MARGARET ATWOOD'S LADY ORACLE: *THE ARTIST AS ESCAPIST AND SEER*

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Margaret Atwood's first two novels are basically similar. Although one centres on the comedy of premarital manners and the other tells of a mythic quest for identity, each book, as George Woodcock observes, "is the account of a *rite de passage*," a story "of self-realization and hence of life-realization." Both Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman* and the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* begin, by the end of their ordeals, to overcome illusions and delusions that were partly self-imposed, partly culturally imposed. Each thereby ultimately achieves a broader perspective on herself and her situation. Now Atwood has given us another such character. Joan Foster, the narrator in *Lady Oracle,* is a comic protagonist in search of an identity who also suffers throughout much of that novel from a case of limited vision. Yet this third novel is not simply a reexamination of old themes. As we shall argue, in *Lady Oracle* Atwood subtly explores the complex etiology of fantasy, the causes and consequences of self-deception,[2] and in so doing effectively portrays the protagonist's dawning recognition of her largely self-imposed victimization and her first stumbling steps to escape that condition.

I

Throughout much of *Lady Oracle* Joan Foster succumbs to various delusions. Unconsciously dissatisfied with both her private and professional life, she refuses to recognize even the fact of her own unhappiness and, instead of confronting her present condition, retreats to hazy dreams of the future or myopic remembrances of the past. But this character deals in the same malady from which she suffers. Indeed, the first hint of the complexity of the novel is the fact that Atwood's protagonist is herself a novelist, a writer of Costume Gothics. Ironically, Joan Foster, a victim of illusions — her own

[1]George Woodcock, "Surfacing to Survive: Notes of the Recent Atwood," *Ariel,* 4, No. 3 (July 1973), p. 25.

[2]It should be noted that some critics do not find *Lady Oracle* a capable or complex work of art. Sam Solecki, for example, in "Letters in Canada 1976: Fiction," *UTQ,* 46 (Summer 1977), 343-44, sees the book as "at best a slight comic novel" that "restates in a more attractive and accessible form — light comedy — the themes and situations of Atwood's earlier poetry and fiction."

and those of others — is, as Louisa K. Delacourt (an assumed name), also a professional spinner of illusions. Thus the theme expands, for we see here Atwood's comically idiosyncratic version of literary mimesis. Unreal art imitates unrealized life. Out of past personal unhappiness and present dissatisfactions, the narrator-novelist of *Lady Oracle* weaves the stuff of dreams. Reality becomes romance; the author's imperfect biography is at least temporarily superseded by the fairy tale plots of her fiction.

Just as the author, as victim, escapes into fantasy, so too do her readers. Louisa's books are bought by women who are also trapped in unfulfilling lives, who therefore cherish the opportunity to be engrossed for a time in some tale of a threatened but ultimately triumphant virgin. With author and audience almost metaphors for one another, Atwood illustrates the essential function of fantasy. They all, producer and consumers, elude in impossible fictions of finally perfect romantic love the pervasive imperfections of their own lives. It is more comfortable to take refuge in a wish-fulfillment world than to face the task of altering the direction of one's life. In other words, the author of Costume Gothics works to sustain a cycle of futility. Instead of foreseeing new possibilities and fostering a different future, she evades the present with a masquerade from the past and thereby helps to keep the future essentially the same as the present or even the past.

So the fictionalist in *Lady Oracle* is hardly a soothsayer. The vision she first presents is a hackneyed one. As Foster admits, her books, with "their covers featuring gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns," serve to "perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted."[3] They are "trash of the lowest order" (p. 34). Nevertheless, she insists that such "trash" serves an essential purpose. She understands what her audience wants, what it requires:

> I went to school with them, I was the good sport, I volunteered for committees, I decorated the high-school gym with signs that read HOWDY HOP and SNOWBALL STOMP and then went home and ate peanut butter sandwiches and read paperback novels while everyone else was dancing. I was Miss Personality, confidante and true friend. They told me all. (p. 35)

Knowing "all," she knows that former dancers turned into tired wives must seek some compensation for their fading beauty. "Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers" (p. 34). But to be only a palliative is not enough. Her fiction, she claims, also has "the power to turn . . . pumpkins to pure gold." Consequently, she can maintain that she "dealt in hope" and "offered a vision of a better world, however

[3]Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 34. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

preposterous" (p. 35). Yet the qualifying phrase "however preposterous" gives the lie to Foster's altruistic apology for her profession. Having no magical abilities, she merely possesses the power to dupe. Pumpkins remain pumpkins even while they read of golden princesses — as Joan well might realize, recalling the paperback novels that she turned to in her own pumpkin adolescence.

Self-deception pervades her previous life too, for Joan Foster prefers not to remember too clearly her former humiliations as a fat girl and neither will she acknowledge the real cause of her past failures. She knows that she was at war with her mother, that the field of battle was the dinner table. But she could never admit that her mother did not want to bear her, even though she overheard conversations testifying to as much. Consequently, her retaliation was largely subconscious. An undesired burden, she would be as a child a real burden, abundantly "there," an inescapable token of the mother's moral failure and a perpetual disappointment to that same mother. Furthermore, partly sheltered behind a wall of flesh, Joan did not have to feel so keenly her mother's obvious animosity or her father's diffuse indifference. Yet this only dimly sensed neurotic interplay in an obviously disturbed family was also only half the story. As Joan continually made herself fatter and even more physically unattractive, her mother became more antagonistic, her father more aloof — another vicious cycle. It is not acknowledged either. Instead, Atwood's novelist-narrator fudges autobiography much as she fudges historical fiction and applies to her own life the same fantasies that she projects in her Costume Gothics. Refusing to see herself as a responsible woman, she dramatizes her life as a series of victimizations. Thus victimized, she requires some escape. Writing seems to fulfill that function. Paul, her mentor in escapism, had told her: "Escape literature . . . should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader" (p. 155). But, as already noted, escape is no cure. In fact, by sometimes writing, sometimes remembering versions of what she would be, Joan simply perpetuates her victim status.

It is equally futile to try to live a fantasy, as is particularly demonstrated by Joan Foster's marriage. Within that relationship, she plays the role of a compassionate helpmate who can see her husband through his frequent social and psychic crises while having none herself. But Atwood does not expect us to sympathize with this put-upon protagonist. On the contrary, we see how Joan's marital role-playing both derives from and continues the pretense that preceded marriage. From the first, she claims social concerns and crams Communist philosophy in order to present herself to Arthur as a fellow traveller and an ideal prospective spouse. But because she sailed into matrimony under false colours, Arthur can assume, with some justification, that she is the person she claims to be, even though she increasingly chafes at the duplicitous role that she must play and finds herself trapped in the fiction of her marriage just as her heroines are trapped in the machinations of

her Gothic plots. Yet for her heroines the escape will be marriage. With that future ruled out, Joan increasingly turns to her past. Here too she should have known better. As her Aunt Lou had earlier warned her, "you can't change the past." However, the niece had then insisted, "Oh, but I wanted to; that was the one thing I really wanted to do" (p. 10), and until late in the novel she is convinced that if she had "had a governess," had "gone to finishing school," or "had learned to cry with style," her life would have progressed more smoothly. Believing that a proper past must necessarily make for a more pleasant present and a still brighter tomorrow, Joan continually expends her energies revising her autobiography. But of course nothing is changed except that she becomes even more of a fugitive from herself and is further diverted from the necessary task of coming to terms with her life. Again, escape requires still further escape.

Joan's life is unresolved in other respects too. For example, although she loses some one hundred pounds, she continues to see herself as "the Fat Lady." That image haunts her nightmares and underlies her perpetual fear that she will be "recognized" by someone out of her past. Physically slim and beautiful, she remains, emotionally, a bitter, self-conscious adolescent. The disparate sides of her personality are also represented by her two names — one taken from her husband, one from her aunt: "I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed; I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that . . . . But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt" (p. 213). As a wife and as a writer, she actually leads two separate existences. But instead of her whole life being greater or even equal to the sum of its parts, it is less than either. Her work as a hack author so contradicts her desire to be the socially committed partner of a young activist and vice versa that Joan D. Foster and Louisa K. Delacourt almost cancel each other out. Because her sense of self is nebulous and even self-negating, she readily allows herself to be defined by others. Thus, as a child, even though Joan became obese partly in retaliation against her mother, that obesity allows her no autonomy. Instead, it renders the daughter even more dependent on the mother, a condition that is precisely what the latter wishes, as is indicated by her "baking sprees" and the "pies and cookies" left "around the kitchen" (p. 123). Grotesquely overweight, the daughter first testifies to tribulations that life has imposed on the mother and is the living symbol of a forced, failed marriage. Then, as an adolescent who desires to lose weight, she does not do so until her will is supplemented by her aunt's and the promise of one thousand dollars and independence if she can divest herself of one hundred pounds. Yet as a slim and attractive adult, Joan functions mostly as an extension of the various men that she meets and fulfills their fantasies instead of their fulfilling hers. Successively, she is cast and for a time casts herself as Paul's ideal mistress, Arthur's politically committed wife, and the Royal Porcupine's avant-garde affair. Each

relationship is unequal and soon proves unsatisfying. In short, even her various romances constitute a private version of the more general cycle of futility that she helps to sustain by writing her romantic fiction.

This is where we are when the novel begins. Caught in the kaleidoscope of conflicting identities, Joan tries to free herself from them all: "I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it" (p. 7). No real suicide is intended: "The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for a solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it" (p. 7). But we soon see that her early demise is not much different from the rest of her life — the shadow passing for the reality, and not passing very successfully. She could not even "expire" independently. She acted with accomplices. There were witnesses. Consequently, by the conclusion of the novel, Joan finds that she must return to Canada, admit that her "death" was all an act, and confess the reasons for the charade in order to exonerate the two friends who await trial for her murder. That failure, however, is also a fortunate fall. Inadvertently, her feigned death finally forces her to repudiate various false identities. Until then, however, her ostensible drowning is part of a symbiotic pattern whereby unconscious self-victimization and ineffectual escape fantasy each fosters the other.

II

The professional weaver of illusions finally begins to see that she has done some private spinning too and caught herself in a tangled web partly of her own making. Beginning to come to terms with the disaster of her life, she must ask herself some difficult questions. Where does Louisa's fiction stop and Joan's life begin? That question is further complicated by the fact that Joan Foster's interwoven authorial-autobiographical fantasies intermesh with similar fantasies of others. For example, Paul attempts to achieve in his own life the same simplistic extravagant romance of which he writes in novels about nurses in love and at one point is ludicrously ready to rescue Joan from an imagined international Communist conspiracy. Furthermore, Arthur, editing a radical journal and dreaming of revolution, is really as unrealistically romantic as Paul and just as blind to how his delusions — his devotion to and subsequent disappointment with different causes or comrades — serve to gratify his vanity.[4] Chuck Brewer, as the Royal Porcupine, a free poet and a free character, also acts out his ideal image of himself. In fact, the three male characters fantasize every bit as much as

[4]Jane Rule, in "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy: The Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), p. 48, points out that "Atwood's heroines" when leaving one man are drawn to "his opposite number." Arthur is Paul's political opposite, but in other respects they are quite similar.

Joan does. They all strike poses, and when pose encounters pose, the necessary consequence is misunderstanding. For example, Joan's "deflowering" takes places because she misread Paul's invitation to share his quarters. She sees him as a kindly Dutch uncle while he aspires to be a dashing Polish prince, but, pretending to be sophisticated, she is too embarrassed to admit her mistake.

Perhaps the relationship between Joan Foster and the Royal Porcupine best illustrates how intricately different roles and fantasies can intertwine to create a cat's cradle that must sooner or later fall apart. To start with, when Joan meets this character at a press party, she is first attracted to him precisely because he is such a character. With his top hat, cape, and cane, he could have stepped right out of one of her novels. Yet he thinks of himself as an original even though he embodies a standard Gothic character, and she plays a public poet even though she secretly writes the pulp fiction in which his prototypes most regularly appear. Furthermore, what is largely founded on self-deceived role-playing founders on that same shifting and unsubstantial rock. Joan would escape her husband's sullen socialism and a predominantly sexless marriage by having an affair. The Royal Porcupine evades almost all mundane considerations by aspiring towards pure art and pure acts. At first, their purposes happily coincide. They have a fine time arranging to meet at literary gatherings and smuggling him along on her book-promoting tours. But then her lover begins to change radically the rules of the game. He wants to be more than her escape. So while she is evading one marriage, he proposes another and evolves his own fantasy of settling into a regular existence replete with wife, children, job, house, mortgage — the same mundane reality that sends Joan's readers to her books. Shorn, shaved, in jeans and a T-shirt, the Royal Porcupine becomes "merely Chuck Brewer," and the change is disastrous. "He'd thought that by transforming himself into something more like Arthur he could have Arthur's place; but by doing this he'd murdered the part of him that I loved. I scarcely knew how to console the part that remained. Without his beard, he had the chin of a junior accountant" (p. 271).

"Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" (p. 269). But Joan knows that more is at issue than is suggested by that question. Soon she sees what all along has been an irreconcilable difference between herself and her lover: "For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for me it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape" (p. 270). The issue is not that simple either. Reality and fantasy can merge. Fantasy is not always escape. In fact, after he is disappointed in love, the Royal Porcupine, in the unlikely guise of Chuck Brewer, becomes much more like his Gothic doubles. He hints of suicide, double suicide, murder: "Or maybe I could shoot you and then jump off the Toronto Dominion Centre with your body in my arms" (p. 271). Joan Foster must see that she is no longer the artificer of her own fantasies but has

become, instead, the prospective victim in another's Gothic imaginings. Again, life imitates art. Joan has partly modelled her heroines on herself. Now she finds herself in one of her Gothic heroine's typical predicaments and in a much better position to recognize how the plot pinches.[5]

It is only fitting that the stuff of fantasy should suddenly — literally — come to life, since it is largely from the stuff of life, her past, that Foster shapes her fantasies. All along, Chuck Brewer-the Royal Porcupine has had, like Joan herself, two identities. We see him act with a certain duplicity and recall that in Joan's Costume Gothics the male protagonist almost always has a double role. Furthermore, this ambiguously dualistic masculine figure derives from Joan's childhood experience. Her mother had differentiated between "nice men" who "did things for you" and "bad men" who "did things to you" (p. 69). Yet in her one childhood encounter with a supposed bona fide bad man — an exposer — Joan discovers that he likely fits both categories. An older man carrying a bouquet of daffodils frightens Joan and her friends by exposing himself but then gives the flowers to Joan. Later perhaps the same man frees her and leads her home to safety after "friends" had left her bound and abandoned in a dark winter woods. She then wonders: "Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?" (p. 64). By the time she has reached adulthood, however, Joan realizes that all her men exhibit such duplicity: "Every man I'd ever been involved with . . . had had two selves" (p. 292), one of them sinister.

With these two-sided male characters, Atwood advances a thematically important argument with implications that Joan finally recognizes. If men have a dual role in women's lives, then women must exhibit a corresponding duality. They must be either victims or heroines — sometimes threatened, sometimes saved. This double duality especially pervades romantic fiction. The heroine's happiness, perhaps even her life, hinges on the Gothic hero's decision. Which Rochester or Redmond will *he* be? Consequently, the heroine cannot be self-defined. So even though Charlotte, in *Stalked by Love,* supports herself, escapes from various traps, and even confronts the maze alone, a prospective hero shall still step forward at the end. The female protagonist in Joan's last novel hopes that the men in her life will save her. When, generally, they do not, she has to rely on her own talents. But before she can take final credit for doing so, the hero claims her triumph and her. She is, therefore, made to feel both helpless and unhelped, her own saviour unsaved, never fully triumphant. Yet she cannot confess to any dissatisfaction. The Costume Gothic ends with either an engagement or a wedding ceremony, and the actual or impending marriage supposedly promises happiness ever after. But matrimony, ostensibly the heroine's triumph, does not really alter restrictive assumptions about woman's role. In fact, in *Stalked*

[5]As Rule rightly observes, in "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy," p. 48, Foster's life at this point more and more "takes on the sinister and paranoid qualities of a gothic romance."

by Love, Charlotte can hardly anticipate being elevated to the status of a wife when she considers how that promotion profited her predecessors.

Just as Charlotte is caught in a double bind, so too is Joan. In the author's life, as in her fiction, much is accomplished independently of male characters, yet seemingly everything of any importance depends on the male. Thus Joan meets Arthur and soon decides that "the right man had come along, complete with a cause I could devote myself to. My life had significance" (p. 171). To sustain that "significance," she must hide or suppress her own talents and capabilities, must achieve, as she does with cooking, "defeats" because "they cheered him up" (p. 210). Not until near the end of the novel does she even try to act with decisive independence, and then, presumably from lack of practice, she is comically inept. But before the final chapter, she tries to anticipate both what the men in her life probably desire and how society might view whatever she is doing. Her own existence must be a maze of doublethink and second guess until she is able to realize how she is victimized by the same dualities that inform her Costume Gothics.

That necessary realization is partly prompted by the very act of writing the romances, particularly the last one, *Stalked by Love.* It is also prompted by her book of poetry, *Lady Oracle,* which Foster describes as "a Gothic gone wrong." She sees this latter work as "upside-down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love" (p. 232). As she soon comes to see, Gothic reversed accords to the facts of her own life every bit as much as does Gothic plain. To begin with, she acquires another false identity. When she attempts to explain her "Automatic Writing," she is not believed but turned into media copy: "It was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-mirror reflection" (pp. 250-51). More to the point, even though she herself becomes a media fiction, others still hold her responsible for everything in her poems and view the latter as if they were fact, autobiography. Arthur assumes that the male character in the book is based either on himself or on a lover and is unhappy with either alternative. His inability to distinguish between her poetry and their life leads him to reject his wife both emotionally and sexually, a rejection that precipitates the affair with the Royal Porcupine and that soon leads to the only slightly veiled threats, the knives and dead animals, that turn up on her doorstep. She is possibly being victimized by the rejected lover, a situation that would preclude trying to find a would-be saviour in Arthur, her husband, who might well be himself the source of the threats. Who is hero? Who is villain? Who is disguised as what? And where is the promise of love? Faced with the possibility of a real death, she contrives a fake one. Again life imitates art. After acting out her own parodic version of the unlikely

romances that inform her novels, she must become the woman in the boat, the oracular lady of her poetry. The result is that she jumps to the "death" with which the novel opens, leaving behind the fragments of her past that are the fragments of her acknowledged, unacknowledged, and mostly false identities. That fictitious death appropriately epitomizes the fictitious life, out of which comes the fraudulent fictions that divert middle class housewives from existences as inauthentic as Joan's.

III

Water, thematically important in *Surfacing,* also functions symbolically in *Lady Oracle.* As Roberta Rubenstein has noted in an essay on the earlier novel, the narrator's "plunge" into the lake represents "the true beginning of her plunge into the purifying element, the unknown, and the unconscious."[6] Similarly, Foster's fall into Lake Ontario entails a baptism, a rebirth, and the beginning of a new life. But her comic dive is not so deliberate nor the outcome so definite as was her predecessor's mythic immersion in the waters of life and death.[7] In fact, in *Lady Oracle,* the protagonist actually topples from the boat before she is ready to do so, a fortuitous action that is most appropriate, for her first steps in her "new life" tend to retrace paths followed in her old one. In fact, she gets off to such a faltering start that her rebirth is almost stillborn. But the feigned death still has serious overtones. There is an end to the false identities of the old order and the possibility of surfacing to truer ones. In a sense, when Joan takes her dive, she enters the same "maze" that Charlotte enters in *Stalked by Love.* The maze, of course, serves an an effective symbol in that Costume Gothic, just as it also does in Foster's own life. Both author and character confront figurative labyrinths, and both must, literally and figuratively, discover the meaning of the maze. Charlotte's task, however, soon proves to be more complicated than Joan had expected. The author tries to steer her protagonist through to a conventional ending. Redmond should rescue the girl after she has, in foolhardy fashion, assayed the maze, and the two of them should then live happily ever after. But Joan discovers that she cannot conclude this particular book with such a romantic cliché. "That was the way it was supposed to go, that was the way it had always gone before, but somehow it no longer felt right. I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere" (p. 333). The last sentence reverberates with implications. The author, the book, the character have all taken wrong turns. These various wrong turns, however, are interrelated and become more clear even to Joan, especially as she more and more projects aspects of her own predicament onto her protagonist.

[6]Roberta Rubenstein, "*Surfacing*: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior," *Modern Fiction Studies,* 22 (Autumn 1976), 392.

[7]For a sustained religious and mythic reading of *Surfacing,* see Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision," *Signs,* 2 (1976), 316-30.

Consider, for example, the description of Redmond in the final scene of *Stalked by Love*:

> Cunningly, he began his transformation, trying to lure her into his reach. His face grew a white gauze mask, then a pair of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard and moustache, which faded, giving place to burning eyes and icicle teeth. Then his cloak vanished and he stood looking at her sadly; he was wearing a turtle-neck sweater. (p. 342)

Of course, with these metamorphoses, Redmond really reflects the men in Joan Foster's life. He successively becomes the various hero-villains to whom she has turned for help but who have provided no real support at all: her father, her first lover, her final lover, her fantasy lover, and her husband. More to the point, the interactions between Charlotte and Redmond in this final scene also characterize the author's own attempts to escape from the limitations of her life by being "saved" from herself by the men in that life. Redmond finally says: "Let me take you away . . . Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always" (p. 343). Charlotte, "almost yielding," remembers that "once she had wanted these words, she had waited all her life for someone to say them" (p. 343). The past tense is significant. Earlier, alone in her apartment in Terremoto, Joan had decided, "from now on . . . I would dance for no one but myself" (p. 334). Thus, though her life and her fantasy fiction converge, they now do so in a different fashion: Joan Foster has begun to use her own vision to shape her work; the fiction is no longer an escape; the artist is no longer a victim. She is seeing different possibilities, new modes of action. For the first time she is, in a small way, something of a lady oracle.

When the heroine in the novel within the novel rejects Redmond's offer to be danced away, a real unmasking occurs. The flesh falls away from his face and Charlotte confronts a skull. The narrator who has pretended to die can live, but only after she has rejected the ostensible saviours who actually represent the repressive, life-denying forces in her own life. The final, revised chapter of her last Costume Gothic therefore serves as a symbolic fictional manifestation of Foster's own changing views of herself. Concomitant with that change, she must view men differently. That new awareness is soon illustrated. Joan comes out of the trance-like state in which she writes her novels to hear footsteps, real footsteps, possibly the steps of the man who earlier, in Toronto, seemed bent on killing her. She assesses her situation. She can disguise herself and flee, or wait and do nothing at all. Yet neither alternative — both standard procedures in her fiction — is a real option. Instead of continuing to play the hapless heroine, she opens the door and strikes the prospective intruder over the head with an empty Cinzano bottle — only her second aggressive action in the entire book.[*] The

[*]Earlier she did outplot Fraser Buchanan and forestalled his plan to blackmail her by stealing his "data book."

consequences are comic. Foster's life is not, after all, a pulp novel — as much as it may seem like one. Atwood typically interjects humour into the most portentous of scenes. The protagonist, by acting decisively, has managed to injure a harmless reporter. But the action is still significant. She discovers a new aspect of her personality, one neither she nor the men in her life had previously seen. She has accepted herself and with that her own potential to do harm, to affect her world. With that new awareness, she recognizes that she must return to Canada to straighten out the mess occasioned by her "death." It will be embarrassing, but she has seen that people must sometimes be embarrassed.But a more important realization is also achieved. Joan Foster at last decides that she "won't write any more Costume Gothics." "I think they were bad for me," she continues. "But maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you" (p. 345).

Joan has finally begun to see the futility of certain fantasy escapes. In her life and, even more so, in her Gothic romances, a fictitious past, ostensibly a palliative for an imperfect present, both reflects and perpetuates that present. Consequently, her books — and her life — have not been so much an escape as an evasion. She neither sought nor counselled independence or capability. The Costume Gothics really advocate a continual abdication of present responsibility for the sake of being properly, passively feminine and thus meriting love, marriage, and eternal bliss. Their supposed happy endings, however, do not even betoken mere survival. The heroine rises, as her predecessor falls, to be claimed at the book's end by the hero in matrimony. Yet, Foster realizes, in her novels themselves, "all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both" (p. 319). She has hardly, as she earlier claimed, offered unhappy women any sustaining vision, and she shall henceforth deal in a different dream with different implications. Science fiction, though still fantasy, looks forward and implies at least survival. Essentially, then, Joan Foster's decision to discontinue her work on Costume Gothics entails a recognition that she need no longer be a victim and that she will no longer inflict the myth of the victimized woman onto herself and her readers.

But not too much should be made of this triumph. In *Lady Oracle,* as in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing,* the ending is muted. In each case, the female protagonist has recognized new possibilities inherent in a problematic present but has not completely transcended all problems. Which is to say that the title of this essay is somewhat misleading. It might more accurately have been, "The Pseudo-Artist as Escapist and Apprentice Seer," for Joan Foster at the conclusion of *Lady Oracle* has not achieved the vision of either artist or seer. At best, she is moving in the right direction. She has begun to confront her present only in her life, not in her art. She has yet to realize that that present, her story, consciously transmuted into fiction, holds more

possibilities for her — and her readers — than any fantasies of the past or fables of the future.[9]

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[9]As Margaret Atwood suggests in *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 193, it is better "to write from the centre of [one's] own experience" than "from the periphery of someone else's."