronto blizzard. I hadn't gone" (xi) function not only to inform us that Sullivan knew MacEwen, but also that Sullivan's knowledge of MacEwen is personal and other than simply academic. The implication of a feeling of guilt after MacEwen's death hangs over this book: its author is both story teller and participant. This is precisely the dual position the character Richard hopes to attain in Atwood's "Isis in Darkness."

The twin to Sullivan's dual friend/critic rhetorical strategy, which is so successful in disarming readers, is the strategy I have called *apologia biographica*. By this I mean that Sullivan takes it upon herself to repeatedly comment on and question the epistemological status of the book she is writing throughout the book itself. At one point, for example, Sullivan claims she will not "pretend, as biographers sometimes do, that one can turn a childhood into a seamless narrative... forty years after the fact and [construct] a childhood from the multiple versions of the survivors who are left behind" (xiii). On the next page, she appears to contradict herself when she states that biography should "try to match what we do to our own lives. We live our lives as narratives..." (xiv). Sullivan's competing desires to tell a story and not to look like the authority in telling *this* particular story, disrupt *Shadow Maker* in numerous places. For example, when she searches out one of MacEwen's lovers in Montreal, Sullivan stops herself short. "I reflected—," she writes, "who was I to walk into his life carrying a piece of his past that had gone missing?—and yet, when I had gathered my nerve, I phoned" (177). The important fact is that Sullivan always manages to "gather her nerve." No stone, no matter how ethically questionable, is left unturned.

This is especially true when we come to the contentious part of Sullivan's biography, her strongly-implied allegations of sexual abuse during MacEwen's childhood. Unlike Plath and Woolf, some of whose biographers have been the centers of furious controversy as a result of their discussions of spousal and child abuse, similar allegations by Sullivan have not made the headlines. Interestingly, while both Linda Griffiths and Claudia Dey rely on Sullivan's biography to write their plays (see below) neither chooses

to go anywhere near the biggest "secret" that Sullivan unearths. Do they also sense a lack of successful authentication on Sullivan's part around this contentious issue? What interests me particularly about Sullivan's decision to read sexual abuse into MacEwen's biography, is how it relates to the authentication-text with which she opens her book. As I have demonstrated in the context of nineteenth-century Black Canadian non-fictional works and their authenticating prefatory material,¹³ authentication-texts are included in contentious works precisely in order to guarantee the approval of readers and critics. If the biographer can establish herself as an authority early enough in the biography through the deployment of strategies like the first-person anecdote, it stands to reason that highly speculative assertions such as Sullivan's about MacEwen having been abused as a child, will be more readily accepted by the same reader.

When I mentioned earlier in this chapter that certain elements in MacEwen's life had been exaggerated at the expense of others in the service of biographical influence, I was thinking especially of Sullivan's treatment of MacEwen's family and upbringing, and her lengthy discussions of MacEwen's dream life, documented in the author's own journals. While these aspects of MacEwen's life were presumably well-enough known to her friends and acquaintances during the time she was alive, Sullivan makes totemic use of them in her overarching project of unlocking the "secrets" (xv) of MacEwen's life. Appropriating the title of MacEwen's 1969 book of poetry, *The Shadow-maker*, for her biography, Sullivan proposes a convenient *chiaroschuro* reading of MacEwen's life—and by default a biographical methodology—where the "shadow, the darkness, is necessary to locate the outline of the light" (xvi). With this commonsensical phrase, Sullivan manages

two skillful rhetorical moves. She makes her own biographical methodology (that of dwelling on negative aspects like alcoholism, depression, mental illness, possible sexual abuse, a string of love affairs) appear to stem from MacEwen's own mouth. This is the ultimate type of authentication: Gwendolyn came up with the metaphor, so it must be fitting. At the same time, by making the "many secrets Gwendolyn hoarded," (xv) the central structuring device of her biography, Sullivan easily manages to produce a standard ingredient of successful narrative: suspense. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the commercial and artistic success of her biography. The liberal use of words like "mystery" (x, xii), "search" (xii), "hidden" (xii), "coded" (xii) and "secrets" (xv) leaves the reader in no doubt: MacEwen is less a person or a writer, and more a tragic puzzle which Sullivan must solve.

While it is naïve criticism to condemn the popular appeal of Sullivan's biography simply because she uses suspense and creates a mystery which she then conveniently solves, I do believe it is important to look at how she exaggerates some things in order to meet her needs. Just as importantly, I want to call attention to the things for which she gives up responsibility. The two are tied, I argue. The "excess" of tragic biographical detail (important portions of which are speculative) leads to an "absence" of one significant thing: sustained criticism of the poetry. A good example of how this plays out is the passage about "The Day of Twelve Princes," a short story MacEwen writes at age 18. Sullivan, who will at other points make MacEwen sound old for her age (publishing her first poems as early as 16), in this particular instance wants the reader to see things differently. The story is written when MacEwen "was just eighteen, barely detached

from... childhood" (44). Sullivan wants us to read this particular story as the product of a child because she wants to tie it specifically to a childhood incident that will be important to the rest of her biography: the speculated sexual abuse of MacEwen by her uncle. After quoting from the section of the story where the boy Samuel sees his uncle and his mother behind a closed door, the uncle holding "something squiggly and red in the air, " (45) Sullivan jumps to the startling conclusion that this is a scene of "seduction of the mother by the uncle" that may in fact be a "displaced" version of "another experience entirely... a more personal pain" (46).

Sullivan chooses her language carefully in this passage. She half-heartedly states by way of disclaimer that fiction "is not biography, and cannot be used as a witness to testify against real life," (45) and that it "would be unwise to conclude" that the seduction of the mother is "based on any literal incident" (46). Yet she proceeds later in the biography to conclude precisely that.¹⁴ Sullivan's equivocal method is shown best in the phrase that follows immediately after this half-hearted disclaimer. She writes that "one has to ask" (46) whether the story MacEwen writes might be a displaced version of a more personal pain. This rhetoric of presumption—by asking the question the answer must be obvious—is for me an excellent example of a deconstructive lever that allows us to unravel Sullivan's carefully-constructed contribution to biographical influence on MacEwen. Sullivan does not stop speculating here. In a second phrase, telling for its deliberate overtones of legal discourse, she states that on "the evidence," she "can only conclude one thing for certain" (46). Her conclusion is that while the short story may not be about MacEwen's mother and uncle, or even about something "more personal," it is at

the very least about MacEwen's "well-developed sense of non-being" (46). The biographer's perfect circle is beginning to be drawn here: for answers to the tragedies of MacEwen's later life, we need only look to the life of the child.

The second aspect of Sullivan's *Shadow Maker* that interests me is its over-generous focus on MacEwen's dreams, at the expense of even the most basic attempt at a full reading of her own work.¹⁵ This situation is a mirror image of the larger phenomenon of biographical influence. Biographical influence is the supplanting of one text, literary criticism, by a second text, biography. In *Shadow Maker*, this phenomenon is played out on a micro-scale when Sullivan begins to transfer lengthy exegeses of MacEwen's dream-journals into the biography-proper. A large section of the book—arguably the book's core—beginning at page 192 and extending to page 287, relies almost solely on transcriptions of MacEwen's dream journals, followed by interpretation of these dreams by Sullivan. For example, Sullivan's interpretation of a dream MacEwen transcribed in 1966 reads like astute literary analysis:

Were it not for the last phrase, one might conclude the sexual metaphors could be a substitution for other fears, but as it stands, with Gwen's references to defloration, it seems impossible not to conclude that the dream refers to early sexual violation (193).

There is an acknowledgement of form, of rhetorical figures, as well as an attempt to draw a conclusion from the evidence within the "text." In contrast, almost every time Sullivan discusses a published poem of MacEwen's, or a novel or short story, the analysis is characterized largely by its simplicity.

She introduces poems without analyzing them, as in "Letter to an Old Lover," which is prefaced solely by the information that in "1987, more than two decades after she met him, Gwen wrote a love poem to Salah" (197). Or else she summarizes the poems with simplistic platitudes that say nothing about the poet's technique at all. About "The Left Hand and Hiroshima" and "Dark Pines Under Water"—which she reprints in their entirety—Sullivan's only comments are that one poem shows "we are all accomplices, with our jekyll and hyde hands, in Hiroshima;" the other that the "thrust of [MacEwen's] poems became the downward quest" (222). More serious yet is Sullivan's tendency to analyze significant poems in ways that may change the preferred or obvious meaning of the poem to suit her own biographical needs at that point. For example, her one-line summary of MacEwen's poem "Poem," is that it is written "to the god [MacEwen] locates within the self" (224). Emblematic of the lack of critical rigour in this core section, and throughout the biography, is Sullivan's prefatory statement before her inclusion of two long poems (again in their entirety), "Memoirs of a Mad Cook" and "Meditations of a Seamstress." "All experience," Sullivan writes, "could be turned into poems" (248). This unquestioning, simplistic stance that prefers to find the meaning of the writer's life in transcriptions of her dreams, rather than in a sustained analysis of her work, leads to my judgment that *Shadow Maker* is a critical biography minus the criticism.¹⁶

What is even more intriguing about this lack of interest in literary criticism is the fact that the hundred or so pages in which the dream-journals begin to override the biography, correspond exactly to the period of MacEwen's life Sullivan finds it most

difficult to account for. This is the period between the late 1960s when MacEwen was busy publishing and travelling, and the period in the late 1970s when MacEwen was increasingly distressed, prone to alcoholism, failed relationships, and depression. We can read *Shadow Maker*, overly-burdened as it is by dream interpretations during this ten-year stretch, as foregrounding its own failure to explain MacEwen's downward spiral. In a similar way, we can read biographical influence as the failure (voiced by some of the country's writers) of critics to properly account for the literature as a whole.

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It seems inevitable that in works of biographical influence, we are drawn time and again towards deconstructive levers, moments of excess where the author lays down his or her guard, stands outside or beside the work he or she has created, and explains his or her motivation. Often it is not even the author's intention to provide an explanation, it simply arrives. Linda Griffiths's acclaimed play *Alien Creature: A Visitation from Gwendolyn MacEwen* abounds in such moments. The visual moments alone are fascinating. There is the eye-conic book cover: a close-up of MacEwen's eyes—that staple of MacEwen description we see time and again in Atwood, Findley and Sullivan.¹⁷ There is also the effect of mirrored authenticity produced by the inclusion of a still from the production with Griffiths as MacEwen, followed by a photo of MacEwen herself, the juxtaposition inevitably inviting a comparison from readers. Through the order of their placement, the pictures seem to ask each other, is Griffiths authentic enough? Excess is also found in the

prefatory material to the published version of the play. Griffiths acknowledges the familiar accomplices in the MacEwen story: Rosemary Sullivan and Margaret Atwood among them. These authorities are acknowledged on the same page as the various funding bodies Griffiths had support from in developing her play. The unintended effect is to foreground the "officialness" of Griffiths's project: she has been guided not only by the poet's biographer, her friends and family, but her project has warranted the approval of government arts funding bodies, and private foundation support as well.

Many works of Canadian literature include such official acknowledgements—they are not unique to Griffiths. The point is that in the growing industry of MacEwen biographical influence, these acknowledgements take on new meaning. It becomes *de rigueur* to acknowledge the correct people, so that the work of biographical influence one has produced is seen as having authenticity. We see this not only in the literary examples of biographical influence but also in cultural events like the auction mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The "presence" at the auction of Atwood, MacEwen's estate and Pachter, among others, is important because they guarantee the public's interest in the event, and simultaneously the authenticity of the proceedings. In literary examples, such authentication is a traditionally rhetorical figure, but at the auction it also took on a literal valence as a guarantor of the monetary value of the objects on sale. Griffiths takes such authentication to new heights in *Alien Creature*. Besides the traditional acknowledgements, the published play includes a section entitled "Playwright's Notes." Here Griffiths repeats her debt to Sullivan, claiming to be doubly inspired: first by "MacEwen herself, and then from the extraordinary biography of her life by Rosemary

Sullivan" (10). The significance of this extra acknowledgement becomes clear further along in the "Notes."

Griffiths goes on to discuss her use of poetry in the play. A little ethical crisis is evident when we read between the lines of Griffiths's explaining that there "are thirty four lines of Gwendolyn MacEwen's poetry in *Alien Creature*. Everything else in the play is new material... presumption of presumptions, there are these theatre-poems mixed in with the poetry of this real poet. How do I explain?" (10). Here Griffiths is clearly echoing the double guilt I discussed earlier in relation to the Sullivan biography. Not only is there guilt among MacEwen's friends and admirers for the neglect she suffered while alive, but now there is guilt because these same people are using the poet's poems, in this case, to drive their own work. Is such an enterprise—biographical influence—ethical? We have seen Sullivan's and Atwood's explanations: they assuage their guilt by falling back on literary genres like elegy and tribute. Griffiths's explanation for this need on her part is more raw; it comes down to the personal, not the literary. "I want to address this to the people who knew and loved her," she writes. "She and I are doing this play. And only both of us can speak." (10) What interests me about this logic is that it takes us back to a point I have made on a number of occasions in this dissertation. If all these writers are so fascinated by MacEwen the poet, why is it that they must only discuss her *life* in their own subsequent works? Why has literary criticism failed MacEwen so badly?

There is an argument to be made that criticism is not necessarily only contained in the sort of rational, objective and quotation-driven prose produced by professional academics. Indeed, there are elements of Griffiths's performance-art-like *Alien Creature*

that could be interpreted as approaching criticism. The opening lines of the play are particularly telling here. Gwendolyn addresses her audience in a barrage of similes: "You look like great bunches of black grapes," she says. After unleashing a couple more of these similes, she says, "sorry, it gets to be habit" (13). Here we might choose to see Griffiths pointing up the conscious artifice involved in MacEwen's art. The deconstruction of any possible suspension of disbelief, whether poetic or dramatic or biographical, continues in the character's first speech. "I feel I have to warn you," Gwendolyn tells the audience, "that I do die in the end, so things might get a little intense. I hope you're not afraid of excess" (13). The excess Griffiths sees in MacEwen's life is obviously literal—the alcohol, the men, the madness—but it should not be too difficult to make the leap of seeing these purported excesses of MacEwen's as indicative of the excesses of biographical influence I have discussed above.

Indeed, a typical excess of the kind I am describing will demonstrate the logic of association that occurs in the world of biographical influence. At the end of the speech quoted above, which takes place at the top of the play, Gwendolyn disabuses the audience of any romantic notions of her death, at the same time demonstrating her inability to face up to her problems: "I did not commit suicide. I drank myself to death, it's different. Don't Sylvia Plath me and I won't Sylvia Plath you" (13). This fascinating line speaks volumes about the phenomenon I have been describing. It recognizes that women poets have been used as interpretive frameworks to name particular types of behaviour and experience. It recognizes that one can be "Plathed"—that biographical influence is a phenomenon people bring upon each other. Not least, it is part of a chain of instructive

Plath references in the works of biographical influence themselves. We have seen above how playwright Claudia Dey tries to dissociate herself and her play *The Gwendolyn Poems* (discussed below) from any comparisons to Plath. Now we see Griffiths reacting against the very thing she understands herself to be doing to MacEwen: mythologizing her life. A final Plath echo occurs in the passage of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* where Iris goes through her dead sister's drawers and pretends she finds a manuscript. The language here is exactly the same as in Atwood's earlier review of the Plath volume of short stories, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, where she bemoans the "going through of drawers" that has brought this previously unpublished work of Plath's to the world posthumously.¹⁸ There exists a collective will to pathologize MacEwen, one might argue. Despite Griffiths's ostensible aim of "alienating" MacEwen, showing how unique she was against the backdrop of a greed-filled Toronto, Griffiths ends up re-inscribing the poet as another Sylvia Plath.

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A similar result occurs in Claudia Dey's *The Gwendolyn Poems*, a play produced in Toronto less than a year after Griffiths's play. While the result is the same—the re-inscription of MacEwen as a tragic woman writer—the method used to arrive at this end is quite different. Where Griffiths's play uses the vernacular of performance art (as for instance in the pyrotechnic effects Griffiths includes to simulate MacEwen's interest in magic), Dey's play is much more a classic drama, with a prologue, two acts and an

epilogue. There are numerous characters in Dey's play, including MacEwen's parents Elsie and Alick, two of her life-partners, Milton Acorn and Nikos Tsingos, and even a character, Mo, based on a number of MacEwen's female friends, who bears an especially close resemblance to Margaret Atwood. One could argue that Dey takes a completely opposite view of MacEwen than Griffiths did. Griffiths's play is based on MacEwen's inner life, and this is mirrored by the fact that she is the only character on stage in that play, whereas Dey would like to see MacEwen as part of a larger existence, including family, friends, and lovers.

Dey's choice to make MacEwen only one of ten characters in a biographical play has positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the audience is treated to multiple viewpoints. This may or may not produce the effect mentioned earlier in the Al-Soyalee article, namely that Dey deconstructs the myth of MacEwen instead of building on it. On the negative side, I would argue that in Dey's version, MacEwen is drowned out by the chorus of voices around her. This replicates the situation that exists within biographical influence: many people are talking for MacEwen, to the point where we are no longer equipped to hear MacEwen talking for herself. Dey is at some level aware of this quality in her dramatic structure, and compensates with the rhetorical strategy of having a number of characters, including MacEwen, Acorn and Elsie, describe Gwendolyn as a "queen." In the prologue, MacEwen exhorts the audience to see things her way: "I am the queen of this story. I am the one who deserves a cape, a crown, a retelling" (4). While the audience may not question this assertion so early on in the play, it soon begins to wonder about the status of the word "queen" when applied to MacEwen. In the first act,

Gwendolyn's husband Milton Acorn, disillusioned at the short-lived happiness of their May-December marriage, says: "We were on a mission to reinvent a Canadian mythology... We were going to be King Poet and Queen Poet of Canada" (23).

Both these early instances of MacEwen being described as a "queen" contain a fair amount of dramatic irony. In the first instance, while Gwendolyn wants to be seen as the "queen" in this play, the audience senses that in fact she will be crowded out by the other characters and their interpretations of her life. In the second instance, Acorn's naïve hope that he and his wife will revolutionize Canadians' respect for artists is seen to be ironic in the mouth of an anti-establishment character who goes on to pile scorn on Canada's conservative allegiance to things like the monarchy: "I say, my friends, please enjoy the following: ... truth in poetry!... Poetry that refuses to be the Queen's pet!" (45). Even Gwendolyn's mother Elsie's deluded claim that her daughter will be "gracious with autographs... They're all looking to you. The Piper. The Ruler. The Queen" (45) is ironic coming from a character that spends the bulk of the play heaping scorn on her own daughter. It is clear that the word "queen," with its Canadian associations of conservatism and tradition, is used ironically by Dey to signal a type of unhappy status that MacEwen accepted grudgingly, if at all.

One of the many deconstructive levers that abounds in the arena of biographical influence exists in Dey's play. In the "Playwright's Notes" that appear before the prologue, Dey makes the obligatory nod towards all those who have helped her in her project of re-vivifying MacEwen. High among these people is "Rosemary Sullivan—the biographer is a *queendom* unto herself" (np, emphasis added). The fact that both Sullivan

and MacEwen are described as queens in this play may just be coincidental. If we take the position of devil's advocate, however, in order to argue that Dey consciously aligns the biographer with her subject, what might this mean? Is this the same as the alignment of Amy and her gay cousin Icarus in *Headhunter*? Or the same as the coming together of Richard and Selena at the end of "Isis in Darkness"? One thing that is at least obvious is that this rhetorical slippage whereby the subject of biographical influence is collapsable, amenable to comparison, resurrected as metaphor, does not come as a surprise in Dey's play. It is one of the fundamental strategies of biographical influence. At the end of the play, Dey continues the pattern by collapsing the character Gwendolyn with the figure of T.E. Lawrence (as did Sullivan earlier). It may be argued that MacEwen brought this upon herself by writing poems in the first person about a well-known historical figure, but others have done the same thing without being burdened unfairly with endless comparisons to that figure. Whatever we decide, the end of Dey's play leaves the audience with the definite notion that the afterlife may be what one has created while alive. Gwendolyn lives on in an afterlife that is just another poem. The last line of the play, spoken by Gwendolyn: "Come, follow me, to the other side of the poem" (93) is ambiguous.

The ambiguity stems from the last part of Dey's play I would like to look at, a scene in Act One where Gwendolyn and her friend Mo satirize the male poetic tradition that they are writing against. After some pointed jabs against Leonard Cohen-esque masculine poetry—Gwendolyn says, "But don't you want to touch my perfect body with your mind? To which Mo laughingly responds: "Of course" (32)—the women discuss the

realities of being a female writer. It is "Death to be a poet" (32) they decide, invoking the well-known examples of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. "Here's to being not just another head in the oven," says Gwendolyn; and Mo says a little later, "suicide, that's what we have to fight for; walking into the water with rocks in our pocket" (34). Like the opening lines of Griffith's *Alien Creature*, where the audience is told not to "Sylvia Plath" MacEwen, the suicide of the female poet comes, in Dey's play, to stand for the life of the female poet in general. The suicidal woman poet *is* the woman poet, and MacEwen is both. While the stated objective is to take apart this equation, by writing about MacEwen as Atwood, Findley, Sullivan, Griffiths, and Dey all do, the truth is that their works reinscribe at the deepest level the very equation they are trying to root out. It is precisely through MacEwen's availability to be made into a metaphor, her weakness as subject, that biographical influence thrives.

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I note that as I finish writing this chapter, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection north of Toronto is mounting a show called "Perspectives" using women artists from its collection, paired with pieces of writing by Canadian women authors. The curator and literary consultant have chosen MacEwen as one of the authors emblematic of women's experience in Canada. The show's focus "on the intersection between women as practitioners of visual art and women in representation within the broad social/historical framework"¹⁹ reminds me of the central paradox of biographical influence. Women

writers as practitioners subsumed (robbed of their very agency as practitioners) by the representation of women writers in the particular cultural space of late twentieth-century Canada. MacEwen is a good candidate for the McMichael's show. While most professional critics of Canadian literature would undoubtedly acknowledge her as one of the century's most influential poets, nine times out of ten this judgment would be based not on their having read MacEwen, but on a detail taken from her well-known life story.

Chapter Six

The Haunting of Pat Lowther

1.

Of the three writers discussed in this dissertation, Pat Lowther is the only one whose work I first came to as a direct result of biographical influence. The mother of a good friend of mine had just completed her master's thesis on Lowther's poetry in 1991. Even though Della Golland's thesis consciously steers clear of biographical details in its attempt to show how Lowther uses metaphorical language to demonstrate the power of art in women's lives, in conversations with Golland I soon learned the details of Lowther's murder which have made her so well known. My interview with Golland, which appears at the end of this chapter, is an attempt to untie the knot that binds all my examinations of writing by women who have been the subjects (or victims?) of biographical influence: Which came first, interest in the life or interest in the art? And once this question is answered, is there a significance to which came first? Golland's responses to my questions are valuable because they provide personal insight into the tricky situation of all critics who have tried to work on Lowther's poetry.

Pat Lowther is the subject of my final chapter because in her life, her posthumous reputation, the posthumous criticism of her work, and the ways she has been used by subsequent writers, both of fiction and non-fiction, we see the phenomenon of biographical influence coalescing most forcefully. The components of this phenomenon that we have seen before are all here: the ethical questioning by critics of their own

activities; the invocation of Sylvia Plath, the ironic muse-figure of biographical influence; the direct participation of Margaret Atwood, one of the power brokers of biographical influence in this country; the writing of plays and the making of documentaries about the writer; and of course, the placing into fiction and poetry of Pat Lowther herself. An extra layer of complication is added in the case of Lowther because of the nature of her death. Whereas the guilt over MacEwen's death as recorded by Sullivan comes across as somewhat muted (the question of suicide never having been satisfactorily, and possibly not necessarily, answered), the guilt felt by Lowther's friends is enormously palpable. The question this chapter tries to answer is whether or not the guilt felt by these friends has been transferred to the country's critics, and which of two results have taken place. Has the guilt made critics more interested in Lowther, or has it caused them to shy away?

This chapter is structured like the ones before it. After a brief biography of Pat Lowther, which will allow us to gauge the scope of the posthumous reaction to her life and work, I offer readings of the following texts: Margaret Atwood's elegy for Pat Lowther, "Another Night Visit (for Pat)" and Gail Mackay's book of poetry, *The Pat Lowther Poem*. I am particularly interested, in this section, in the significance of the elegiac form as a component of biographical influence. Next I read the workshopped but never produced play, *Finding Pat Lowther*, by Joan Shaw. Written in the mid 1990s, this play is similar to the Beth Hopkins play about Susanna Moodie, in that it uses Lowther's poetry to dramatize her life. This willingness to read biographical details from the poetry leads to my reading of Toby Brooks' literary biography of Lowther, *Pat Lowther's Continent*. In comparing this book to Sullivan's biography of MacEwen, I am interested

in defining a particularly Canadian form of literary biography that is allied to biographical influence. I then look at Anne Henderson's documentary film *Water Marks*, and discuss how a shift has occurred in biographical influence of Lowther that makes her two youngest daughters, Beth and Christine, primary players in the Lowther phenomenon. This tendency is also marked in the subsequent section where I discuss Keith Harrison's novel *Furry Creek*. Finally I look at the ethical concerns expressed in the few examples of criticism of Lowther's work and end with my interview with Della Golland.

2.

Patricia Louise Tinmouth was born in Vancouver on July 29, 1935. She is part of the generation of women poets that includes Gwendolyn MacEwen and Margaret Atwood. She is also part of the wider generation of Canadian poets who came to maturity at the same time that the small press movement in Canada, including companies like Coach House Press in Toronto and Talon Press in Vancouver, was getting underway. There were more venues at which to read poetry, and through which to publish poetry, than ever before. The comparison with MacEwen and Atwood, which we will return to later, is deficient in one respect, which is that unlike these two writers, Pat Lowther travelled very little. Only in the last few years of her life, when she had become better known, did she travel across Canada giving readings. Unlike Atwood and MacEwen, she never travelled overseas. Her poetry is markedly of the West Coast of Canada, though she did make

imaginative leaps to include the South American nation of Chile and the high Arctic in her works.

Like MacEwen, Lowther left high school without graduating. She worked as a keypunch operator in a factory for a number of years, while taking creative writing courses at a Vancouver community college. She married early and had two children, but divorced within six years, gaining custody of her daughter, but not of her son. She remarried in 1963, to the man who would eventually murder her in 1975, Roy Lowther. They had two children. Lowther was publishing poems in magazines and anthologies through the late 1950s and 1960s, and her first book, *This Difficult Flowring*, was published in 1968. At the same time as she was gaining prominence as a poet, Lowther worked in local and provincial politics for the New Democratic Party. She held temporary jobs teaching creative writing in New Westminster, and in 1974, was offered a job teaching creative writing at the University of British Columbia. In the same year, she became co-chair of the League of Canadian Poets, the first woman to serve in this position. Her second book of poems, *Milk Stone*, was published in 1974, and she had a manuscript accepted by Oxford University Press of Toronto very soon after. This book, *A Stone Diary*, was published posthumously in 1977. Pat Lowther was murdered September 23 or 24 of 1975, and her husband Roy Lowther was convicted of her murder two years later.

While fiction, drama, and biography are the genres most amenable to biographical influence, there is the famous example of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* that shows how poetry can also be used to fictionalize and rescue the figure of the dead Canadian woman writer. In the case of Pat Lowther, a number of poets have written poems either as a tribute to Lowther, after hearing the news of her death, or else as self-standing artistic responses to her life. Among these poems we can list notable examples such as Atwood's "Another Night Visit (for Pat)," Patrick Lane's "For Pat Lowther," and Leona Gom's "Patricia's Garden — For Pat Lowther." Atwood's poem is representative of this group. I would argue that it is a particularly successful example of the classical elegy, a judgment made on the basis of Atwood's skillful upholding of the elegiac conventions as enumerated by Peter M. Sacks in *The English Elegy*. The emphasis in this poem is not really on mourning, and just barely on commemorating the person who has died, but rather, it is mostly about elucidating the relationship—the similarities—between the living poet and the dead poet.¹ This subtle shift is important. As we shall see in our subsequent readings of literary works of biographical influence that use the figure of Pat Lowther, this relationship between the writer and Pat Lowther becomes axiomatic: Lowther becomes a point of access for demonstrating truths within all of us. This is the same argument that I made earlier about the significance of Virginia Woolf in a novel like Cunningham's *The Hours*. Lowther steps out of her historical reality—an up and coming Canadian poet with two books to her credit murdered at a young age—and becomes instead a therapeutic touchstone for the things we want from ourselves and our literature.

Atwood's poem begins with the lines:

The height of
moon, cat
against my heart, heart
that feels like luck
so far, the house
floating on wind

Which stone
are you in?

The elegy begins on a contemplative note, as is traditional; the poet lying in bed presumably with a cat on her chest and looking out the window at the moon. The phrase "heart/that feels like luck/so far" is mysterious to the reader at this early point, but definitely to be kept in mind, as it will be revisited later in the poem. Why does the poet feel lucky? Also of interest is Atwood's invocation of the moon, the wind, and the stone, natural phenomena she will come back to and tie into her version of Pat Lowther.

The poem continues:

This is your voice I hold,
it came in the mail,
this white pebble
face with the high bones
taut, in shadow, this tight smile

Here Atwood makes the first of a number of paradoxical metaphorical comparisons between stones or pebbles (Lowther's poetry is notable for its use of stone imagery²) and Lowther herself. The speaker has received a picture of Lowther in the mail, but has decided to compare the woman's face in the picture—"this white pebble/face with the high bones/taut, in shadow"—to a stone. The metaphor is continued in the next stanza:

That mouth is gone,
sealed over, like a jar
closed, no, broken, skull a cave no
longer. Blood, your
fire on the wall & floor,
smouldering there weeks after.

It was not bad luck.

The elegy continues in a traditional vein. The line "That mouth is gone" echoes Milton's well-known "For Lycidas is dead" beautifully, yet violently. Lowther's mouth and fractured skull are likened to symbols of domesticity and safety: a jar, a cave. Now Lowther is not only a stone, but perhaps more specifically a comet or an asteroid, whose "fire"—the blood at the murder scene—is left "smouldering" on the wall and floor.³ The final line of this section, "It was not bad luck," is the signal to the careful reader that Lowther's grisly murder and the speaker's own situation are in some way tied together.

If we recall the line "my heart, heart/that feels like luck/so far" and set it against what we have just read, "It was not bad luck," then I believe we can see Atwood

introducing a new political element into the poem, the reality of men's violence against women. By writing the line "It was not bad luck" in the negative, Atwood is able to stress the opposite, that in fact Lowther's murder was premeditated and to be expected. Furthermore, the speaker, in describing her own feeling of luck at the beginning of the poem, gestures towards the possibility that her own life, as a woman, may be in danger, as was Lowther's. At least, the repetition of the word "luck" effects a similarity between the speaker's and the subject's positions: women at risk of male violence. In this way, Atwood subtly, and perhaps unconsciously, moves away from commemorating and elegizing Lowther (and this is a movement we have seen already in Sullivan's biography of MacEwen) towards *making use* of Lowther's historical reality for her own reasons.

This making use is a prerequisite of biographical influence. After this point, the tone of the poem shifts from a deeply personal, affectionate and saddened one to a detached, almost clinical tone:

and he put you somewhere
after that, it was in
water. Then they found you, consigned
you, smoothed you over.

Goodbye, or anyway
it was on a plane
we talked last time.
I remember
a plastic stick, ice, your long

dark hair, sunlight, uncertain
fingers, not
what we said.

The sudden switch from a description of how Roy Lowther disposed of his wife's body, and how the police and the justice system righted the wrong ("found you, consigned you, smoothed you over") to the blasé memory of a plane trip where the speaker can't really "remember... what we said," is startling. The use of "he" and "they" instead of "Roy Lowther" and "the police" or "the jury" is in large part responsible for the detached tone of this section. The reader wonders, perhaps, whether the automatic actions of the justice system as enumerated by Atwood, do not in fact have something in common with the work of writers like Atwood herself, who find Lowther, consign her, smooth her over, until she becomes what they would like her to be? Just as important, and perhaps even more startling, is the speaker's "Goodbye, or anyway/it was on a plane/we talked last time" at the beginning of the next stanza, which seems to undermine the elegiac tone. The comma after "Goodbye" acts almost as an ellipsis, as if the speaker would like to leave it at "Goodbye" but feels compelled by the reader's prurient curiosity to continue with the poem. Even the descriptions of Lowther's "dark hair" and "uncertain fingers" seem inconsequential. Whereas when Atwood and others describe MacEwen, her dark hair and eyes embody a redeeming iconicity, Lowther's features are just one of many things the speaker notices on the plane, including, "a plastic stick," "ice," and "sunlight."

In the final three stanzas of the poem—

Is that you, in the wind or

as you said, in stone

But this is not a stone,
it is your voice,

alive still, moving
around each word like
wind, these words un-
earth you.

the speaker moves back toward traditional elegy by including what literary critics call a consolation, in this case the idea that Lowther is not in fact dead because her poems "un/earth" her. This most classical of notions, that poetry renders the poet immortal, must be read ironically at least to a degree in the case of Lowther, because one can argue that had it not been for her murder, she might not have become as well known as she has. There is little evidence in the poem that the speaker is aware of such irony, but I believe that Atwood the poet is aware. If we recall the repeated references to wind in this elegy, along with the title "Another Night Visit," the opening stanza where the speaker lies awake at a window, hearing the wind, and the closing lines with their ghostly phrase "these words un/earth you," I believe we can confidently read Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as an intertext to this poem. By invoking the well-known scene where Lockwood sees the ghost of Cathy at his window, as well as the famous last paragraph which states

that Heathcliff and Cathy are not in fact sleeping in the "quiet earth," we can see Atwood participating in a romanticization of Lowther that is integral to biographical influence.

Another fascinating poem that participates in the biographical influence of Pat Lowther is Gail McKay's 1978 collection *The Pat Lowther Poem*. McKay was a student of Lowther's in the University of British Columbia's Department of Creative Writing in 1975. Even though Lowther taught only two classes before she was murdered, the effect of those two classes was strong. McKay's book is a multifaceted journey, both personal and poetic, through the two-year period after Lowther's death. As the catalogue for a retrospective exhibition celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Coach House Press (McKay's publisher) states, "In facing unflinchingly a fatal drama in which the writer herself is too much involved, *The Pat Lowther Poem* not only achieves a disturbing new poetic but greatly honours the woman whose death it mourns."⁴ The catalogue is prescient in noting McKay's use of a "new poetic" in her book, something I will look at below. It is also right in claiming the book as a species of elegy ("greatly honours the woman whose death it mourns"). What is most striking to me as I read McKay's poem, however, (just as it was striking while reading Atwood's elegy above) is the fact that the poet makes connections between Lowther's violent death and violence in her own life. When the anniversary catalogue states that McKay is "herself... too much involved," it refers to the fact that McKay was a friend and student of Lowther's. A close reading of the poems, however, shows that McKay draws parallels on a wider level even than this.

McKay's collection takes the form of an epic divided into numbered cantos. Pat Lowther is the subject of this epic, and the canto form recalls Lowther's poetic hero Pablo

Neruda, whose famous *Canto General* tells the history of South America and his native Chile in evocative detail. The canto format (roman-numeral numbered poems without titles, without page numbers) allows McKay a lot of flexibility, in terms of the forms and subject matters she employs. This is probably what the Coach House anniversary catalogue is referring to when it claims McKay writes a "new poetic." Consider the difference between the following two cantos:

i

Your empty office.
The daylight
square on the floor
shrinks to rectangle, to line.
blood drains out of colours.

My lips go cold, calcareous.

And

xxi

MR. LOWTHER, 50, SAID HE
FOUND HER IN BED WEARING

ONLY A PINK BLOUSE, AND
 THE RIGHT SIDE OF HER HEAD
 WAS COVERED IN BLOOD.

- *He too cries*

Like a bird a black bird

Or a memory.

YES, MY LORD, WE COUNTED
 117 BLOODSPOTS ON THE WALL.

In poems like the one immediately above, McKay quotes generously both from Lowther's own poetry (all typeface in italics) as well as from court documents from the trial of Roy Lowther (all typeface in bold caps), as well as from the Finnish *Kalevala* and other sources. By mixing these genres McKay participates in a proto-poetic postmodernism roughly contemporary with seminal works like Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Jack Hodgins's *The Invention of the World*, as detailed in Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern*.

Consider also the difference between the two above-quoted cantos in terms of content, style, and imagery. Canto i is similar to Atwood's poem. Its Poundian compression, and use of the words "blood" and "calcareous," hints right away at what will become McKay's chief imagistic patterns: blood, stone, and also water and bones. The effect of using these images throughout her poems is to invoke an unbroken lineage

between herself and Lowther, who used these same images time and again. On the other hand, canto xxi is an interruption in the world of McKay/Lowther natural imagery, both in its bold all-caps typeface, and in its rhetoric, which is based on quotations from testimony and evidence presented at the trial. McKay therefore puts into play a dialogic mix where her own poetic language and that of Lowther are seen to speak back to and confront the testimony/evidence-driven sections in the middle of the book. The effect is both the destabilization of a too-easily construed version of the Pat Lowther myth (many voices obviously meaning that no one voice holds all the truth), and at the same time, as in the Atwood poem, a moving away from Lowther to an examination of how Lowther impacts the poet's own life.

We see this moving away most clearly in cantos xvi and xxv. Both are slightly jarring in that they move away from the main plot line of Lowther's disappearance, murder and the trial of her husband, to the speaker's own personal experiences with violence.

xvi

I had three big cousins up north.
By grade nine Mike and Jake
were loggers. Jamie drew pictures.
No one knows why.

Aunt Mabel tried for months on end
to talk Jamie into being a man.
One night he went out....

and chopped off his hand.
And gashed his neck in two places.
It's not like
our family.

- Mike and Jake are dead.

Logging accident.

While the eerie parallels with Lowther's murder are intact ("chopped," "gashed") it requires an imaginative leap to guess at the intended effect of reading this canto among the other ones about Pat Lowther. My own guess is that, as in the Atwood poem where the speaker compares her luck against Lowther's luck, McKay is opening up the Lowther story for its universal significance in a world of violence. Significantly, the syntax of the McKay line "It's not like/our family" recalls Atwood's "It was not bad luck": the negation in these phrases obviously works in the opposite way, which is to emphasize the violence in the family, where it has been denied. Similarly in canto xxv, McKay describes a neighbour from her childhood who shoots his old horse Jemima, ending with the startling revelation, "You have to understand/the way we do things in the country."

The brutality of her cousin's self-mutilation and later his death in a logging accident, and the death of the horse at the hands of its owner, are brave and not completely straightforward conceits for the situation of the female writer in Canada.

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Joan Shaw's play *Finding Pat Lowther* is structured in a similar way to McKay's *The Pat Lowther Poem*. Workshopped in 1995 at the Alumnae Theatre's New Ideas festival, the play had been germinating for a long time, according to playwright Joan Shaw.⁵ Shaw was president of the Alumnae Theatre in 1975, the United Nations International Year of the Woman. To commemorate this year, Shaw had planned an evening of readings by Canada's top women writers to be held at the theatre in the fall of 1975. Hoping to include a representative poet from the West Coast, Shaw called the League of Canadian Poets in Toronto, who suggested Pat Lowther. Lowther agreed to come. As it got closer to the date of the reading, neither the League nor Shaw could get in touch with Lowther. This was around the time police would later establish Lowther had been murdered. The frustration of not having Pat at the reading, and then the horror of hearing she had been murdered, was what inspired Shaw to write a play. Like many critics, including myself, she readily admits to being inspired to write about Lowther after learning of her murder.

As in McKay's poem, and like Hopkins' earlier play about Susanna Moodie, Shaw's play uses Pat Lowther's own poems as a substitute for playwright-conceived dialogue. According to Shaw, this was a personal as well artistic decision: she did not

want to put words into the mouth of a woman she had not even got to meet, and who had been brutally murdered. This decision is akin to the decision later writers will make, as we will see in our discussion of Keith Harrison's novel *Furry Creek*. The idea, in an untheorized form in Shaw's comments, and later in a highly developed form in Harrison's novel, is that using a real-life person, Pat Lowther, as a character in a later literary work, involves a difficult ethical choice. Both Shaw and Harrison elide the responsibility entailed in *using* Pat Lowther, each in a different way. Shaw does not give her dialogue to speak, whereas Harrison will not even use her as a character. The characters that Shaw does create, Pat's mother, her sister, a League of Canadian Poets staff person, and a chorus of "Gossips" who represent variously Pat's friends, family members, and the literary community in general, are also integral parts of the action.

Not having attended the workshop, and encountering the script only in its text-based form, I must admit that my critic's gaze was happily surprised by the quality of the dramatic effects Shaw is able to achieve in *Finding Pat Lowther*. As in Davies's *At My Heart's Core*, there is a definite sense that the playwright has grasped or extracted something about Lowther that other practitioners of biographical influence have not. In Davies's case, it was the mix of pathos and humour in his version of Susanna Moodie that made reading that play enjoyable. The facets of Shaw's play that might normally make the play flat—Pat Lowther speaks through her poems and thus does not interact with the other characters; the subject matter of the play is the standard biography of Pat Lowther, without any surprises—in fact help to create a palpable dramatic tension throughout the play. I will argue that there are two reasons why this tension is successful.

First, the juxtaposition of Pat Lowther's actual published poems with invented dialogue, and more importantly, the amazing congruency of the juxtaposition, is what creates the dramatic unity and tension in the play. We see this most successfully in the early section of the play where Shaw is providing background information on Pat's childhood. Speaking of her husband, Pat's father, Shaw's mother-character says, "We moved to Rice Lake when he took a job taking care of the reservoir out there" (3) and immediately following this Pat reads from her poem about her father's job at the reservoir:

When I was a child
my father worked with water
adjusting flow and level....
And once he took me to Rice Lake
where no one is allowed
the water was flat as pavement
papered with fallen leaves
and flat wooden walkways
and there I walked on water.

Quite apart from its merits as a poem, as a piece of dialogue in a play, the use of this poem is brilliant. It adds an aspect, found in the traditional Christian Passion play for example, of prefiguring, that would be much more difficult to achieve were Shaw to give Pat lines of dialogue instead. The theme of water, which was vital to Lowther throughout her writing career, and the simple nod to the story of Christ walking on water, are all that

is required for Shaw to subtly foreshadow the climax of the action, the death of Pat Lowther.

A second reason why *Finding Pat Lowther* succeeds in my estimation, is its decision not to be scared off by the figure of Roy Lowther. As we have seen with the poetry, and as we will see with the biography and the fiction, part of the "ethics" of biographical influence seems to be that writers are wary of giving Roy Lowther too much space in their re-writings of Pat Lowther. There is, perhaps, a fear that inclusion of Roy Lowther might damage the martyr-like character of Pat Lowther that has coalesced in the contemporary imagination. Shaw is able to get past this by keeping in mind that the Lowthers were married for more than a dozen years. The tension between "why did she stay with him" and "this is not a question we can answer" is given credibility in this play by the inclusion of a character modelled after Roy Lowther. The scene where Roy introduces Pat at a Vancouver Poetry Society Meeting is dramatically successful for the simple fact that it dramatizes something the other writers either ignore, or only tell us about, and usually from Pat's point of view:

ROY I've brought a new member here tonight, Pat Dompousse. She's new to the Vancouver Poetry Society, but Pat's been writing for a while, doing very promising work and voicing some important issues in her poetry. So welcome Pat and we're looking forward to hearing your work (12).

It is the power of dramatic irony that is working so well in this scene. The obvious pride of Roy in introducing a woman he will soon fall in love with, to a group of his peers, comes through forcefully. As the audience knows, of course, this pride will turn to resentment, and the "voice" Roy lauds in this early scene will become the source of his jealousy, his motive for murder. Intrinsically, then, drama offers the practitioner of biographical influence a number of advantages that may actually impede the biographer or the writer of fiction and poetry. Through the conceit that these characters are speaking their own words (and not the playwright's), Shaw is able to *use* Lowther successfully, in a way that Atwood, McKay, and as we shall see, Pat's biographer Toby Brooks, are not as fortunate to accomplish.

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The "making use" of Pat Lowther demonstrated in my readings above of the Atwood and McKay poems is even more visible in the literary biography of Pat Lowther published by Toby Brooks in 1999. *Pat Lowther's Continent* is based on the premise that "Pat Lowther's work has a lot to say to anyone, but it touches a particular chord inside women who were adults before the 1960s" (10). The aesthetic qualities of Lowther's work are underplayed, however, and the therapeutic uses of her work are valorized instead. This approach, signalled early in Brooks' biography, is quite different from the tone taken by Sullivan at the beginning of her biography of MacEwen. Sullivan concentrates on the notion of biography as elegy, whereas Brooks, I would argue, sees biography more as

exemplum, to use a term from medieval criticism. Brooks goes on to state that Lowther's poetry is important to the generation of women she zeroes in on because these women, while "sympathetic" (10) to the emerging feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, were nevertheless divorced from it because they were caught in an earlier mindset that was hard to break away from. According to Brooks, Lowther gave such women "a compass that could guide" them in "thinking about the relationships [they] were in and how they fit into life on planet Earth" (10).

Brooks' unstated assumption is that biography has a redeeming quality. By studying the life of Pat Lowther, women can, like Brooks, put their own "vague feelings into words" (10). In this approach to literary biography, Lowther becomes an *amensis* of sorts, who channels the frustrations of a particular group of women into art. Brooks then discusses her own work in the mid 1970s as a counsellor in a shelter for battered women, and ties this experience back to Pat Lowther: "I decided I wanted to do something in Pat's memory" (10). Belabouring the point that she is "gripped by her poetry," an "admirer of her poetry," that Lowther's poetry sings "inside [her] head," Brooks is able to mark herself rhetorically as a literary biographer. While she is careful to make it appear as though the reason for the biography is her own admiration for Lowther's poetry, it is in fact clear that the real reason for the biography is to pay tribute to an abused woman who was murdered by her husband. The sad irony that a woman who repeatedly decided not to leave her abusive situation, after numerous requests and offers of help from friends and family, should become a heroine of sorts for women who have been through abuse, is puzzling and chilling. To her credit, Brooks does repeatedly explain the probable

reasoning behind Lowther's decision to stay with her husband—"Murder statistics show that women who have recently left, or who are trying to leave an abusive husband or lover are five times more likely to be murdered than other women" (97)—but the irony remains. The last sentence in Brooks' preface makes this clear: "perhaps together we can broaden the understanding of why Pat's life was cut short and celebrate the continent she has left behind" (11). Despite the admirable metaphor of Lowther's poetic legacy as a "continent," what really interests Brooks is the reasons why Lowther was murdered.

As a result of this thesis-driven form of biography (let us find the reasons why Lowther was murdered), the biography necessarily reads reductively in many instances. The biographer's chief method of exposition is to use the poet's work as evidence for actual historical states of mind. Brooks echoes Sullivan's numerous qualifications in the statement, "A poem is not hard fact, yet it does reveal the poet's feelings" (64). In fact, the careful reader of this biography looks in vain for any distancing whatsoever of the speaker in Lowther's poems from the poet herself. Brooks' habitual method of describing the poems is to preface the description with unproblematic phrases like "Pat wrote an unpublished poem describing her feelings about her new home" (65) or "In 'Angel,' [Lowther] confesses" (54) or "the poet-mother's concern" (71). There are two effects of this rhetorical strategy. The first is that the reader inevitably comes to see, as does Brooks, that Lowther wrote about her life in her poems. In fact, the reader comes to see the poems, as many have, as premonitions of her murder. The second effect is more unfortunate, and that is, the reader becomes incapable of judging Lowther's poems on any objective aesthetic criteria. While the biographer may list the acceptance of the poet's

work in various anthologies, her winning of Canada Council grants, or her reviews in the press, there is no manifest way to make sense of these events. The poetry is consistently, and only, utilized as a way to underscore the personal, actual, and historical experiences of the woman Pat Lowther. This is a double-bind we have been grappling with since our early discussion of Atwood's refusal to allow any hint of autobiographical interpretation to be made about her works.

In the earlier discussion of Atwood's refusal to admit there are any autobiographical aspects in her work, I argued strenuously that the time for this sort of "fiction" was over. Brooks' biography of Lowther causes me to momentarily reconsider this decision. At the very least, a more effective balance needs to be struck between when and how much biography should be read into the work of writers. This balance must be made up of something more meaningful than Brooks' and especially Sullivan's repeated agonized asides about whether or not they should read the life into the work. The issue comes down, eventually, to our definition and valorization of literary biography as a genre itself. On one hand, literary biography strives to be taken seriously among the other genres such as criticism and theory. On the other hand, literary biography uses methods (like reading the subject's life through his or her work) that are not countenanced in the current methodology of criticism and theory (and in the institution of English studies generally). What we have here is a problem in the epistemology of English studies.

This problem plays itself out in Brooks' *Pat Lowther's Continent* (and in Sullivan's *Shadow Maker*) by an unhealthy imbalance of underemphasis and overemphasis on certain aspects of the writer's biography so that the biography can match

up more closely with the critic's chosen reading of that writer's work. The important thing to keep in mind here is the malleability of the facts of the writer's life once the writer has passed away. Where Sullivan overemphasized the melodramatic aspects of MacEwen's love affairs and her alcoholism—at the expense of her life as a professional writer—and reprinted the poems from MacEwen's oeuvre that demonstrated these aspects, Brooks effects a similar imbalance. She emphasizes the melodramatic aspects (the gruesome murder) that are already an overdetermined part of the Lowther myth, at the expense of a fuller picture of Pat Lowther, which we might presumably expect the first published biography of Lowther to include. These underemphasized facts include Lowther's affairs with men during her separation and second marriage.

Consider the following two examples. After a discussion of the breakdown of Lowther's first marriage to William Domphousse, which Brooks argues happened because the couple had nothing in common besides an early physical attraction, she goes on to discuss Lowther's "friendship" with Ward Carson during her separation from Domphousse:

After Pat and Bill separated, Pat's friendship with Ward Carson continued... She was twenty-five by now and he was over forty. It is likely they were lovers (46).

It is through the use of the word "likely" that Brooks underemphasizes Lowther's affair with Carson. She does this presumably so as not to provide a precedent for the extra-marital affair Lowther would later have while married to Roy Lowther. The point here is not, of course, to make a moral judgment of Pat Lowther, but rather an ethical judgment

of her biographer. Like Sullivan's decision to dance around the fact of MacEwen's suicidal tendencies in *Shadow Maker*, we might argue that Brooks strategically underplays Lowther's extra-marital affair so that her woman-writer-as-victim thesis might have more currency. After all, she credits her interview with Ward Carson in the appendices of her biography, and later in the same chapter states that "Pat ended her relationship with Carson in about 1961" (47). So why pretend, in the earlier-quoted passage, that the relationship was only "likely"? A comparison of the deliberate underemphasis in this passage to the following one will make my point clear:

Roy continued to batter Pat's head after the blood stopped spurting against the lowered wallpaper. He pounded and pounded: a blow for every published poem, a blow for her job, a blow for every friend, a blow for every real or imagined lover, a blow for her Canada Council grant, a blow for the Fishermen's Hall reading, a hard blow for the upcoming Ironworkers' Hall reading, a blow for being chair of the League, a cascade of blows to blow out the Roy Lowther that he refused to see (191).

Breathtaking in its pathos, this passage shows Brooks at her lowest point. There is the melodramatic vocabulary ("spurting," "flowered," "a hard blow," "a cascade of blows"), sensational rhetoric (the repetition of the word "pounded" and the word "blow"), and most glaringly, a set of motives imputed to Roy Lowther that are not backed up simultaneously by any evidence from court documents (Brooks does back up her claims for motive in other sections of the biography). My claim in the introduction that the figure of the dead Canadian woman writer has come to stand, through biographical

influence, for the difficulty of being a writer in Canada, is perfectly encapsulated in this passage. Lowther is murdered for her art, and Brooks resurrects her in her literary biography, in order to make sure she is accorded her correct place in the canon of Canadian writers.

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One of the fascinating things about studying examples of biographical influence is that the marked tendencies of the phenomenon are the same, no matter whether the work in question is of superior aesthetic quality, or of merely passable aesthetic quality. For example, *Furry Creek*, the novel Keith Harrison published in 1999 after being "inspired by Pat Lowther's art" (6) is an emphatic aesthetic success, even though its methods are very similar to the methods employed by McKay and Brooks in their less aesthetically successful works. This fact suggests to me that biographical influence is such an accepted subject matter for Canadian writers that it is open to being done well, or to being done badly. Right from the start of his novel we can see Harrison participating in the pattern we have seen elsewhere. His acknowledgements, printed before the novel begins, make the obligatory nod to his interest not in the Lowther biography, but in the art. He acknowledges having reprinted some of Lowther's poems from her "fine" and "very strong" (6) collections *Time Capsule* and *A Stone Diary*, thereby setting the stage for a respectful work of art. Like McKay, he interweaves his own Lowther-inspired creation with Lowther's own poems, a dialogue that is less successful in McKay's case, but which

works well in *Furry Creek*. I will come back to the reasons why Harrison is more successful later in this section.

After the acknowledgements there follows the epigraph to the novel, which not surprisingly at this point in our study of this phenomenon, is from a poem by Margaret Atwood. The lines Harrison chooses from Atwood's "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written" take the poem out of its usual context, which is as a poem about oppression in countries other than Canada⁶:

This is the place
you would rather not know about,
this is the place that will inhabit you,
this is the place you cannot imagine

Assuming the "you" in the poem is aimed at the reader of Harrison's novel, the first two lines are ironic because they disavow the truth of the phenomenon of biographical influence: many of us do, in fact, have a prurient interest in the lives of MacEwen and Lowther. Anyone who has picked up the novel will most probably have done so because he or she has heard it is about Pat Lowther. The back cover copy and the publicity around the time of the novel's release made this connection clear.⁷ I believe the next two lines of the poem effect a switch and describe the author's subjectivity not the reader's: the author is inhabited by this "place" yet "cannot imagine" it. As we will see in our discussion of Harrison's novel, he studiously stays clear of the death of Pat Lowther (the place he cannot imagine)—in fact she is not even a character in the novel—yet still manages to "inhabit" it by writing around it in an effective and imaginative manner.

The larger irony in including this epigraph from Atwood is, of course, that she is the primary figure in the whole phenomenon of biographical influence this dissertation has been describing. This fact cannot be lost on Harrison, who later in the novel embeds a newspaper clipping from the time of Lowther's death stating that Lowther is the "equal of Margaret Atwood and Gwendolyn MacEwan [sic]" (93). While his intention is to compare Lowther's poetic reputation and skills to Atwood and MacEwan, I would argue that in a work as studied in its postmodernism as *Furry Creek*, we are justified in choosing instead to read the word "equal" as more ambivalent. It could refer, for instance, to the equality between Atwood and MacEwan and Lowther resulting from their interest in/being subject of/to biographical influence. Later in the novel, Harrison has a character perform a critical analysis of Lowther's prose poem "The Face." The character decides that the line "All faces change minute to minute" refers to Pat's rising fame. She is "not yet famous like Margaret Atwood who's on every cover, every CBC radio show and TV panel," (108) but more famous than the character himself, a struggling professor of creative writing who has had writer's block for over two years. Harrison's revisiting of Lowther in *Furry Creek*, an example of biographical influence, is thematized in the novel itself, where characters like the professor think about literary fame, the icon for which is Margaret Atwood.

I am chiefly interested in *Furry Creek* for two reasons. The first is that, like *Swann* and *The Blind Assassin*, it appeals to me as a successful novel. By this I mean its narrative, though interspersed with non-novelistic texts, and lacking the standard plot and characterization of realistic fiction, nevertheless moves the reader forward by the force of

what I will provisionally term its narrative power of conjecture. That is, the reader is left with possible clues in this novel, not unlike in a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, and allowed to wander off in search of the true "meaning" of the novel, the solution to the mystery. The second reason is that I see *Furry Creek* as a fascinating transition text in the area of biographical influence. It holds visible markers of indebtedness to less sophisticated examples of biographical influence (both in its fictional technique and in its subject matter), but it also goes far beyond these earlier examples. It moves forward via its engagement with the ethics of the literary enterprise and its engagement with what is left behind. The latter is another provisional phrase I will use, this time to describe a phenomenon whereby the estate of the author, in the case of Lowther especially her two youngest daughters, comes to play an increasingly large role in the production of meaning surrounding the author. We will see this most clearly in our subsequent discussion of Anne Henderson's documentary film, *Water Marks*.

Harrison's novel is a postmodern riff on a well-known novel by William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. In Faulkner's novel, each chapter is narrated by a different character, and the chapters are titled after the character whose point of view is being used in that chapter. The thin plot of the novel involves the family's burial of its matriarch, Cora, who is carried in a coffin throughout the novel. Cora is given one chapter to share her point of view. In Harrison's novel, a large number of fictional characters with a tangential relationship to the Lowther story (court typists, RCMP officers, UBC creative writing students) are each shown going about their daily business. Lowther is not a character in the novel, yet her presence is palpably evoked as each of the fictional characters

obliquely comments on her life and death. I will call this delicate and successful fictional technique exposition by association. For example, the RCMP diver who narrates the first chapter reminisces about his violent youth in an Alberta town, where "by midnight some guys, their brains soaked with beer, would throw a punch or two... all pretty harmless stuff," (12) and where his father died violently in a tractor accident. Through the overt and implied thematic links between the memories of these strangers (in the case of the diver, between the violence he experienced growing up and his losing a parent) and the Lowther story, the reader has the overwhelming sense of Lowther's experience as having been universalized, becoming applicable to a number of people who never knew her. Thus, the diver's subsequent comment about the relative tameness of the hooligans from his Alberta youth, when compared to the violence done to Lowther's body—"a battered head and bloated body in a river" (12)—effects a subtle, though pointed, comparison between Lowther and this unnamed RCMP diver. The effect, as in McKay's *The Pat Lowther Poem* with its invocation of country cousins coming to violent deaths, is to imbue the figure of Lowther with a redeeming power of comparison. This is the same redeeming power I've referred to on occasion, displayed well in a text like Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, and the award-winning film recently made of this novel.

A careful reading of *Furry Creek* shows that the two main issues Harrison uses for purposes of comparison between his fictional characters and Lowther, are violence and family discord, often resulting in death or separation. Another good example of Harrison's technique is the chapter about the fictional Mr. Harding, an average working class man who, while on a picnic with his daughter and wife one day, stumbles across the

body of Pat Lowther in Furry Creek. What the reader knows from reading the novel is that Mr. Harding and his wife Mary have been having a lot of arguments lately, and that their daughter Jennifer is frustrated by her parents. What lifts this stock family situation into successful fiction are Harrison's subtle comparisons between the fate of Pat Lowther and this family's current situation. For example, at the beginning of the story there is a description of how Jennifer reacts in resignation during her parents' bickering: "Our daughter's head fell forward, long black hair flinging down to her waist" (32). This might seem like merely the gesture of a teenager tired of hearing her parents fight. If we've been reading carefully however, as Harrison intends for us to read, then we hear the distinct echoes between Jennifer's gesture of resignation and the murder of Pat Lowther, whose often-remarked upon long dark hair also fell forward when her husband tossed her into Furry Creek. Later in the story, after his gruesome discovery, Harding describes Lowther's legs, "like a frog's at rest," and then moments later his daughter's "tadpole body wriggling fast through the water," making the comparison unmistakable. Harding's fear of losing his family is unconsciously (by him) juxtaposed against the loss of Pat Lowther.

Almost every chapter contains these echoes and comparisons, sometimes rendered so blithely as to make the reader wonder whether part of Harrison's goal is not to demystify some of the melodrama we saw surrounding the murder in our reading of Brooks' biography. In one chapter, for example, the fictional laboratory technician whose job it is to positively identify Lowther's body after it has been found, muses about her relationship with her lover, Ron: "Why does this guy believe I'll keep fitting my life into his schedule? I am suddenly floating, face-down, in the liquid tomato flavours of my own

kitchen" (49). In less skilled hands, this sort of off-hand echo of the Lowther murder scene ("floating, face-down") might be macabre or tacky, but Harrison manages to pull it off. Part of how Harrison manages this difficult feat is by resorting to a "documentary" style whereby his own musings as author of the novel are included in the novel itself. This self-revealing mode allows him to make his method transparent, taking away the shock, surprise, and disbelief that might otherwise be the reader's reaction to the exposition by association—which relies so heavily on the reader's prior knowledge of Lowther's murder. While in less experienced hands such a postmodern device might lead to an unpleasant reading experience, Harrison manages to successfully integrate his meta-texts (literary criticism, explanations of his own intentions, letters from Christine and Beth Lowther) into the novel *Furry Creek*, making it a stronger novel by this effort.

When I asked earlier whether there was a better way to offset the tendency in biographical influence to always read the writer's life posthumously into the writer's work, I was searching for the language to describe a literary ethics stronger than what Sullivan and Brooks had been able to offer in their biographies of MacEwen and Lowther. Reading *Furry Creek* has accidentally bestowed this vocabulary upon me. The experience of reading *Furry Creek* engenders and valorizes what I will call the foregrounding of honesty. Like the other provisional techniques I've deduced from this novel (narrative power of conjecture, exposition by association), foregrounding of honesty is a technique by which Harrison is able to mitigate his participation in what might be seen as the opportunistic world of biographical influence, without sacrificing aesthetic unity in his novel. I would argue that there is a progression in effectiveness

between the asides I have criticized in Sullivan and Brooks (where these biographers trouble their own participation in a biography-centered criticism) to the much-expanded interest, evident in Harrison's novel, in a true literary ethics.

We see this foregrounding of honesty at work in a number of sections of *Furry Creek*. There is the chapter, cited earlier, where a fictional professor of creative writing performs a virtuoso close reading of Lowther's prose poem "The Face." After the close reading has been done, the professor states that "Her murder will become part of a mystique now, that will mix image and achievement confusingly" (118). This one-line summation of biographical influence is Harrison's way of admitting his own implicatedness in the "mystique" his fictional creation describes so well. One reason why we can confidently assert this is because the parallels between the professor-character and Harrison himself are too close to be dismissed. Harrison also teaches creative writing in British Columbia, and like the close reading done by the fictional professor in this chapter, Harrison has also published a close-reading, "Notes on 'Notes from Furry Creek'" in 1997 in *Essays on Canadian Writing*. In case we aren't near a library, Harrison also reprints a good chunk of this essay in the novel, further blurring the boundaries between fiction and criticism and biography. Harrison reserves his most honest confession for the section he titles the "Afterward."

Titled "Writing the Unwritable," Harrison positions his Afterward as a direct response to the questions Atwood poses in the poem Harrison uses as an epigraph at the beginning of his novel. There *is* a way to write the unwritable, Harrison says to Atwood, and he goes on to describe the genesis of *Furry Creek*. Honest enough to admit the novel

stems from an "impulse to explore [both] Pat Lowther's poetry and biography," (212) Harrison goes on to state that he almost gave up on the project because it posed "artistic and ethical questions that were likely unanswerable" (212). We have seen above how Harrison answers the artistic dilemma; what remains is to look in more detail at how he has solved the ethical dilemma. If we recall the discussion in the last chapter about the playwrights Linda Griffiths and Claudia Dey and how they make use of "guarantors" like Margaret Atwood and Rosemary Sullivan in their preliminary notes and acknowledgements, then we are half way to understanding Harrison's strategy in *Furry Creek*. As Atwood and Sullivan are to the world of MacEwen biographical influence, so Christine and Beth Lowther are to the world of Pat Lowther biographical influence. All the writers we have looked at, and will look at, in this chapter, who have participated in biographical influence involving Pat Lowther, have also to some degree participated in dialogue with one or more of Lowther's two youngest daughters. In *Furry Creek*, Harrison goes so far as to reprint his personal correspondence with them.

Interestingly, the first letters from Christine and Beth are reprinted immediately following the chapter described above about the fictional professor at UBC, who might be said to be a thinly disguised version of Harrison himself. In the first letter, Christine Lowther writes "Thanks for sending the copies of your first chapter... I love the last line. It resonates with me a lot as you no doubt can imagine!" (121). We come away from this letter understanding, as Harrison would like us to, that Christine Lowther has been *allowed* to read Harrison's novel-in-progress. The meaning just below the surface is that Harrison is following an ethical literary practice by showing Christine his novel in

progress, even though it is fairly common knowledge that he does not have to do this, since the subject of his fiction is deceased. On the next page (keep in mind this is in the middle of the novel), Harrison reprints a letter from Beth Lowther. In this letter Beth also reacts approvingly to Harrison's novel in progress, concluding: "I trust you to do it well and lovingly" (123).

In the Afterward, Harrison explains these injections of real life into the novel as an antidote to feeling "too safe as a novelist" (218). Presumably, this is an elegant way of saying he feared the implications of publishing a book about Pat Lowther without being in touch with her youngest daughters. The implication of the writing-in of Christine and Beth in the latter half of the novel, coupled with the narrative of the Afterward—which is in large part a chronology of Harrison's first, second and third meetings with Beth Lowther and her progressively warmer friendliness towards him and his project—is clear. Christine and Beth are beginning to usurp, as far as practitioners of biographical influence are concerned, the function of their mother. Harrison's quotation from Susan Musgrave at the end of the Afterward drives this point home: "If I could foresee my own death, and know my daughters would grow up to have the dignity and the courage Pat Lowther's daughters have, I could die... well, with 'smiles in all my corners'" (219). Ever so slightly, but nonetheless significantly, the balance of power in the arena of biographical influence has shifted. It is as if the violence done to Pat Lowther, and which is the source of all posthumous interest in her, must not be revisited (metaphorically, of course) on her daughters. The practitioner of biographical influence must now abide (and

show evidence of having abided) by an unwritten code of ethics. The question, of course, is what this new ethics means for biographical influence, and for art in general.

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One place to look for an answer to this question is in Anne Henderson's recent documentary film, *Water Marks*. The film premiered at the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto in 2002, and has since been shown on the CBC. It is told in straightforward documentary style, largely eschewing the dramatizations that were a large component of the documentaries on Susanna Moodie and Gwendolyn MacEwen mentioned earlier.⁸ Instead of dramatizing Pat Lowther's life, *Water Marks* takes Keith Harrison's method one step further, and tells the story of Pat Lowther almost solely through the story of her youngest daughters, Beth and Christine. Just as Harrison's novel gets around using Pat Lowther as a character (thus avoiding any charges of sensationalization) so too does Henderson's film focus on the story of how Beth and Christine coped after the death of their mother and the jailing of their father. As I read the film, what is most at stake is its unstated interest in transferring the power and melodrama of the well-known story of Pat Lowther's murder, onto the less-well-known story of the fallout of her murder on her daughters. It could thus be argued that *Water Marks* is the first fully post- or meta-biographical influence work of art on Pat Lowther. Such a reading of the film leads to the conclusion that it is alright to use and retell the Pat Lowther story, as long as something ethically beneficial is gained from it. In *Water Marks*, the ethical benefit is a series of

emotional reunions, first between Beth and Christine, and then between the sisters and Allan Safarik, who represents Pat's friends and peers.

Like the title of the movie, with its obvious meaning of watermarks on paper, and its more hidden meaning of water marks on Lowther's murdered body, Henderson's film also relies on a structure of double meaning. In this double structure, the obvious structure is the historical facts. At this level of the movie, people such as Kathy Lyons (Pat Lowther's daughter from her first marriage), Ruth Lowther (Roy Lowther's daughter from his first marriage), Allan Safarik (Pat's friend and one-time publisher) and Sean Rossiter, a newspaper reporter who covered Roy Lowther's trial, tell the story of Pat Lowther's life as they knew it. The second structure is the redemptive narrative. Here, the filmmaker reunites Christine and Beth Lowther (Lowther's daughters from her second marriage), one of whom lives on Vancouver Island, and the other in Vancouver, and takes them on a field trip to Mayne Island where they talk about the happy summers they spent with their aunt and uncle, the experience of hiding out on Mayne with their father after he had murdered their mother, the taunts of their fellow schoolchildren when news of their mother's murder had become well known, their separation from their father after his arrest, and their unhappy teenage years in foster care and group homes.

By including scene after scene of the women walking and talking together on Mayne, the redemptive level of the film attempts to achieve a visual solution to what Beth Lowther calls at one point the events "that set us apart forever." Beth's statement is cryptic: does she mean the events that set her and Christine apart from each other (a fact established in the film and by reading between the lines of Christine's own poetry), or is it

a separation from the rest of the world, by virtue of being the children of a notoriously-murdered poet? Either way, *Water Marks* largely succeeds at overemphasizing the closeness between the sisters.⁹ Besides the trip to Mayne, the other method the filmmaker uses to achieve these reunions is the skillful repetition of scenes where Christine and Beth are united in front of photo albums, both ones they have inherited and ones they are themselves creating.

The second reunion is one that answers the need voiced throughout the film for a sense of closure felt by various friends and family members in the Lowther story. Allan Safarik describes how he and other poets and literary people felt saddened and deprived by never truly being able to say goodbye to Pat Lowther. In the next shot, Safarik is "reunited" with Beth and Christine, who now stand in for their mother. At this reunion, Safarik gives both daughters rare copies of *The Age of the Bird*, a book his press, Blackfish, published by their mother in 1972. The three walk along the ocean and talk, ironically it would seem, about the mythologized position Pat Lowther now occupies. Beth remarks on the "constant eulogizing [that] sanctifies, and ironically... dehumanizes her. It should be said that the dishes were dirty..." The true heroes of the Pat Lowther story have now become her daughters, whose perseverance and clear-sightedness, in the face of the family tragedy and the prurient interest by critics and purveyors of biographical influence, have reached near-heroic proportions. In one scene, this passing of the torch is taken to new heights as Beth quotes her recently-deceased grandmother, Virginia Tinmuth, as saying that Rowan (Beth's son) is "the only one like Pat." Lowther

lives on in her children *and* grandchildren, who have now become the subjects of biographical influence themselves.

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In a situation as complex as that which surrounds the figure of Pat Lowther, poet, mother, victim of a violent murder, subject of biographical influence, it is no wonder that literary criticism of Lowther's work should be seen repeatedly to search for the ethical response. Beginning with Sean Ryan's 1977 essay "Florence McNeil and Pat Lowther" in *Canadian Literature*, all critics who have published work on Lowther (and the number is even smaller than in the case of MacEwen) have necessarily drawn parallels between her life and her work. Sometimes, they have even asked what the implications of this necessity are. Ryan ends his discussion of Lowther with the following strongly-worded statement:

Some reviewers have read this final work [*A Stone Diary*] as ironic and prophetic of her death. A more judicious reading will see the poems as statements of affirmation, quietly spelling out her resilient will, saying words to scatter the dark (25).

Jean Mallinson, in her brilliant essay "'Woman On / Against Snow': A Poem and Its Sources," concludes that a necessary part of reading Lowther's work is uncovering the narrative of "the poet's life as woman and writer... This narrative source cannot be demonstrated, but the whole history of lyric poetry justifies the inference" (17). The difference between such a statement and Atwood's earlier-voiced claims about the

necessity of separating literature from autobiography, is striking. Marya Fiamengo has written about how Lowther's "poems while deeply personal are not confessional in the alienated tradition of self-obsessional neuroses which limits the often fine achievements of a Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton" (15). Della Golland asks, "should one examine a poet's work, knowing her fate, yet explore through the poems for portents of a violent death? Perhaps not" (36). Most recently, Eric Ormsby concludes that:

Time Capsule is a difficult book to review. One cannot read these poems in willed ignorance of their author's fate. By the same token, however, one wishes to accord the poems the respect of a dispassionate, if sympathetic, gaze. The ghastly carnival that has swirled around the work of Sylvia Plath for forty years now should stand as a caution (5).

As a conclusion to this chapter, and as a way to sort out my own paradoxical feelings on this topic, I asked Della Golland, the critic who has looked most closely at the total Lowther poetic corpus, if she would answer some questions in an interview.

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Richard Almonte: How did you come to know about the work of Pat Lowther?

Della Golland: The first I heard about Pat Lowther was in the *Canadian Magazine*—a Saturday supplement to the *Toronto Star*, of June 5, 1976. In that issue, there was a feature article about her called "Eulogy for a Poet."

RA: Was your decision to write a master's thesis on Lowther's poetry prompted by certain qualities of the poetry or by the circumstances of her life? Do you think the two aspects are separable?

DG: Before I even considered Lowther as a thesis subject, I'd written several undergraduate papers on her poetry. Of course, because of her tragic murder by her husband, when Lowther was only 40, her poetry becomes somewhat more poignant, especially the poems where she has a prophetic insight into her own violent death. So, yes, there is a connection between her life and death and her poems.

RA: Explain your opinion on the question of whether or not biographical information is important for the critic of Lowther's poetry. Did you find biographical information "getting in the way" of your reading of her poetry? Or did you find it useful?

DG: I suppose I'd prefer to have been introduced to Lowther's poetry in a literary magazine or journal or at an actual poetry reading. Then the poems would stand on their own, but in an isolation, of sorts. Her nature poems, poems about her children, and her poems to Pablo Neruda do not need any major biographical explanation. Any poetry reader and/or scholar can see the universal insights and feel her powerful, direct language on timeless themes.

In my opinion, the biographical information was an ambivalent issue. Of course, the prophetic poems such as "Kitchen Murder" are powerful in themselves—but even more bone-chilling when you see in them the knowledge of her murder—a murder which took place in her own home, with a common household item.

RA: Could you tell me about how the event you organized with Toby Brooks in 1995, "The Triumph of Pat Lowther: A Commemorative Reading Honouring the Poet Who Died 20 Years Ago" came to be? What do you think the overall effect of this event was?

DG: Toby did most of the organizing from Ottawa. She was semi-retired at the time and had access to e-mail, etc. I can't remember the specific details of time and place, but we both held Lowther in high regard, and thought that the League of Canadian Poets should think of an anniversary reading of *her* poems at their next AGM. After all, it is the League that annually presents a Pat Lowther Award to a promising female poet.

It was only after the League declined to host such an event that Toby and I decided to organize our own. This event was deliberately planned to take place during the League's AGM of June 1995, so that the current winner and past winners of the Pat Lowther award would be in Toronto.

It's hard for me to say what the overall effect of that event was. The immediate effect was the personal satisfaction and intellectual and literary satisfaction of hearing an almost forgotten poet's work being read out loud. The event was reported in the subsequent issue of the League's *Museletter*. Also, the reading was a turning point in the life of Chris Lowther, Pat Lowther's youngest daughter who travelled to Toronto for this occasion. Chris has written in an introduction to a posthumous collection of her mother's work [*Time Capsule*] that the 1995 reading in Toronto was special to her, as she had never paid so much attention to Lowther's actual work.

RA: There is a sense in which Lowther's posthumous reputation is burdened by a sense of what it is ethically possible to do as a critic writing about a murdered woman writer. Would you agree with this statement? How do you see the "politics" surrounding the posthumous Lowther "industry"?

DG: I can see the politics issue in your question, but I must disagree with the industry implication in your tone. To my knowledge there has been a critical biography, one unpublished play, and one documentary film. There has also been a fictionalized version of Lowther's death [*Furry Creek*] and my master's thesis.

I cannot speak authentically for all of the above, except for my own work. Of course, Lowther's tragic death, short life, and prophetic poems are easily sensationalized and/or trivialized for popular consumption. But I do not feel that any of the works mentioned were meant to make money or exploit Lowther's poems or her legacy for personal gain.

Pat Lowther published only four slim volumes of poetry during her lifetime. No one knows what she might have written had she lived until 70 or 75. She will remain a minor poet in Canadian literature of the twentieth century, regardless of the number of critiques, theses, or documentaries created about her. To my knowledge, except for students and scholars of twentieth-century Canadian literature, very few educated people know of her work or even of her death.

As for the first part of your question, I can see your point about a critic (especially a male one) having to be careful about discussing the work of a "murdered woman writer," especially one on the left side of the political spectrum. However,

Lowther has written several great poems like "Woman On/Against Snow," "Notes from Furry Creek" and "Chacabuco, the Pit" which will be anthologized and studied (I hope) by many future generations of students and poetry lovers. As with most poets, there are many published or unpublished works that will remain unknown or obscure because they are overshadowed by the few great and lasting poems. Even well-known poets such as Sylvia Plath and Gwen MacEwen will be famous for a number of monumental works, but not for every published poem.

RA: How would you quantify the significance of Lowther's being a woman murdered during the ascendancy of feminism in the 1970s, and her current place in Canadian literature?

DG: I'm reluctant to quantify the significance of the tragic murder of a female poet during the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s. I don't think that's possible for me. However, there is always a danger, in a case like this, for Lowther to be clothed as a sacrificial icon, a martyr to the cause of violence against women. The victim role is easily taken up by well-meaning writers and/or feminists, using Lowther as an example. I don't believe that this was done in her case. My reason for saying this is that her name and poetry are not well known outside of small literary circles. You cannot create a martyr of an obscure literary figure.

As I mentioned in a previous answer, I believe that Lowther's place in Canadian literature will be as a minor poet of the twentieth century—minor in relation to the number of lasting poems she wrote and minor in her own influence on other poets.

My hope is that she will never be forgotten as a powerful voice as long as her major masterpieces are anthologized, studied, and read out loud.

RA: Finally, as a high school English teacher, could you talk about whether you've ever brought Lowther up with your students? If so, or if you had to, how would you go about teaching her poetry? Is Lowther amenable to being "taught"?

DG: I have taught some of Lowther's poems to a Grade 11 English class in the context of a poetry unit, part of the Grade 11 curriculum. The two poems used were "Woman On/Against Snow" and "Notes From Furry Creek." These poems were not considered part of a Canadian or Women's literature unit, but as great poems—period.

Of course, I introduced Lowther as a poet whom I had written a thesis on and whose work I had studied in great detail. "Teaching" poetry, or literature in general is a nebulous undertaking. As Northrop Frye has said, you can't teach literature, only literary criticism.

I introduce a poem in many different ways to high school students, but the first step is for me, or a student, to read the poem out loud. Poetry began as an oral art and must be heard out loud if possible, before you begin to teach, analyze or deconstruct it. The structure and poetic devices can be discussed and discovered by the students, led by the teacher. The "soul" of the poem must be discovered by each individual.

Lowther herself is just as amenable or non-amenable to being taught as any poet. The power of a poem is in the unique use of the language, the imagery, the resonant chords it strikes in the reader or listener, the music of sounds that speaks to each person in a personal, yet universal way. I did say this was a nebulous undertaking!

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Golland's comments are useful as this dissertation approaches its conclusion. A number of the cautionary notes she raises in response to the implications embedded in my questions, particularly about the Lowther "industry," the issue of a male analysis of a woman writer's posthumous reputation, and her insistence on a realistic reading of Lowther's reputation, are ones I will revisit in my conclusion. Yet Golland's experience of coming to know Lowther and her work, and then making use of both the poet and her work for her own reasons, is consistent with the general contours of the theory of biographical influence this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate. Despite her hope for a separation between biography and literary work, Golland's experience follows a familiar pattern. There is the classical "recognition" experience (like Atwood's discovery of Moodie in her father's bookshelf, and Sullivan's meeting MacEwen back stage at the Music Hall theatre), in this case it is Golland's reading about Lowther in the *Canadian Magazine*. Then there is the "revisiting" experience (like Atwood's dream of Moodie described in the Afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*) when Golland decides to write undergraduate papers and later a master's thesis years after the first encounter with Lowther. Finally, there is the underlying impulse to "rectify" the situation—Lowther is not as well known as she should be—by writing Lowther into the narrative of Canadian literature and criticism through her master's thesis.

Conclusion

If the tone at certain points of this dissertation has come across as accusatory in even the smallest amount, this has not been my intention. Still, I realize as I look back at what I have written, that figures like Margaret Atwood and Rosemary Sullivan may have been turned, against my actual intentions, into villains of sorts, in the narrative of biographical influence as I have invented it. Even my interview with a close acquaintance, Della Golland, eventually concludes with a neat casting of Golland as part of a familiar pattern of biographical influence.

For all the positive aspects of his various archaeologies of knowledge, the net effect of Foucault's central insight—that all history, all knowledge, is written, and can be decoded—has the effect, finally, of creating a great epistemological logjam. The writing of academic literary criticism, especially in English departments in the past two decades, has become a predictably dialectical process. Proposing a grand theory has as much worth these days as the paper the theory is printed on. As Robert Lecker's deconstruction of Frye's "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*, or Margaret Reeves' deconstruction of Watt's language in *The Rise of the Novel*, or Leila Silvana May's taking-down-a-peg of Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* show all too well, all grand theories are eventually shown to be graspings for cohesion.¹ And cohesion seems to be the enemy. The only grand theory left intact is the unstated one that makes it almost necessary that all-encompassing theories like Watt's and Frye's and Armstrong's,

need to be dissected in this way. At worst, this is an epistemology of distrust. At best, it is a fair exchange of ideas, leading ideally to fairer and improved hermeneutical synthesis.

Sure enough, the modest theory I have put forward in this dissertation is open to the same dissection indicated above. Let me restate the theory briefly so that we know where we stand. Biographical influence is a phenomenon that is glimpsed in certain late twentieth-century Canadian novels, poems, plays, films, and biographies through which contemporary writers use some of their forebears, specifically some of their female forebears, in order to construct an alternative canon to the traditional one we are taught to valorize in high school and university. The process of biographical influence has an identifiable motive, and that motive is a desire to validate the position of "author" in this society. The reason why women writers like Moodie and MacEwen and Lowther are most often used to demonstrate this desire is that their difficult or foreshortened careers are a perfect metaphor for the larger problem, which is the marginality of the Canadian writer in general.

What are the weaknesses in the edifice I have constructed along these lines? First, as readers must have deduced by now, the theory of biographical influence presupposes a commonality of purpose, or motive, as I have termed it in this dissertation. I am expecting readers to some degree to buy the idea that writers as various as Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Keith Harrison, Linda Griffiths and all the others, share, at some level, the desire I have identified as being at the base of biographical influence. The desire is in many ways conceptual. It is of course impossible for me to gauge, short of putting the question to each writer in an interview,

whether or not this desire exists, and that is why I have relied on the novels and stories and poems and plays that these writers produce, as my evidence.

Another criticism that may be levelled at the theory of biographical influence is glimpsed in the criticism I made earlier about Misao Dean's revisionist feminist reading of late nineteenth-century Canadian women's novels. I argued that Dean's readings of little-read authors like Jessie Sime were largely ineffectual because Sime's texts are not easily available, and that more generally, she does not have an audience today. Then, in the chapter on Susanna Moodie, I argued a diametrically opposed viewpoint. Moodie, I said, becomes subject to biographical influence precisely because contemporary critics and writers have turned a blind eye to the majority of Moodie's output: her Victorian formula novels. Is there a way that I can criticize Dean and still hold on to my belief that our need to "rescue" the victims of biographical influence has to do with our skewed idea of their actual careers?

Inevitably, this contradiction is not easily resolvable. In fact, any solution is likely to be artificial and not indicative of the complexities and paradoxes that make the institution of Canadian literature as interesting as it currently is. For example, in this dissertation I have perhaps contradictorily described biographical influence as a "methodology," as "subject matter," as a "subversive act" and as a "system of value exchange." I could argue that these four definitions of biographical influence are, at base, methods of argumentation, but that would be simplifying what I see as a complex phenomenon. I would like, in the end, to hold on to all my opinions about biographical influence. Most notably, that it is a gutsy strategy on the part of the artists who employ it,

but at the same time, a fictional gamble that distorts the historical truth of a number of our women writers' lives and literary output.

The implicit argument I have been making about biographical influence as a shift in power between Canadian writers on the one hand and scholars of Canadian literature on the other, has presupposed a division into camps that is not as simple as it seems at first glance. In fact there is an overarching similarity between the two camps—both display a marked interest in confronting the present by means of the past. Only Margaret Laurence's portrait of Catharine Parr Traill escapes this overarching need or desire. Undoubtedly the fact that Laurence is alone in being able to "let go" of Traill is instructive in its own right.

Notes

Chapter One

¹ Examples of criticism that brings into question the existence of influence in the Canadian literary context include John Metcalf's essays "Freedom From Culture" and "The New Ancestors," W.J. Keith's essay "Shooting Niagara? Some Pessimistic Thoughts about the Future of English-Canadian Literary Studies," and in a completely different political vein, Dionne Brand's comments about considering herself firmly in the "middle of Black literature" as opposed to on "the margin of Canadian literature" (quoted in Morrell 14).

² As we shall see in Chapter Four, the tumultuousness of Moodie's life is largely a construct of Atwood's in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and not an "authentic" tumultuousness as in the cases of Gwendolyn MacEwen and Pat Lowther.

³ David Cowart's *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing* is the most concerted effort at creating an alternative theory that encompasses all literary phenomena that traditionally fall under the purview of influence and intertextuality. Cowart's main argument is that unlike the "poor relation influence" (3) and "its cousin, the much discussed intertextuality," (187) literary symbiosis has the advantage of being an organic spectrum of phenomena, which Cowart is loathe to "pin... down" (3) to just one process. Literary symbiosis takes in everything from translations from one language to another, to texts with significant allusions, to conscious examples of texts that misread or enter into dialogue with prior texts. The main feature of Cowart's literary symbiosis is that continuity is achieved between writers and genres of different periods, with the net result of a "literary reconfiguration" which is not parasitical, but rather a species of "literary rejuvenation." Despite convincing close readings of, for instance, the symbiosis achieved between Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, or Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there is a vital weakness to Cowart's argument. He asks his readers to assume, as he does, that the main function of literary art is the recycling of previously used ideas and characters, themes and structures. Unfortunately, he is not able to provide an interesting or viable enough reason for this recycling. His argument is tautological, invoking terms like "regeneration," "reassembling," or "reconfiguration" on a regular basis without providing a precise theoretical explanation (as does Bloom, for instance) about why this activity might be taking place. The goal of replacing Bloom's fiercely-fought battles over influence with an imprecise system of symbiosis is not in the end an improvement over Bloom. And it is only marginally more precise than the intertextuality of Kristeva and Barthes and Genette which Cowart also assumes he has superceded.

⁴ Carole Gerson calls this a "comforting myth" (Gerson 48, 206n12) and lists critic Marguerite Anderson and critic/anthologist Rosemary Sullivan as two of its proponents. It could also be argued that the modernist canonizers of the 1930s and 1940s, including F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith and Louis Dudek, advocated a "masculinist" tradition, excising any matriarchal characteristics evident in the Canadian canon up until that time.

⁵ Influential theories of the male-centered American Renaissance include those authored by F.O. Matthiessen and Leslie Fiedler. In the past three decades, these theories have come under close scrutiny and critique, most notably by feminist and African-American critics. Despite these critiques, the notion of the nineteenth-century American Romance continues to be seductive, explaining in large measure why Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville and Thoreau remain vital to nineteenth-century American literary studies.

⁶ Atwood is never re-writing the work itself. She is less interested in Moodie's literary output than she is in a highly aestheticized re-writing of the events of Moodie's life.

⁷ Metcalf's impressionistic point is bolstered and given statistical credence in the sobering final chapter, entitled "Making It Real (Again)," in Robert Lecker's 1995 study, *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*.

⁸ Lecker includes what seems like a grudging admission in *Making It Real*—no doubt prompted by attacks on him by Frank Davey: "whatever questions I pose about Canadian canons are inevitably coloured by my own business and editorial interests" (1995 x). This is a rather restricted explanation of the unique position he holds in Canadian literary culture. Not only is he an influential academic critic of Canadian literature, but the publishing company he co-owns has published books in Canadian literature and criticism, and the journal he publishes and edits, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, is the commonly accepted arbiter of important scholarly work in the field.

Chapter Two

¹In his biography of Virginia Woolf, James King argues that Woolf's art was based on "employing a new conception of the female self, one which had not been assimilated into male culture" (xviii). This is a nod to the feminist literary theorizing of Jane Marcus, who famously coined the word sapphistry to describe Woolf's female-centered rhetorical strategies. According to Marcus, Woolf "makes sexual difference an asset for women, makes the male the other, defines his language as different from the natural, normal speech of women together, and asserts the superiority of womens' speech as a demotic and democratic instrument of communication" (138). Marcus reads *A Room of One's Own* as Woolf's triumphant putting into play of this sapphistry, which she likens to a lesbian seduction. A vital part of the rhetoric of sapphistry is its unwillingness to be declarative. The interrogative is the preferred stance of this woman-centered rhetoric: "We are not told the truth as she sees it, but we participate in the drama of asking

questions and searching for answers" (148). I see an important parallel between Marcus's delineation of a feminist rhetoric of interrogation with Godard's earlier-mentioned discussion of an alternative to Barthes' myth that would validate the interrogative.

² An important exception to this lack of "battles" would be the Robert Lecker-Frank Davey exchange in the 1990s about power in the field of Canadian literature. The monographs that include significant essays from this exchange are Lecker's *Making it Real* and Davey's *Canadian Literary Power*.

³ The notoriety brought about by Rose's publication of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is ironically occasioned by her own inclusion, in the Preface, of inflammatory and gossipy revelations such as the following: "In correspondence with the Hughes's, this book was called 'evil'. Its publisher was told it would not appear. At one point an attempt was made to revoke previously granted permission to quote from Plath's work... I was told by Ted Hughes that my analysis would be damaging for Plath's (now adult) children and that speculation of the kind I was seen as engaging in about Sylvia Plath's sexual identity would in some countries be 'grounds for homicide'" (xi). In the face of these revelations made before any analysis is even introduced, is it any wonder that we might not take Rose's later claims to never be writing about the life of Plath, but only about the work, at face value? On this point, see Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, which begins by stating, "Perhaps the most interesting thing about... versions of Plath's life is the way her story breaks through conventional boundaries. When critic Jacqueline Rose chose to write about Plath's last poems... she ended up writing a psychological study of Plath and her readers" (xi). Rose has failed to convince her readers of her detachment from an interest in the biography over the work.

Chapter Three

¹ That biographical influence is being enacted through sculpture is a fact I witnessed first-hand at Travellers Tales Bookshop in Picton, Ontario, two years ago. The store was holding an exhibition entitled "In Their Own Words" which consisted of portrait-busts by Toronto-based artist Susan Longmire. These busts utilized "as a finished surface the paper pages from the authors' own published works." (Exhibition brochure for "In Their Own Words.") Staring at me from various vantage points in the store were Margaret Laurence, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Pauline Johnson among others, "clothed" in a skin made up of pages from their own books.

² Another reading of the "patently transparent constructedness of Canadian literature" is the somewhat stinging commentary in Robert Lecker's essay "The Rhetoric of Back-Cover Copy: Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*" in his book *Making It Real*.

³ Shields discusses the original drafts of *Swann* in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel. In conversation with Della Golland, I was told that Pat Lowther's biographer Toby Brooks

asked Shields whether Mary Swann was based in any way on Pat Lowther, but was told there was no connection.

⁴ This weakness in Shields's technique is evident also in *The Stone Diaries* where the words that come out of Victoria's mouth sound exactly like those that come out of Daisy's mouth, even though the characters are two generations apart.

Chapter Four

¹ For a somewhat different opinion on the significance of *Green Gables*, see Jeannette Lynes' essay, ?.

² A transcription of the Moodie plaque was provided to me by email on November 15, 2002 by Michelle Pilon, Information Officer at the Historical Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

³ See my essay "Treason in the Fort: Blackness and Canadian Literature" on Moodie and blackness. I am grateful to Jennifer Harris for pointing me in the direction of Moodie's daughters in law. Charlotte Gray briefly mentions the fact of their blackness in *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

⁴ Bowering says that "The Canadian centenary was perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to Canadian criticism because we started counting mooses [sic] and snow forts instead of paying attention to writing" (15). I read this as an attack on Frye, Atwood and D.G. Jones, among other practitioners of thematic criticism.

⁵ In "Rewriting Roughing It," Thurston's strongest appeal to a dialogic, non-author-centric reading of Moodie, the critic's own language betrays him. In an essay which explicitly argues against the idea of Moodie as author of the text, Thurston makes claims such as "Moodie can only enter one-line comments as not only the system of narrative but the system of land exchange is disrupted" or "Moodie can contain these characters in a narrative framework without betraying them" (1986 201). In more recent work, this ambivalence in Thurston's view of Moodie is reproduced again. In *The Work of Words: The Writing of Susanna Strickland Moodie*, Thurston concludes by noting the "disunity in [Moodie's] voice" (echoing his earlier argument about Moodie as an author-function, not an actual author) but notes at the same time that "Moodie remains integral to English Canadian literary culture because her life and *writing* are bound up with the history and ideology of nineteenth-century Upper Canada" (1996 172 emphasis added).

⁶ Used to great effect, for example, in Mary di Michele's 1994 novel *Under My Skin*.

⁷ Findley's refreshingly unfashionable view of literature as potent with redeeming qualities is similar to his straightforward approbation of the idea that writers' lives are important to other writers. In an interview with Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan,

Findley states that "if you write in this time and are really interested in writing and not just being published, sure you're going to end up having conversations with other writers. It's unavoidable. But every single writer will deny that there's any connection or influence...As people, writers aren't important at all, but as people who write they can be important." (53)

Chapter Five

¹ The books available include *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* (1982) published by Mosaic Press; *The Honey Drum* (1983) also published by Mosaic; MacEwen's adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Birds* (1993) published by Exile Editions and MacEwen's translation (with Yannis Ritsos) of *The Trojan Women* (1998) by Exile Editions. The Web sites consulted were www.chapters.indigo.ca and www.amazon.ca.

² For example, Sullivan's essay on MacEwen and elegiac biography, published in the Australian journal *Meanjin*, is constituted of previously-published portions of her biography, *Shadow Maker*. Similarly, Jan Bartley's Twayne Series monograph on MacEwen (*Gwendolyn MacEwen and Her Works*) is a reworking of her earlier University of British Columbia Press monograph entitled *Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen*.

³ I am thinking here of recent reissues by Talon Books of some of Nichol's work, including *Meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol* (2001) and *bpNichol Comics* (2001). In terms of academic criticism on Nichol, the work done by Roy Miki, for example his edited collection *Tracing the Paths* (1988), comes to mind.

⁴ See Kamal Al-Solaylee's review of *The Gwendolyn Poems* at www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_05.23.02/arts/onstage.html and Gord McLaughlin's profile of Claudia Dey at www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_05.09.02/arts/gwendolynpoems.html.

⁵ See for example Atwood's "standard disclaimer" (xviii) in her recently published University of Cambridge Empson lectures, *Negotiating With the Dead*. As has become typical, Atwood writes: "I am a writer and a reader, and that's about it. I'm not a scholar or a literary theoretician, and any such notions that have wandered into this book have got there by the usual writerly methods, which resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests" (xviii-xix). In this statement, as in the rest of her Introduction to the Empson lectures, Atwood skillfully uses a deprecating humour to underplay her power vis a vis the supposedly tremendous power of scholars and theoreticians. Simultaneously, she disavows her role as scholar and theoretician by falling back on an innocent-sounding species of bricolage whereby she will "steal the shiny bits" of criticism and theory, but not become a scholar or theoretician by doing so. Ironically, for a feminist of long-standing, Atwood idealizes herself as a vaguely domestic, non-threatening writer, a builder of "disorderly nests." A straightforward search of the MLA bibliography using "Atwood, Margaret" in the subject

heading will of course reveal the falseness of Atwood's claim in the Empsom lectures. She in fact has a large body of scholarly work to her name, including her well known monograph *Survival*, but also numerous scholarly articles, such as the one listed in my works cited about Gwendolyn MacEwen's male muse.

⁶ Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride*, which is a minor example of biographical influence because of its composite portrait of MacEwen in the character of Wards Island-dwelling Charis, is also built upon a vampirical theme. The three main characters, Tony, Charis and Roz, are women whose male partners have been stolen from them by a larger-than-life character named Zenia, who is often described as dark and pale. Most of her victims, including Roz's husband Mitch, and Charis' boyfriend Billy (an American Vietnam War draft dodger, vaguely based on the writer George Fetherling with whom Gwendolyn MacEwen had a short affair) disappear or die as a result of their seduction by Zenia. Tony's partner West and Roz's son Larry are the only survivors of Zenia.

⁷ In an eerie echo, Pat Lowther's daughter Beth uses almost the exact language as Findley to describe some of her mother's poetry. In her introduction to the posthumous volume *Time Capsule*, entitled "I am still with you," Beth Lowther writes, "Perhaps, in as much as women living with a violent spouse carry, like a virus, the possibility of their own deaths inside them, she knew, and subconsciously *began making preparations*" (18 emphasis added). Ironically (considering my critique of Sullivan's biography of MacEwen in this chapter), Beth Lowther is quoted in Keith Harrison's novel *Furry Creek* praising *Shadow Maker* for its respectful nature. Harrison reprints the letter from Beth Lowther in his novel, the gist of the quotation being that Beth hopes Harrison will manage a similar Sullivanesque balance in his novel.

⁸ Another good example of the use of this trope is in Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, which has recently been made into an award-winning movie. The structure of the film makes the madness of Virginia Woolf (and her latent homosexuality) into a mechanism for other characters in the movie to fulfill their destinies and learn more about themselves. Interestingly, Brenda R. Silver's argument about theatrical and cinematic uses of Woolf in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is that Woolf is a figure of fear. With *The Hours*, this truism appears to be changing as Woolf morphs into a therapeutic, mediating figure.

⁹ Without supplying any further comment, Sullivan writes, "Joe remembered that he and Gwen spoke once of marriage, though theirs was never a sexual relationship" (79).

¹⁰ Another example of the presence and non-presence of homosexuality in renderings of MacEwen's life is the moment in the Brenda Longfellow documentary, *Shadow Maker*, when writer Judith Merrill claims that even though she is an "unregenerate heterosexual," she fell in love with MacEwen the first time she met her. In the Sullivan biography, *Shadow Maker*, upon which the film is based, this comment is edited out so that only the falling in love part of Merrill's memory of first meeting MacEwen is included.

¹¹ This might not be true if more critics were to undertake critical readings of MacEwen. Only Branko Gorjup's critical introduction to his selected poems, *The Last Hieroglyph*, has been published since the publication of Sullivan's biography in 1995.

¹² See for example Ackroyd's biography, *Dickens*.

¹³ In *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature*, David Simpson has critiqued what I term authentication-texts. He suggests they are inadequate as an "alternative to" what he argues postmodernism has banished, an "effort at truth" (62).

¹⁴ See my "Narratorial Authentication in Shadd and Smallwood," in *Writing Thru Blackness: Black Canadian Literary Criticism*, Richard Almonte, David Chariandy and Jennifer Harris, eds., forthcoming from Syracuse University Press.

¹⁵ Sullivan states somewhat disingenuously on page 193 that she has "not wanted to face it before, leaping, with a biographer's presumption, to unfounded conclusions, but it seems that on the list of terrors from Gwen's childhood, one must consider sexual violation." Again, the third-person "one" as in "one has to ask" (46) exculpates Sullivan from the obvious—*her* need to ask in the first place.

¹⁶ The closest thing we have to a full reading of MacEwen's work is Branko Gorjup's introduction to the volume *The Last Hieroglyph*. There he treats writing from all phases of MacEwen's career, and even dares to make generalized arguments about its importance, something few other critics have been willing or interested enough to do.

¹⁷ Typical examples of poor critical acumen include Sullivan's claim that "one can almost hear Gwen speaking of herself" by way of introducing the poem "The Parents" (323); her unexplained decision to analyze the speaker in MacEwen's *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* as "Lawrence/Gwendolyn"; and her overly-emotional and personalized analysis of the poem "It Comes Upon You," where an image is described as "breaki[ng] the heart" (251).

¹⁸ I would argue that the visual representation of MacEwen is nearly of as much interest as that of Virginia Woolf. The same Mac Reynolds photo is used on Sullivan's *Shadow Maker* and on *The Early Years* collection published by Exile Editions. See Brenda R. Silver for an excellent reading of the importance of photographic portraits of Woolf in the "versioning" or creation of the Woolf myth. See Lucasta Miller for a discussion of the significance of the National Gallery portrait of Charlotte Brontë in the Brontë myth.

¹⁹ See Atwood's review of Plath's *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* in *Second Words*.

²⁰ For a description of the McMichael exhibition see www.mcmichael.com/Revisions/revisions-perspectives-women.shtml.

Chapter Six

¹ Peter M. Sacks explicitly draws a comparison between how an elegy shows the poet “working through” a loss and “Freud’s phrase ‘the work of mourning’” (1). Sacks claims that “many elegiac conventions should be recognized as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary versions of specific... psychological practices” (2). This comparison takes us back to the argument advanced in Chapter Two about the hidden motive of female literary myth explication monographs, the motive of mourning. In Atwood’s “Another Night Visit (for Pat)” we can see the classical elegiac conventions at work: among them the movement from grief to consolation, and the drawing of attention away from the lost subject and towards the “elegist’s own surviving powers” (3).

² On the significance of stone imagery in Lowther’s poetry, see Ormsby and Golland.

³ Roy Lowther murdered his wife by hitting her in the head numerous times with a metal hammer. The court transcripts describe the 117 spots of blood found on the wall. Gail McKay makes use of this fact in her *The Pat Lowther Poem*.

⁴ The catalogue for “Twenty/20” an exhibition held at the National Library, is found at www.collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/200/300/chbooks/twenty20.

⁵ The comments that follow are based on a conversation with Joan Shaw that took place on March 24, 2003.

⁶ For an incisive reading of the hypocrisy embodied in Atwood’s poem, see Frank Davey’s essay “What’s in a Genre: Margaret Atwood’s ‘Notes Towards a Poem.’” Here, Davey deconstructs Atwood’s carefully and ambivalently crafted poem to show how “the most intriguing aspect” of the poem “is the effort the speaking-subject makes to have its appropriation and conversion of the victim’s physical suffering into its own aesthetically usable pain seem morally acceptable” (53-4). I believe Harrison is aware of this equivocation on Atwood’s part, and that he uses the poem anyways, partly to parallel the ambivalence of his own moral position vis a vis Pat Lowther.

⁷ The back cover of Harrison’s novel reads: “A non-fiction novel, *Furry Creek* uses documents and made-up lives to narrative the art, life and violent death of poet Pat Lowther.”

⁸ Although it largely eschews dramatization, *Water Marks* includes a handful of instances where a poem of Pat Lowther’s is read as voice-over to the film. There is also a scene where a poem is read while the back of an actor’s head stands in for Pat Lowther, “re-creating” the scene described in the poem itself.

⁹ This achievement holds despite obvious moments of sibling disagreement in the movie. Examples include Christine’s bitterness about Beth being able to remember more about

her mother, as well as both Christine's and Beth's unhappiness with their older half-sister Kathy, who scattered their mother's ashes in Stanley Park, apparently without informing either of them that she was doing this. The filmmaker also makes sure to underline the differences between Beth and Christine (Beth as more insular, Christine outgoing; Beth as paralyzed by memories, Christine as using memories as source of empowerment). I would argue that the film raises these differences in order to make the reunion I speak of in this chapter more poignant.

Conclusion

¹ Examples of this sort of deconstruction of grand theories include the works by William B. Warner and Margaret Reeves in my Works Cited.

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