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'The end or *The End*': Ageing, Memory and Reliability in Margaret Atwood's Fictional Autobiography, *The Blind Assassin*.

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Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's complex Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin*, eighty-two year old Iris is writing her memoir in a race against time due to a heart condition that "nothing short of a whole new unit" will fix. Atwood's novel is a fictive autobiography, her fictional protagonist imparting her tale to us in the form of a memoir, also fictional. This paper will explore the themes of memory and reliability in the novel with focus on depictions of old age, on the function of memory and the processes of writing and remembering, as Atwood constantly links these themes via various depictions, descriptions, images and metaphors, one theme often being inextricable from the other.

'The end or *The End*': Ageing, Memory and Reliability in Margaret Atwood's Fictional Autobiography, *The Blind Assassin*.

Emma Filtness

Margaret Atwood's complex novel, *The Blind Assassin*, in which eighty-two year old Iris is writing her memoir in a race against time due to a heart condition that "nothing short of a whole new unit"¹ will fix, won the Booker Prize in 2000 after Atwood was "three times the bridesmaid and finally the bride"² (she had been shortlisted previously for *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Alias Grace*). In a review of *The Blind Assassin* in *The Guardian*, Alex Clark states that, in her tenth novel,

Atwood again demonstrates that she has mastered the art of creating dense, complex fictions from carefully layered narratives, making use of an array of literary devices - flashbacks, multiple time schemes, ambiguous, indeterminate plots...Yet at times there are simply too many threads for Atwood to weave into the carpet, as she muses on themes of authorship and confession, the simultaneous empowerment and impotence of secret storytelling, and the hopeless position of women whose fates, through blood, money or love, are tied to men.³

Thomas Mallon in *The New York Times* agrees that in relation to the complex 'novel within a novel' narrative, she does not quite pull it off or, if she does, it is at the expense of the characters⁴. As Clark continued, "it falls short of making the emotional impact that its suggestive and slippery plot at times promises. What we have, at the end, is a mystery story whose chief character is absent"⁵. The novel may be complicated, but this does not detract in any way from the characters – it was, indeed, the unique, insightful voice of Iris rather than the elusiveness of her sister Laura that kept me turning the pages. Clark's review commends her wonderful

evocations of childhood, and while the age of the narrator is often mentioned fleetingly in reviews, and Iris's merits as an entertaining and amusing narrator extolled⁶, many still seem to neglect to mention the novel's wonderful depictions of old age with the perfect combination of humour and sadness, of what it is like to be an eighty-two-year-old widow engulfed in memory and regret, instead focusing on the story-within-a-story structure, its social synopsis of women's lives in the 1900s⁷, on sibling rivalry and political chicanery⁸. In the academy also, relatively little attention has been paid to the text in terms of its depictions of ageing, although a few critics who read the text from a feminist point of view, such as Madeleine Davies in her article 'Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies', devote a few paragraphs to the novel's depictions of the ageing female body, yet in the case of Davies, this entails a reading of *The Blind Assassin* and its female bodies according to Cixous's 'écriture féminine' with focus on power struggles and writing metaphors employed by Atwood⁹, and others such as J. Brooks Bouson mostly focus on the depiction of the female body in relation to domestic abuse and wider power struggles within a patriarchal society. This paper will attempt to address this oversight by looking at representations of old age within the text, as well as at the function of memory and the processes of remembering in old age in relation to the act of writing a memoir, and the implications in terms of reliability, the subject of which forms the basis of Ruth Parkin-Gounelas' 2004 article – duplicity¹⁰. Atwood draws attention to these concerns through the reflexivity of her text, not as a novel in the guise of an autobiography, but as a novel which documents and reveals the processes involved in the construction of and the need for such a text, whether it be memorial, confession, or testimonial. It is Iris's age and the fact that she may soon die that motivates her to write, so in this sense the ageing protagonist and the autobiographical narrative are, in this novel, intertwined. Iris states near the very end of the novel that "by the time you read this last page that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be."¹¹ She equates the end of the memoir with the end of her life, and is not sure which one will happen first, though both are imminent.

A Question of Genre

Coral Ann Howells, points out that *The Blind Assassin* is more than just a memorial of one mere woman, "Iris's autobiographical narrative is a memorial to the end of an

era.”¹² Many critics, such as Elaine Showalter¹³ and J. Brooks Bouson, view the book as a feminist novel, but some such as Molly Hite describe it as a historical novel “bolstered by intensive research”, the details “laid out with a kind of fascinated affection.”¹⁴ Linda Hutchinson defines this text and others like it as historiographic metafiction; self-reflexive novels including historical events and people and a self-awareness of history and fiction as constructs.¹⁵ It would also fit with what gerontologist Mike Hepworth calls stories of ageing: “full-length novels which are about ageing as experienced by a central character” within which he includes “stories where ageing may not be the main interest of the writer but which include significant references to aspects of the ageing process or to older people.”¹⁶ *The Blind Assassin* also falls into the category of what Mary Morganroth Gullette in *Aged by Culture* calls ‘Age Autobiography’: “like any autobiography, Age Autobiography starts with the Oldest Self’s strong present feelings about its past selves.”¹⁷

In Atwood’s novel her fictional protagonist is imparting her tale to us in the form of a memoir, also fictional, so the novel can be described as what Northrop Frye called a fictional autobiography. In *Anatomy of Criticism* he expressed the opinion that all autobiographies are fictional anyway since all are constructed. He begins by identifying four types of fictional prose: autobiography/confession, the novel, romance and anatomy. He says these four types intermix in a variety of combinations: “most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern [...] that mixture produces the fictional autobiography.”¹⁸ *The Blind Assassin* may only be a *fictional* autobiography, but autobiographical criticism still applies, as the novel deals, through its partial form as a memoir, with many of the issues and concerns that have plagued autobiographical critics for decades. As Laura Marcus declares in *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, concerns in autobiographical criticism in recent years include: “the nature and expression of subjectivity; the generic specificity of autobiography; the truth-status and referentiality of autobiography in relation to the fact-fiction dichotomy and the status of fictional entities.”¹⁹ Atwood and other writers of fictive autobiography, such as Fay Weldon in *Chalcot Crescent*, Kate Morton in *The House at Riverton* and Angela Carter in *Wise Children*, and other forms of

fictional life writing such as Sebastian Barry's *Her Secret Scripture* extrapolate these concerns through the very act of creating obviously fictional auto/biographies. Barbara Hernstein Smith, as discussed by Marcus, also mentions the similarities between the novel and autobiography, stating that "the writer of fiction is pretending to be writing a[n auto]biography, while actually fabricating one."²⁰

Marcus explains, "in the last decade or so, generic and disciplinary borders and boundaries have started to break down. The most interesting auto/biographical theory and practice are being written across traditional conceptual and disciplinary divides."²¹ Fictive autobiographies such as *The Blind Assassin* are examples of current practice bridging these gaps. Marcus believes this is particularly the case in feminist autobiography, which again points to Atwood's novel as being an exemplar of this current boundary dissolution in autobiographical practice.

Our first encounter with the narrator, Iris, is when she declares "Ten years after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge."²² We learn she is a sister, a role that is integral to the plot. This first line also establishes the historical context of the novel, as in one sentence it reveals both personal family history and international history; in fact, as Howells observes "her autobiography is enmeshed in the wider currents of the Nation's history, though the main focus is always on Iris's relationship with her sister."²³ The novel spans most of a century, and references are continually made to personal history, the history of the nation and world history through its chronicling of events, from those as large-scale as the world wars, to things as small as picnics and fashion trends. Iris muses on the growing relevance of history in later life, where she herself has become part of it, recalling "I am after all a local fixture, like a brick-strewn vacant lot where some important building used to stand."²⁴ She again links the nature of history to her present state: "My bones have been aching again...they ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain."²⁵ At earlier points in her life, Iris also equates world history with her own personal history when noting: "And then, after the wedding, there was the war. Love, then marriage, then catastrophe."²⁶ All through the novel significant historical events, although seemingly only in the background, provide more than just context – they tend to mirror events in Iris's personal history too, though, as is the

case with history, it is only through hindsight that all becomes clear, hence the advantage of Iris's position as an older narrator: "as a very old person, Iris lives in a permanent condition of double vision, where the boundaries between the present and the past are frequently blurred."²⁷

Atwood chooses to explicitly depict the creative process involved in writing an autobiography or memoir in the narrative present of her novel in which the past is recalled and reconstructed, rather than simply presenting the memories as a first person past tense narrative or a first person present tense narrative in which the 'memories' are lived. It is this split between the self that writes and the self that is written about that is most enlightening – the distinction between past and present selves. We are first made aware that Iris is writing fifty-three pages in: "Laid out in front of me are a cup of tea, and apple cut into quarters and a pad of paper with blue lines on it...I've bought a new pen as well."²⁸ This is the first of many references to the writing process – she often describes how it feels to push the pen along the page, how the ink looks on the page – a scrawl, a thread, a line, where and when she is writing (outside on the porch in summer, the kitchen when it is too cold). She describes her pen, the paper, the growing pile, how it feels to squeeze out the words, her fluctuating motives for writing – why she is writing, why anyone writes, musings on possible readers, if any. How her age makes it difficult (arthritis, failing memory, impending death), how guilt and regret and painful memories also make the process a struggle, but that she must write, nonetheless.

Representations of the Fourth Age

In *Stories of Ageing*, Mike Hepworth suggests that old age is the ultimate challenge for the novelist:

it is about people who are living through the final period of their lives; a time when those who live long enough have to come to terms with changes in their bodies and the attitudes of society to growing older. Stories of ageing are faced with the problem of describing a character and his or her relationships with other people when she or he has apparently little distance left to travel in the 'journey of life'.²⁹

This could be why many novels featuring an older narrator or protagonist tend to spend little time in the narrative present with the ageing protagonist or narrator and instead use flashbacks, memories and reminiscence of childhood and youth. This is often the case in *The Blind Assassin*, yet as the novel is lengthy, there is still plenty of time spent with eighty-two-year-old Iris in her present as well as delving into her past via many devices. Hepworth believes that the space opened up by creative license by novelists who represent ageing “enhances the reader’s appreciation of the subjective experiences of someone who is consciously aware of the process of growing older”³⁰ as, indeed, is Iris. This links to what Marcus describes as the impossibility of self-presence – the radical split between the self that writes (ageing, old, dying) and the self that is written (young, beautiful) – and “the crucial role of language in the construction of the subject.”³¹ Atwood structures the novel in such a way that this split between past and present selves is apparent and contrasting. An image of Iris in the present, tiny, wrinkled, hunched and poor will be laid next to a snapshot of Iris in her twenties, beautiful, rich and glamorous. Marcus argues that in autobiography subject-object fusion is the ideal, but not the reality.

The functions of representations of ageing in this novel are varied, from the depictions offered by Atwood of the ageing female body and the psychology of growing old, the ‘pros and cons’, and mortality, to the many stereotypes and prejudices, the discrimination and ageism (not always consciously so) of society as a whole towards older people, especially single women. Gerontologists divide the ageing process up into various stages and categories. Peter Laslett introduced four stages – the third being that of active leisure between retirement and the onset of frailty, and the fourth and final stage that of dependence, decrepitude and death (the stage Iris is at)³². Arber and Ginn in *Connecting Gender and Ageing* divide ageing up into three categories: chronological age, physiological age and social age³³. Mike Hepworth in *Stories of Ageing* splits ageing into three slightly different categories: biological, psychological and social – the body, self and society. Hepworth’s categorisation and approach to ageing is especially useful in relation to *The Blind Assassin*. He states that he treats ageing “not simply as a matter of chronology or biology but as a complex and potentially open-ended process of interaction between

the body, self and society.”³⁴ Atwood explores these interactions through Iris’ present tense narration of her everyday life.

The first indication of the age of the narrator that the reader encounters is on page 43, and this fits Hepworth’s ‘body’ category: “I stepped into the shower, holding on to the grip bar Myra’s bullied me in to, careful not to drop the soap: I am apprehensive of slipping”; and “Getting my clothes on helped. I am not at my best without scaffolding (yet what has become of my real clothes? Surely these shapeless pastels and orthopaedic shoes belong to someone else?”³⁵ The grip bar, the pastel clothes and orthopaedic shoes make it clear that she is old and not too happy about the fact – she sees this version of herself as not her ‘real’ self. This notion recurs throughout the text:

When I look in the mirror I see an old woman; or not old, because nobody is allowed to be old any more. *Older* then...sometimes I see instead the young girl’s face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face.”³⁶

Here, as Hepworth stated, the body and the self interact and often juxtapose – the psychological self and the body are not a unified whole – Iris’s identity is fragmented, her past self and present self contradict. This identity crisis caused by old age fits Davies’ account of female bodies in Atwood’s work in general, which always show signs of unease: “female bodies become battle fields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh.”³⁷ What are these worries, and what are these power structures? Iris expresses concern at having to leave the house, as, due to a heart condition, the doctor has prescribed gentle walks, but after worrying about the inevitable (death) – “It seems I will not after all keep on living forever, merely getting smaller and greyer”³⁸ – she worries about going out: “it isn’t the idea of the walking that bothers me, it’s the going out: I feel too much on show. Do I imagine it, the staring, the whispering?”³⁹ This reveals how Iris believes she is viewed by society – as a spectacle, the object of gossip, and fits with Hepworth’s third ageing facet – society. At another point in the text, she also mentions what she thinks society expects of her, and how she is viewed by the younger generation: “I

knew enough to know that the only thing expected of me was that I not disgrace myself...to them I must have seemed quaint, but I suppose it's everyone's fate to be reduced to quaintness by those younger than themselves."⁴⁰ Also other stereotypes persist and have a damaging effect on those who are burdened with their weight: "[of Halloween] as usual I will turn out the lights and pretend not to be home. It's not dislike of them as such, but self-defence – should any of the wee ones disappear, I don't want to be accused of having lured them in and eaten them."⁴¹ This is a reference to the classic fairytale 'Hansel and Gretel', in which a cannibalistic witch lures two children into her house (it is made out of confectionary) with the intention of eating them. It is hard to tell here, though, if Iris is joking or not, which in itself is quite sad. She also speaks of the way she is treated by those younger than herself: "They're in the habit of speaking of me in the third person, as if I'm a child or pet;"⁴² and "more and more I feel like a letter – deposited here, collected there. But a letter addressed to no one."⁴³ She has no autonomy any more, is subjected to the whims of others, dependent upon them, and worse, she is alone.

Iris describes her body using very negative, yet creative imagery – she describes her arm as "a brittle radius covered slackly in porridge and string"⁴⁴ and says of her face: "if I could see my face in the mirror – if I could only get close enough, or far enough away – it would be crisscrossed with tiny lines, in between the main wrinkles."⁴⁵ There are many such descriptions in the text, some revealing a playfulness, a sarcastic acceptance, others a disappointment or, worse, frustration: "it's an affront, all that. Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities – they aren't ours, we never wanted or claimed them. Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected."⁴⁶ Again, this displays Hepworth's proposed interaction between bodily ageing and psychological ageing, and the conflicts that arise. Another way ageing is represented in this text is through Iris's thoughts and musings upon her own mortality, on impending death, which she seems to have accepted with little trouble, as long as she has time to finish her memoir: "I hasten on, making my way crabwise across the paper. It's a slow race now, between me and my heart, but I intend to get there first. Where is there? The end or *The End*. One or the other. Both are destinations, of a sort."⁴⁷ Later, her aim of keeping her "leaky heart afloat"

until she can “set things in order” raises the question of what ‘things’, exactly does she mean?⁴⁸ The truth, or Iris’s version of it.

Memory, Remembering and Misremembering

According to Howells,

Iris’s narrative is grounded in the realistic circumstances of her everyday life, but there is a continual slippage away from realism as she escapes from the loneliness of the present and from her intense irritation with her bodily infirmities back into the secret spaces of private memory.⁴⁹

Here, Howells is referencing what Marcus called the ‘split’ between the ‘I’ that writes in the narrative present and the ‘I’ that is written, through the recollection and reconstruction of events as memories. As Marcus states, “autobiography is both introspective and centrally concerned with the problematics of time and memory,”⁵⁰ and these themes are a central concern in *The Blind Assassin*, further supporting the reading of the novel as autobiography. As Ruth Parkin-Gounelas argues, the novel “has to do with memory as a process of reconstructing the past,” but that “the more it adds or remembers, the less it seems to know.”⁵¹

Memory, like ageing, functions in different ways in *The Blind Assassin*. Memories are not simply presented, but are accompanied by a reflexive awareness of, interest in and documentation of the entire process of remembering, or indeed *misremembering*, as is the writing process. One such function of the representation of memory in the novel is to illustrate problems associated with the act of remembering in old age: “Where was I? I turn back the page: the war is still raging”⁵² and “Where am I? *It was winter*. No, I’ve done that.”⁵³ This confusion and difficulty in accessing memory is shown most vividly through her inability to accurately recall her husband: “I’ve failed to convey Richard, in any rounded sense. He remains a cardboard cutout. I know that. I can’t truly describe him, I can’t get a focus: he’s blurred.”⁵⁴ Memory is also presented in this text as a negative phenomenon and Iris feels the need to warn younger generations about this:

When you're young, you think everything you do is disposable. You move from now to now, crumpling time up in your hands, tossing it away... You think you can get rid of things, people too – leave them behind. You don't yet know about the habit they have, of coming back."⁵⁵

Iris is now unable to sleep, and her doctor jokingly attributes this to a bad conscience, unaware of just how right he was: "Unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So can biting your tongue. My bad nights were beginning. I couldn't sleep."⁵⁶ Howells refers to this as a sustained negotiation with the dead because Iris is haunted by her memories.⁵⁷ This again fits with Marcus' description of problems often associated with autobiographical confession narratives: "in the process of confession, the present 'reformed' self will be overwhelmed by the past as it ostensibly seeks to put it behind itself."⁵⁸ No matter how hard Iris tries to put her past behind her, it keeps coming back to haunt her.

Another concern is why we feel the need to remember and be remembered, the idea of memorial:

Why is it we want so badly to memorialise ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire-hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It's all the same impulse. What do we hope from it? Applause, envy, respect? Or simply attention, of any kind we can get?

At the very least we want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down.⁵⁹

Here, Iris is explaining our need to do this, *her* need to this, as this is what she is doing by writing a memoir to leave behind once she is dead, to 'set things in order.' She also hints at the reason behind her own memoir when she says: "What is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge."⁶⁰ This statement makes us question Iris and her motives; she does not merely want to set

the record straight, she wants revenge, but revenge on whom? Her 'enemies' are both dead at this point, yet she still feels the need to make her version of events known to what family she has left – her estranged granddaughter Sabrina.

Secrets, Lies, Omitting and Forgetting

Iris is often described in reviews and by critics, and indeed by Atwood herself, as an unreliable and often-duplicious narrator. Davies shows in her discussion of Atwoodian biographers that she “knows herself to be essentially duplicitous, constantly inviting doubt around the veracity of her own shady narrative and repeatedly drawing attention to textual adventures in bad faith even in the act of composition.”⁶¹ Parkin-Gounelas states that “we’ve been deceived as readers throughout...it is only on the second reading of Iris’s overarching narrative, however, that we notice the way the perspective is skewed to lead us to miss things.”⁶² Her unreliability is due, in part, to memory and remembering and the consequences of ageing upon this. Her inability to recall Richard, and to stick to chronology, are not her fault, and she often admits to these downfalls, such as when she describes her knowledge and presentation of her family history as a mosaic: “I collected enough fragments of the past to make a reconstruction of it, which must have bore as much relation to the real thing as a mosaic portrait would to the original”⁶³ – in reference to asking Reenie, the hired help, about the family history prior to her birth. At other times, though, Iris admits to intentionally lying and misleading, sometimes because she genuinely did believe it was the best course of action, and she regrets times when she did not lie, but told the truth, which is often more damaging than a lie – for example, when she tells Laura that Alex (who Laura is in love with) is dead, and that Iris had been sleeping with him, which could be seen as not the only cause of Laura’s suicide but the final straw: “Now I’m coming to the part that still haunts me. Now I should have bitten my tongue, now I should have kept my mouth shut. Out of love, I should have lied, or said anything else.”⁶⁴

On other occasions Iris lies simply to cause mischief and to entertain herself, and enjoys doing so, or because it means less hassle and bother, especially in relation to Myra and her doctor. On one occasion Myra gives her brownies to eat as she is always complaining that Iris does not eat enough and will die of starvation. Iris

says: "I could neither drink nor eat, but why did God make toilets? I left a few brown crumbs, for authenticity."⁶⁵ On another occasion Iris is snowed in and feels like some company:

"Don't be silly Myra", I said. "I'm quite capable of digging myself out' (a lie – I had no intention of lifting a finger. I was well supplied with peanut butter, I could wait it out. But I felt like company, and threats of action on my part usually speeded up the arrival of Walter).⁶⁶

Moreover, Iris does not answer the door when Myra knocks, writing: "Out of perversity, I didn't answer. Maybe she would think I was dead – croaked in my sleep! No doubt she was already fussing over which of my floral prints she would lay me out in."⁶⁷ Marcus states that the intention to tell the truth, as far as possible, is a sufficient guarantee of autobiographical veracity and sincerity.⁶⁸ Iris often lies, yet she admits this to us, so we feel that she is not lying *to us*, we are in her confidence, yet a seed of doubt is planted in our minds. This seed is then frequently watered throughout the novel by bits of information imparted to us by Iris during her many musings on the nature of truth, and this is yet another way reliability, or more accurately, *unreliability* is presented in the novel:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at a later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it.

Impossible, of course.⁶⁹

From this we can gather that Iris does not believe it is possible to write the truth: at the beginning of her memoir she says that she is writing for no one, but towards the end she changes her mind, this is for Sabrina. So as she is now writing for someone, do we take Iris at her word and therefore assume what we are reading is, if not a lie, then not exactly the whole truth? Iris brings this up yet again later on:

I didn't think of what I was doing as writing – just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought of myself as recording – a bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall.

I wanted a memorial. That was how it began.”⁷⁰

Marcus notes that:

the concept of 'intention' pervades discussions of autobiography: it not only refers to the authorial motive governing the production of the text, but becomes an elaborate structure which apparently defines the ways in which a text should be received. In a number of cases, it is used to resolve the intractable problem of 'referentiality' – that is, the kind and degree of 'truth' that can be expected.⁷¹

Later, directly addressing her reader, Iris writes: “You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn't necessarily get you to the truth.”⁷² For Iris, there is no absolute truth or if there is, it is elusive. Marcus supports this more complex view of truth when she says that “very few critics would demand that autobiographical truth be literally verifiable, - this would, after all, undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than fact.”⁷³ Marcus draws on Starobinski during this discussion, who says that what is important is *not* historical veracity but the emotion experienced as the past emerges and is represented in consciousness. The image of the past may be false, but the present emotion felt is not, therefore the memory is real and valid to the person experiencing it at the time. He says this is the difference between historical fact and authenticity. What Iris is writing in her memoir may not be true, but it is authentic.⁷⁴

Reliability is also called into question via Iris's thoughts on secrets, censorship and omissions:

How do I know these things? I don't know them, not in the usual sense of knowing. But in households like ours there's often more in silences than in

what is actually said – in the lips pressed together, the head turned away, the quick side-ways glance.⁷⁵

Furthermore, in relation to her memoir, she writes: “I look back over what I have written and I know it’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light.”⁷⁶ She also talks about the nature of secrets: “I wonder which is preferable – to walk around all your life swollen up with your own secrets until you burst from the pressure, or to have them sucked out of you, every paragraph, every sentence, every word of them.”⁷⁷ Iris is likening the act of her writing her memoir to that of involuntary confession, and *The Blind Assassin* can also be read as a confession narrative and a testimonial (two subcategories of the life writing ‘genre’): “I am on trial here,” writes Iris. “I know it. You’ll soon be thinking...should I have behaved differently?[...]Should is a futile word. It is about what didn’t happen. It belongs in a parallel universe.”⁷⁸

The Blind Assassin sheds light on what it is to be a lone older woman negotiating the challenges presented by the different facets of ageing as helpfully categorised by Hepworth, an insight which is perhaps more relevant than ever in our current ageing society. As Hepworth notes, “ageing is simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualised subjective experience,” and that reading novels such as *The Blind Assassin* can aid our understanding of ageing, as such stories illustrate the ageing process.⁷⁹ The novel represents these facets so convincingly, with a startling realism, enhanced by the employment of a first person pseudo-autobiographical narrative, and because of the insights it provides into the autobiographical process. Iris’s ‘memoir’ does not only capture what is seen when one decides to look back, but also captures the actual self-reflexive process of doing so – remembering, misremembering, omitting – including motive (death, memorial, guilt, regret). It is a combination of her old age, the promise of death, and the chance to relieve some of her guilt by ‘setting things in order’ that motivate her to write – and we all work better when faced with a deadline, though for Iris this word has a more literal meaning.

Endnotes

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 579.

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- ³ Alex Clark, "Vanishing Act: Atwood's Ambiguous Magic in *The Blind Assassin*", *The Guardian*, September 30, 2000, accessed April 01, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/sep/30/fiction.bookerprize2000>
- ⁴ Thomas Mallon, "Wheels Within Wheels", *New York Times*, September 03, 2000, accessed May 15, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/reviews/000903.03mallont.html>
- ⁵ Clark, "Vanishing Act".
- ⁶ Paul Gray, "In the Shadow of Death", *Time Magazine*, September 11, 2000, accessed 15 May 2012 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,997927,00.html>
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- ⁸ Sybil S. Steinberg, "The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood is reviewed", *Publisher's weekly*, 247.30, July 24 (2000): 67.
- ⁹ Madeleine Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies", in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
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