REAL MUMMIES

Anne Archer

An address to Narcissus:

> *[In] your new role of author and reader/critic of yourself and your art, why not start with yourself as one of the lesser uncertainties? . . . . [Why] not stare at your own face for a while and tell us what your're thinking?'*[1]

It is almost a commonplace to assert that in literature, as in life, there exists a finite number of plots. As Willa Cather notes: "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."[2] Such a statement reveals an obvious but dangerous truth. Repetition, however fierce, requisite, and inescapable, may serve as an excuse on the part of a writer to avoid exploration; may cloak, in fact, a limited imaginative range. 'If one story is all that is really vouchsafed me,' runs the chorus, 'then one story will suffice.' Overlooked is the corollary: one plot notwithstanding, there may flourish within a single story countless permutations, combinations, subtleties of character and motivation, and so on.

The autobiographical impulse further complicates the one-plot syndrome. Though life provides the material of art (or vice versa, as Oscar Wilde would have it), when a story partakes almost exclusively of autobiography, it seems that the tale runs the risk of either turning in on itself, the teller, or both. Jung observes, for instance, that "when a form of art is primarily personal it deserves to be treated as if it were a neurosis."[3] Undue repetition, in this context, may point to an obsession. It is the purely personal aspect of much of Audrey Thomas' writing, coupled with her propensity to tell and retell a single story — to present us with a theme minus variations — that is both fascinating and problematic. Fascinating, because of Thomas' mastery of technique. "Thomas the novelist," says Ken Adachi, "luxuriates in language, releasing . . . a torrent of crystalline

1. From "Do It Yourself, Narcissus!" by Derek Wynand in *Quarry,* Vol. 32/4, Autumn 1983.
2. Willa Cather, quoted in *Passages,* Gail Sheehy (New York: Dutton, 1976), p. 28.
3. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1933), p. 194.

words."[4] Similarly, and with specific reference to the dramatic "confrontation of reader with text" in *Blown Figures,* George Bowering finds attractive the "found novel" elements of Thomas' prose. Bowering explains:

> There are 547 pages, it is true, but fewer than half of them are filled with lines. The rest are nearly white pages, with some black marks on them, words and pictures. These may be single sentences uttered by the main figure, Isobel Carpenter, or African comic strips, or African letters from the lovelorn, or misremembered nursery rimes, or items of etymology, or none of the above . . . This book is not a novel, Thomas once said, it is a book (though the title page says a novel). It is a lot like a big concrete poem, or better, a found poem. It is perhaps a found novel, at least half so, and that's interesting. Not always totally accomplishing, but interesting, and that's what you want.[5]

Thomas' work is nonetheless troublesome, because the recurrence of fixed motifs within one basic story induces claustrophobia. To cite Bowering again on *Blown Figures:* "The first chapter gathers up Thomas' previous books, so that readers of *Mrs. Blood, Songs My Mother Taught Me,* etc., feel themselves sinking into the womb of the delivering voice."[6] A limited perspective marks much of Thomas' canon. To adumbrate her world — that is, to alert readers to the resonant centres of her work — it is hardly necessary to go beyond her first volume of short stories, *Ten Green Bottles.* The parameters of her fictional realm appear curiously fixed, and in a writer of Thomas' calibre, this observation is unsettling. Is Thomas, in effect, a one-trick pony?

"'Do you know only one story?' asked the rats'"[7] in a telling passage from *Blown Figures.* Although I have made no attempt to construct a one-to-one correspondence between Thomas' life and her art, the marked similarities among her female protagonists (many of whom are called Isobel) as well as the clearly autobiographical elements suggest that Thomas' one story concerns the growth of the author herself. George Woodcock writes, for instance: "it is hardly presumptuous to suggest that at least the central armature of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* was provided by the author's youth, and that her senses experienced the impressions of childhood and adolescence that gives *Songs* so rich a textural surface."[8] *Mrs. Blood, Songs My Mother Taught Me,* and *Blown Figures* function, collectively, as a sort of *bildungsroman.* Though the protagonist of *Mrs. Blood* is called Mrs. Blood/Mrs. Thing, she is clearly the precursor of the Isobel of *Songs* and *Blown Figures.* The fact that *Blown Figures* is to a large

4. Ken Adachi, cover of *Two in the Bush and Other Stories,* Audrey Thomas (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981).
5. George Bowering, "The Site of Blood," in *Canadian Literature* 65 (Summer, 1975), p. 86.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 87.
7. Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), p. 313. Subsequent references are in parentheses within the text.
8. George Woodcock, "Twilight Zones," *Canadian Literature* 60 (Spring 1974), p. 97.

degree a sequel to *Mrs. Blood* warrants my use of "Isobel" as a generic name for the protagonist of Thomas' trilogy.

To borrow a phrase from Malcolm Lowry, these three novels are part of a "work-in-progress" wherein Thomas charts Isobel's journey from innocence to experience. With the exception of *Songs My Mother Taught Me,* where the two-part structure — "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" — denotes, in part, a formal progression, the journey tends to be achronological. Characteristic of Thomas' writing is the juxtaposition of the present with the past. Isobel/Thomas, writing in a Wordsworthian fashion to 'understand herself,' explains: "I have memories preserved intact, like men in peat, to be found by a later me. That is what happened this morning with this memory."[9] 'All things are gratulant if rightly understood.' and like Wordsworth in *The Prelude,* Isobel in Thomas' trilogy attempts to fashion her own (albeit godless) theodicy. "What I really want to know is, granted the non-existence of a God, benign or otherwise, who is responsible for all this?" (*MB*, p. 209). As to the necessity of suffering there are, of course, no easy answers. We "all fall down," Thomas notes repeatedly, and Isobel's reminder to herself (a phrase that serves as a refrain in *Mrs. Blood)* contains echoes of an hysterical, false bravado: "I am an old log thrown up by the sea, and the past clings to me like barnacles. There are no victims. Life cannot rape. There are no bad experiences" (MB, p.91). But the bulk of Thomas' narrative belies this uneasy assertion. Though Thomas' trilogy represents a struggle on the part of the author and her *alter ego,* Isobel, to exorcise these bad experiences—the loss of a lover, troubled relations with a husband, a miscarriage, ambivalent feelings toward family—it appears that the past forever haunts the present.

Memories of childhood, for example, act as a ground bass for the events of the narrative. The loss of her unborn child, the major thematic concern of *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures,* is a punishment, Isobel feels, for not loving her father: "I am a victim of my sense of sin. It is not consideration for Jason (her husband) that stops me but fear of the gods. I cried out to him that night 'I'm being punished because I didn't love my father.' And he said, 'Nonsense,' but I could tell that he was frightened" (MB, p.103). A sense of guilt also attends Isobel's despair that her fear of life (a legacy from her mother as well as her father) will be passed on to her children. This song her mother taught her figures, too, in *Ten Green Bottles,* where an Isobel-like heroine "sometimes wondered why her children did not sense the fear which lurked, like a ground fog, around their mother; why they didn't smell it—as animals are said to sense and smell fear in a human being."[10]

9. Audrey Thomas, *Mrs. Blood* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1970), p. 33. Subsequent references are in parentheses within the text.
10. Audrey Thomas, "One is One & All Alone," *Ten Green Bottles* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1967), p. 100.

A real mother, it seems, is a guilty mother. Even Miranda Archer of *Prospero on the Island,* ostensibly the least neurotic or Isobel-like of Thomas' narrators, admits to being burdened by a "terrible surplus guilt" and confesses, concerning her children, that she worries "(until) I terrify them into panic. Must we pass these things on like unwanted family silver?" [11]

Isobel's ambivalent attitude toward her parents, described in detail in *Songs,* contributes, presumably, to her sexual eagerness/reticence. Marriage and sex, for Isobel, seem to have little common ground. Whereas Isobel associates lust with a sort of joyous, animal abandonment, she finds love (here, sexual relations within marriage) to be not a letting go of self but a holding back. She explains: "With Richard (her old lover) she had yelled and moaned and laughed--with Jason only sometimes. In his mother's house they had learned to be quiet, hardly moving, like skin divers in enemy waters . . . . They were like deaf-mutes" (BF, p.95). Sex with Jason means procreation--"That spring it was unusually hot and Jason laughed and said, 'You know what happens to girls who don't wear any nightgown, don't you?" And I said, "If you get me pregnant I won't go with you" (*MB,* p.27)—and procreation, in view of Isobel's fears, is equated with blood, death, and denial.

A mother to her husband as well as to her children, Isobel tends to view her body as a receptacle, the host ("Take this in remembrance" (*MB,*)(p.107) and a host for an often uninvited male: "The woman is the Venus flytrap, tinted a mordant pink, mouth open wide to catch the unsuspecting guest" (*MB,* p.49). This conceit surfaces elsewhere in Thomas' canon—a point on which I shall elaborate presently—and it appears to derive from a childhood fear. Isobel, who learns at a young age that "strangers are usually men," extends this fear to her marriage: "last night I felt for the first time as though I belonged in Jason's house and hadn't stumbled into a stranger's place by mistake" (*MB,* p.174).

Isobel's obsession with the loss of her lover, Richard, also confirms her belief that she is "covered with memories like barnacles" (*MB,* p.148). For in *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* this loss exists as a fresh wound. Years after the fact, Isobel remains unable to reconcile herself to his leaving. Searching blindly for a name for her pain as she confronts repeatedly the bare fact ("Look. There is no nice way of saying this"(*MB,* p.32), Isobel acknowledges: "And I still carry the feel of him around with me like a birth mark or a scar. And that was a long time ago"(*MB,* p.60). The phrase that signals Isobel's "terrible desire for Richard" and his rejection of her desire—"Look. There is no nice way of saying this." —appears in a number of Thomas' short stories, and it is revealing that the context and

11. Audrey Thomas, *Munchmeyer; and Prospero on the Island* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 127. Subsequent references are in parentheses within the text.

often the names rarely change. Despite the occasional inclusion of details, no new associations or perspectives are furnished for this trauma. The memory is indeed preserved intact, and the wound festers. Because Thomas' voice is heard so insistently behind that of Isobel, because life in this instance appears too unwieldy for art, the "bad experience" assumes the quality of a neurosis.

Which is precisely what Thomas requires in both *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures.* Isobel, as character, *is* neurotic. Trapped by her fears ("I'm afraid," said Isobel to the shrink, "I'm afraid all the time. Of everything." (*BF,* p.20)). She questions the reality of her existence and, correspondingly, her own sanity. "Real life had become for (her) a street marked One Way Do Not Enter."[12] As Isobel realizes, her husband's Freudian slip is all too apt: "Isobel doesn't live," said Jason to a friend, "she exits." He meant to say "exists"' (*BF,* p.22). She envisions herself as split in two parts, each part observing and laughing at the other's "frantic efforts to keep the darkness out" (*BF,* p.22). In both novels, the disjointed dialogue, the use of the double voice (in *Mrs. Blood,* Thomas alternates between Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood; in *Blown Figures,* between Isobel and Miss Miller), and the montage-like displacement of events all powerfully simulate Isobel's sense of her divided self, her fear that "her mind had followed the example of her body and was going to betray her" (*BF,* p.32). It is a fear that is well-founded, for Isobel's quest for wholeness appears more futile than viable. Her demons refuse to be exorcised; the past not only haunts but destroys the present. Isobel looks into the 'dark continent' of her mind--"We have all Africa and her prodigies/ Within us," reads the preface to *Blown Figures*--and recoils. Though she proclaims in *Mrs. Blood* that "I want to learn to take chances and hang upside down in the frangipani tree and look at the bloody mouths of the hibiscus without flinching. After the baby comes I must learn to run again" (MB, p.193), Isobel's quest is thwarted. *Mrs. Blood* ends with a miscarriage (literally, the death of her unborn child; figuratively, the death of the self) and *Blown Figures* concludes with an unsuccessful ritual exorcism. Isobel's "bad experiences" exist as insurmountable blocks. She remains, regrettably, a victim, as the postscript to *Blown Figures* suggests: "Time! You monstrous mole. Why are you doing this to me?"

I am certainly not implying that we should demand of every story a happy ending. Regardless of the outcome, Isobel's struggle ("that of a fly in marmalade") is a literary success. Both novels work. But Thomas' strength in *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*--a strength that derives largely from her technical expertise--also contains the seeds of her weakness. The "work-in-progress" method has its pitfalls; Thomas' achievements in the novel and the short story may be questioned on two related counts. We

12. Audrey Thomas, *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1973), p. 211.

sense, for instance, that Isobel's failure has drastic personal consequences for her creator. To repeat, the close connection between Thomas and her protagonist gives rise to a feeling of uneasiness. The plethora of recurring incidents throughout Thomas' canon (that is, the retelling of the same basic story) as well as the use of the same stylistic devices to deploy these incidents (the refrain, the montage, word tricks, the inclusion of nursery rhyme fragments) occasion the fear that Thomas, like her personae, is locked in her own world. On this tendency toward solipsism Isobel observes: "It is impossible for me to see other people as separate from myself. Jason is my husband, Mary my daughter, Nicholas, my son. I can only imagine what they are thinking by imagining what I would think if I were in Jason's position--which is quite different from imagining what I would think if I were Jason" (*MB,* p.192). Given the *bildungsroman* qualities of *Mrs. Blood, Songs,* and *Blown Figures,* a single perspective is not only excusable but artistically warranted. When this sameness with regard to point of view extends to the bulk of Thomas' fiction, however, the result may not be so favourable. Rachel, the heroine of Latakia,[13] raises this very issue. The following, for example, is an excerpt of an argument between Rachel and her lover and fellow-writer, Michael:

> "You have no sympathy for other people, Michael—and no empathy. How are you going to write if you can't get outside yourself?"
> "You don't."
> "I do."
> "You do not. Your books are absolutely self-centered. And I think that's one of their great strengths."
> "I think it's perhaps a weakness. But the point is, I *can* write about other people, I just don't choose to."
> "So you say."
> "So I know."[13]

Rachel's attack on Michael backfires and becomes a sort of 'dialogue of self and soul.' Though Rachel insists rather petulantly that she can write about other people if she so desires, Michael maintains that the proof is in the pudding. He has seen no evidence to support her claim. While Michael is prepared, however, to regard this self-absorption as an artistic (but not domestic) plus, Rachel seems inclined to view her solipsism as a limitation. Indeed, she responds ambivalently to what emerges in *Latakia* as a portrait of the artist as real mother. Rachel is, in a sense, Isobel through the looking-glass. Just as Thomas' mother/narrators, like Isobel, are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the notion of self-generation—that is, as Munch-meyer observes, "The mothers don't need mirrors — they have created creatures in their own image" (M&P, p.46) — Thomas' artist/narrators are caught in a similar dilemma. Mother and artist and, by extension, author, seem capable only of begetting images of the self. Which is, of course, a dangerous vocation. Mothers can miscarry, and as Rachel acknowledges, "Narcissus drowned."

13. Audrey Thomas, *Latakia* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), p. 118. Subsequent references are in parenthesis within the text.

It is in this context that Audrey Thomas is perhaps closer to Malcolm Lowry than to her contemporaries, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro. Granted, Laurence and Munro play with autobiography: *A Bird in the House,* for instance, is avowedly about Margaret Laurence's childhood; Munro writes of *Lives of Girls and Women* that it is autobiographical in form but not in fact. While we may view their fiction, as well, as an ongoing *bildungsroman* or *kunstlerroman,* we note a crucial difference between the work of Laurence and Munro and that of Thomas. According to Laurence: "what we (writers of fiction) are trying to do is to understand those others who are our fictional characters, somehow to gain entrance to their minds and feelings, to respect them for themselves as human individuals, and to protray them as truly as we can."[14] Both Laurence and Munro ascribe a healthy autonomy to their fictional characters, and provide a community in which their creations may develop and interact (for Laurence, Manawaka; for Munro, Jubilee). Thomas' protagonists, on the other hand, seem to spring from the same mold and bear an uneasy resemblance to the author herself. Their community is often rather limited, consisting, in fact, of a population of one. For Thomas' narrators tend to dominate their stories, generally to the extent that we know the supporting cast only through suspect second-hand reports. Thomas' predilection for the epistolary form (as in *Latakia*) or the journal-cum-novel form (*Mrs. Blood, Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island)* heightens this authorial myopia. The much-maligned Jason, for example, is a silent partner for the loquacious Mrs. Blood. Michael, erst-while lover of Rachel and villain of *Latakia,* is as one-dimensional as Richardson's Mr. B. We see Michael solely through the eyes of Rachel, who desires in her letters not simply to exorcise the past but to get even. Unlike Sinclair Ross's Mrs. Bentley, whose treatment of her husband, Philip, occasions endless debate, Rachel is more singleminded in her handling of Michael. Rachel's tone is unmistakeably vindictive, as her parting stab at her lover reveals: "And remember, the best revenge is writing well." (L., p. 172). Not even the irony here is enough to mitigate this cheap shot, and the self-justifying, bitter voice of Thomas' narrator causes the tale to turn in on itself and the teller. John Moss argues, "the effect is...that needs are being met ouside the fictional reality--always a danger in 'confessional' fiction."[15] As opposed to Laurence and Munro, who present us with transformed autobiography, Thomas appears to give us the straight, painful goods.

Thomas' narrators, moreover, seem to find themselves in a vicious circle of self-reflection, and it is this aspect of her writing that brings to mind the work of Malcolm Lowry, whose name I have already mentioned with

14. Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 12.
15. John Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), p. 271.

regard to Thomas' "work-in-progress" technique. Many of the similarities between these two uneven masters of confessional fiction are obvious. Both writers build on Dante's inferno-to-purgatory-to-paradise spiral, and for both writers, it is the inferno that dominates their canons. *Under the Volcano,* which was to be the inferno part of a Dantesque trilogy called *The Voyage That Never Ends,* is, like Thomas' equivalent, *Blown Figures,* a study of madness. What Mexico is for the Consul (or Lowry), Africa is for Isobel (or Thomas). Both writers internalize the landscape, so that geography assumes significance as an objective correlative. Or, in a slightly different sense, both Mexico and Africa are real only insofar as they reflect the protagonists's state of mind. "My Africa is only real for me"(MB, p.43), admits Mrs. Blood.

Lowry's *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* develops the notion, 6a la Ortega, of the author as his own novelist. Lowry's interest here is what takes place in the mind of the writer while writing, and this concern has a parallel in Thomas' two interlocking novellas, *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island.* Miranda, the narrator of *Prospero on the Island,* writes *Prospero* as a sort of journal/gloss on her own novel, *Munchmeyer.* Miranda, the character Prospero, Munchmeyer, his wife Martha, and the Lodestones are all aspects of one split personality, and they recall to varying degrees Thomas' other protagonists. And, as Anthony Boxill notes, "In spite of the basic dissimilarity between the characters of Mrs. Blood and Munchmeyer and that of Miranda Archer, one always has the feeling that Audrey Thomas' fiction is substantially autobiographical."[16] Thus the world of *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island,* like that of *Dark as the Grave,* is a Pandora's box of self-conscious, self-reflexive prose. Both Lowry's and Thomas' fiction attest to the validity of Yeats's proposition that it is impossible at times to distinguish the dancer from the dance.

Lowry's fictional *alter egos,* like those of Thomas, are obsessed with predetermined coincidences and catastrophes, and the previously mentioned guest/host conceit is an example of Thomas' working out of incident and coincident. This conceit is vintage Thomas, and she uses it brilliantly to link her major thematic concerns. Here, for instance, the notion of the author as real mother and the disturbing male and female relation dovetail. To repeat, Isobel tends to view her body as a receptacle or host, thereby reminding us of the close connection between religion and sex. For Richard or Jason to indulge his sexual appetite involves a secular parody or perhaps logical extension of communion. Thomas, who blames it on a simple, etymological twist of fate, tells us that the host is (a) the bread consecrated in the Eucharist; (b) one who lodges another; and (c) a victim. By definition, a mother lodges a child, who in a biological if not figurative sense feeds off the host. Hence, a real mother is both host and is both

16. Anthony Boxill, "Portraits of the Artist: Three Novels by Audrey Thomas," *The Fiddlehead* 95, (Fall 1972), p. 116.

host and victim. Thomas' female narrators, we remember, are mothers not only to their children, but invariably to their men. Isobel, like Rachel, fears that "she had become for (her husband) once and for all MOTHER" (*BF,* p. 216). It is little wonder then that Isobel, a true 'edible woman,' views the twin roles of wife and mother with trepidation and suspicion, for she realizes that 'in life, there *are* victims; life *can* rape.' As well, Africa, to the neurotic Isobel, is a lover who is trying to consume her. "I felt an almost irresistible urge to run quickly off the ship and into this strange adventure as one might run into the arms of a waiting lover"(MB,p.44), she confesses. Isobel has yet to learn that "You eat in Africa or Africa eats you" (BF, p.183). Though Thomas is less concerned than Margaret Laurence, with the political details of Africa's coming of age she uses the guest/host conceit to draw our attention both to the connection between the European as invader or stranger and the black as host or victim and to the struggle between men and women.

While acknowlegement of her victim status precipitates Isobel's madness, Thomas' other women are inclined to rebel. Case in point is Rachel. Referring to Michael's "octopus-love" which is "suffocating, devouring, ruthless" and to her own "octopus-need," Rachel ponders:

> Is there always one who loves more than the other? Is there always the one who kisses and the other who is kissed? When I was not yet yours (i.e., Michael's), you were mad about me. As soon as you knew I loved you, you began to use that power to 'control' me (*L,* p.69).

To counteract Michael's control in the bedroom, Rachel throws in his face her literary successes. Though Rachel claims repeatedly that Michael is jealous of her achievements — "you could not stand even my little seedling of success, it drove you wild" (L. p.62)—it is apparent that Rachel uses her novels as weapons. Their struggle for mastery is an artistic as well as sexual one. And as they both admit, their relationship is really an "all-out-war."

This parasitic relationship, like Jason and Isobel's (like so many in *Ladies and Escorts* and in *Real Mothers*), is one in which the line between victor and victim is obscurred. Thomas writes:

> I would say that in about 80 percent of love affairs it is the women who 'conquer' the men. And the amazing thing about it is that it's done so cleverly that the man is often deceived into thinking that he was the conqueror (BF, p. 447).

As in the January/May affairs that bloom throughout Thomas' fiction, where for each partner the 'Casaubon complex' is mutually nourishing, mutually destructive, it *is* hard to distinguish guest from host. Touché, Thomas! In a world where sex and art are enactments of a dubious communion, a comment from *Blown Figures* is amusing and telling: "My brother-in-law always says we eat too much. He says we dig our graves with our teeth"(BF, p.66).

Again, Thomas' use of the guest/host motif is masterful. Less compelling, however, is her tendency to overwork an anecdote or situation or dialogue. I mentioned earlier that to adumbrate her world, it is hardly necessary to go beyond *Ten Green Bottles.* Whole sections from at least five of the stories in *Ten Green Bottles,* for example, surface at least once again in Thomas' canon. "If one green bottle . . . ." like *Mrs. Blood,* is the story of a miscarriage; "Xanadu" and "One is One & All Alone" treat of the author's African experiences. "Omo" concerns the African anaesthetist who crops up in *Blown Figures;* "Aunt Hettie and the Gates of the New Jerusalem" reappears intact in *Songs.* Similarly, the Timbucto fragment of *Blown Figures* becomes a story in its own right in *Real Mothers,* and so on. Regrettably, resonant lines and delicious anecdotes may suffer a loss of power through overexposure. Familiarity breeds a sense of boredom; we have been here before.

It may not be necessary, however, to end with a dying fall. *Real Mothers,* Thomas' latest collection of short stories, contains hints that the author herself is aware of the need for exploration. While Thomas treats us, for example, to the Rachel and Michael affair once more in "Harry & Violet," she alters significantly the tone and mood from *Latakia.* Memories, at least in the world of art, are no longer preserved intact or mummified. As well, reference to Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* suggests that Thomas recognizes the advantages of viewing a single event from more than one perspective. As the protagonist of the title story muses, "The trick was, of course, to try and get the right distance on everything; to stand in just the right relationship to it all. But how?"[17] My guess is that Thomas' soon-to-be-published novel, *Intertidal Life* will build on the single-mother story outlined in "Natural History"; my hope is that, with the "birth" of a new centre of interest combined with a growing concern for "right distance," *Intertidal Life* will signal a new departure, will provide an alternative to, or at least a significant variation on "the pestilential damps" of Thomas' old "anxieties."

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17. Audrey Thomas, *Real Mothers* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981), p. 33.