

# SHIPS AT A DISTANCE

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Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London, 1993, 261pp; £34.95 cloth, £11.95 paperback.

## I

In 1983 Cedric Robinson published his monumental study on 'the making of the black radical tradition'.<sup>1</sup> Its main contention was that this tradition did not emerge in response to 'racial capitalism' but predated European expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; it is an independently-constituted tradition with a distinctly African world-view. The acts of sabotage, suicide, infanticide, *marronage*, and so on cannot, he claimed, be understood in any other way. It is true that since the end of the eighteenth century black resistance to slavery and colonial domination has spoken the language of the European Enlightenment and drawn on the various western ideologies which are its heirs: nationalism, liberal democracy, Marxism. But Robinson insisted that this does not signify an abandonment of the black radical tradition: on the contrary, the use of such a vocabulary has been a sharply critical one and has not superseded more ancestral modes of resistance. He showed how intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright (case studies which take up the second half of his book), while seeming to capitulate to western radical traditions, actually point up their inherent failure to address the black experience and thus demonstrate not simply the existence, but the theoretical and practical necessity, of an alternative ground of protest and rebellion.

1. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Zed, London, 1983.

Ten years later Paul Gilroy has written a similarly ambitious volume with comparable historical scope and theoretical aspirations. He shares with Robinson the same concern to expose the limitations of post-Enlightenment critical thought (notably its complicity with racial subordination – or at least its inability to deal with it) and to show how black cultural forms exceed them in some way. The parallel even extends to his choice of writers whose work he examines in most detail; two of the six chapters are devoted to Du Bois and Wright.

But *The Black Atlantic* is no mere sequel to *Black Marxism*. It is an interrogation of its main premise, indeed the very concept of 'tradition' itself. The notion of an independent and continuous black tradition that has its roots in the pre-colonial African past has become increasingly influential in African-American cultural studies in the United States in the last decade or so: not only among self-proclaimed 'Afrocentrists' but in the work of more conventional

historians and literary critics.

This position – which Gilroy variously calls ‘cultural nationalism’, ‘ethnic absolutism’ or ‘racial essentialism’ – fails to appreciate the extent to which black history was dislocated by Atlantic slavery. The interconnections between Africa, Europe and the Americas which it set in motion signal a decisive break, which the prevailing orthodoxy cannot acknowledge because it focuses on just one aspect of the phenomenon: the African origin of American slaves and their descendants. Although African cultural forms were not totally displaced by slavery, their meanings were irrevocably transformed. Henceforth, black cultures testified to a multi-faceted criss-crossing of people, techniques and ideas between *three* continents, and to emphasize this Gilroy pays particular attention to the European dimension. While folk religions were important for Robinson, it is popular music which holds pride of place in Gilroy’s account. For him, black culture is typified less by obeah, santeria or voodoo than by contemporary soul, reggae and hip-hop: much more obviously hybrid forms which overrun ethnic and national boundaries even in the space of a single record. He writes of North London’s Soul II Soul:

Their song ‘Keep on Moving’ was notable for having been produced in England by the children of Caribbean settlers and then remixed in a (Jamaican) dub format in the United States by Teddy Riley, an African-American. It included segments or samples of music taken from American and Jamaican records by the JBs and Mikey Dread respectively (p16).

The concept of ‘tradition’ is unable to grasp this kind of complexity – that of ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’ as Gilroy punningly has it (p133). In its stead we are offered some putative alternatives which might permit a more sophisticated understanding of black cultural forms: one is the recent coinage ‘black Atlantic’; another is the older ‘diaspora’, borrowed from nineteenth-century Jewish thought. Both terms suggest we situate black cultural forms not in relation to some racial essence but a network of relationships which are historically quite specific.

But not *that* specific. *The Black Atlantic* is haunted by the spectre of total fragmentation in which the realities of racial subordination are lost in a textualist free-for-all. If Gilroy is urging us to leave behind the mythical certainties of a motherland, this is not to lead us aground on the shifting sands of ‘endless play’ (p36): the course followed by what he calls the ‘pluralists’ or ‘anti-essentialists’ who embrace the hybridity of black cultural forms but only as objects of aesthetic pleasure. They become just so many artefacts to submit to ‘casual and arrogant deconstruction’ (p101). Black identity is not a ‘fixed essence’ but nor is it ‘a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers’ (p102). However Gilroy appears to equate the sillier excesses of a certain mode of criticism with *any* approach which is hesitant to identify a single ‘unifying

dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures' (p80). Such caution by no means necessarily entails a commitment to 'utter contingency' and it's only a high-handed puritanical tone which makes it appear to do so. This imprecision is nevertheless crucial in enhancing the substantive thesis of the book, expressed most succinctly in the title of its first chapter: 'The Black Atlantic as Counterculture of Modernity'.

## II

Gilroy is reluctant to say what he means by 'modernity'. This is because it has usually been defined in the context of theories which he finds wanting. On the one hand there are the arguments of authors such as Marshall Berman or Jürgen Habermas whose 'writings convey a deep faith in the democratic potential of modernity' (p49). On the other there are attempts by those who do not share this faith to confront modernity with something either much older (the pre-modern essentialists) or more recent (the post-modern pluralists).

What all these approaches have in common is an unwillingness to confront slavery: the one modern institution they have failed to consider (at least not since Hegel: a key reference point in the text to which I will return). According to Gilroy, the re-insertion of slavery into the contemporary discussions about modernity would not simply expand their range of topics; to do so would throw into question the whole nature of the debate. However, it seems to me that Gilroy can only make slavery play this critical role by using the term so loosely that it becomes not just important to modernity but virtually synonymous with it. He speaks of 'the relationship of racial terror and subordination to the inner character of modernity' (pp70-1) and of 'slavery as a premise of modernity' (p54). His text includes formulations such as 'racial subordination is integral to the processes of development and social and technological progress known as modernisation' (p163) and 'racial terror is not merely compatible with occidental rationality but cheerfully complicit with it' (p56).

There are no arguments advanced to support these assertions. It may well be that closer examination of slavery and racial subordination could render problematic a simple pre- or post-modern basis for the study of black culture. But Gilroy turns slavery into such an all-encompassing abstraction that it becomes almost impossible to conceive how it could be challenged at all. He identifies, however, two strategies.

Firstly, an 'immanent critique' which takes modernity to task for failing to live up to the ideals to which modernity itself gave rise, such as formal equality and a rational organization of the productive process. But, although this 'politics of fulfilment' is no doubt important, it is limited because it cannot question modernity as a whole. This can only be accomplished by a second strategy which exceeds the norms of secular rationality (complicit as they are with slavery) and draws on other values which transcend them in some way. In *The Black Atlantic* such a critique typically surfaces in themes of redemption, apocalypse and jubilee: crucial distinguishing marks of Gilroy's 'counterculture

of modernity'. Not 'inside', to be sure, yet not entirely 'outside' the West either. This culture and its 'politics of transfiguration' does not sidestep modernity but engages with the 'racial terror' that apparently lies at its very heart.

Although it argues that it is in non-representational performative practices such as music that the counterculture of modernity is most readily expressed, *The Black Atlantic* is concerned largely with literature: an irony probably not lost on the author who has a few words to say about the compromises academicized black intellectuals are forced to make. But the preference for the written text may not be just pragmatic. His claims to have identified a philosophical critique in black music are considerably less plausible than his similar claims about black literature, precisely because of its non-representational nature. What does it mean to assert the existence of 'a community of needs and solidarity ... magically made audible in the music itself' (p39)? As in his previous book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Gilroy confuses music (which is not representational) and musical cultures (which are).<sup>2</sup> Without this confusion the privilege of music in black culture (*qua* 'counterculture of modernity') can no longer be sustained.

On somewhat surer ground, Gilroy illustrates his argument by reference to a passage from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. On the run from his brutal master Edward Covey, he meets Sandy, another slave, who persuades him to carry a certain root which would protect him from further beatings. Not surprisingly perhaps the root proves ineffective: the day after he returns to the farm Douglass is set upon by Covey once again. But this time he fights back and after two hours of struggle Covey (and several bystanders) are forced to let him go. The adult narrator remarks that this marked 'the turning point' in his life as a slave: he was now become a man, no longer afraid to die.

Gilroy finds Douglass' account interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it seems to symbolise the limitations of the African heritage (represented by Sandy) as a basis for resistance. But more importantly it can be read as a subtle rewriting of Hegel's allegory of the master and the slave in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Young Frederick's recourse to violence and his renunciation of the fear of death challenge Hegel's assumption that the rational course of action for the slave is to choose bondage over death. For Gilroy this reworking of the classic philosophical text shows Douglass' 'critical understanding of modernity' (p63). But this is to confuse modernity with theories about modernity. If Douglass' account can be read as a critique of (certain aspects of) the master-slave dialectic, it can only be read as a critique of modernity if Hegel's intersubjective model of power and recognition is assumed to be in every other respect an adequate one – not only of plantation slavery but of the entire workings of post-Enlightenment western civilisation. Gilroy's 'modernity' then is not simply coterminous with slavery but with a basically Hegelian conception of it.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt this problem is an occupational hazard of anyone who begins to philosophically reflect on modernity. This is not to say that one cannot identify numerous parallels and interrelations among a range of beliefs and practices which have emerged over the last few hundred years in the West and which

2. See Alrick Cambridge, 'Sisyphus Stone', in Alrick Cambridge and Stephan Feuchtwang (eds), *Where You Belong: Government and Black Culture*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1992.

3. The problem with Hegel is usefully set out by Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp1-6.

one may call 'modern'. In very general (but rather banal) terms one might even point to certain gross differences between this epoch and the one which preceded it. 'Modernity' could serve as a loose descriptive term for the field of investigation of historians who examine the emergence of 'modern' social relationships, institutions and bodies of knowledge. But to make it into an object of a 'critique' presupposes that field is internally coherent, unified by some basic characteristic or principle of which its multiple instances are but an expression. The temptation to make this huge leap is apparently overwhelming, but its benefits are dubious, whether one's model is a slave plantation or a prison, bureaucrat's office or analyst's couch.

Gilroy feels he needs 'modernity' if he is to break 'the inertia which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between a squeamish, nationalist essentialism and a sceptical, saturnalian pluralism which makes the impure world of politics literally unthinkable' (p102). But one may be entitled to ask where the impure world figures in his own theory. On the one hand a 'politics of fulfilment' which although effective in its field 'is mostly content to play occidental rationality at its own game' (p38) and hence is not of great consequence, focussed as it is on objectives rather more immediate and closely defined than 'modernity' itself. And on the other, a 'politics of transfiguration' which sets its sights suitably high – the vision of an entirely new social order – but how this order might come into existence Gilroy is unable to say.

It is possible to detect echoes here perhaps of 'reform' and 'revolution' of a certain Marxism. But unlike proletarian revolution (which is supposedly not a pious wish but one grounded in a science of history), Gilroy's politics of transfiguration is self-consciously utopian, and this – he argues – is one of its strengths. It pushes 'at the very limits of what Euro-American modernity has delineated as the approved space for politics within its social formations' and requires 'a different political and philosophical vocabulary from that endorsed by past and present scientific conventions' (p114). This politics of transfiguration is to be distinguished from 'political struggles that have been conducted according to the principles of bureaucratic rationality. Particularly in the slave period, but also after it, there are few committee minutes, manifestos, or other programmatic documents that aim at setting down these movements' objectives and strategy in transparent form. Their reflexive self-consciousness ... is regularly expressed in cultural rather than formally political practices' (p119).

It is hard to understand how a politics can dispense with programmatic documents and clear objectives. The last sentence appears to explain: the black Atlantic is characterised by an informal, cultural, politics. But in the absence of any further specification, such a notion remains confusing. Gilroy consistently argues against the dissociation of culture and politics, but he does so at the cost of blurring the distinction altogether by aligning them along a continuum. Cultural practices (or at least those considered radical) are already political practices, albeit only informal ones. A brief examination of a couple of examples will suggest that this 'politics of transfiguration' is not a politics at all,

but rather a term which serves rather arbitrarily to promote some cultural elements over others.

One of the pre-modern themes or motifs which are regularly invoked in black cultures is that of the Old Testament Exodus. Of all the biblical tales 'it was Exodus which provided the primary semantic resource in the elaboration of slave identity, slave historicity, and a distinctive sense of time' and 'the heroic figure of Moses proved especially resonant for slaves and their descendants' (p207). Gilroy contrasts this motif unfavourably with another, that of Ancient Egyptian civilization, held up as a symbol of pre-colonial black achievement by Afrocentrists, who seem to be regrettably in the ascendant: 'Blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs than with the abject plight of those they held in bondage' (p207). The celebration of a mythologised African past

may be useful in developing communal discipline and individual self-worth, and even in galvanising black communities to resist the encroachments of crack cocaine, but [it] supplies a poor basis for the writing of cultural history and the calculation of political choices (p188).

One may reply at this point that Exodus does not provide a strong basis for the calculation of political choices either. But Gilroy does not apply these ordinary everyday criteria to the biblical narrative. This is because the story of Exodus has a utopian, eschatological dimension which is lacking in the image of the Egypt of the Pharaohs. The latter is judged according to the values of a 'politics of fulfilment' (and found wanting); the former is tested against the promise of a 'politics of transfiguration' (and thought to be instrumental). And yet the vision of a land of milk and honey has no *political* value in itself, formally or informally. Like the myth of an African past, its value lies in its capacity (under certain conditions) to organize identities and motivate people: 'developing communal discipline and individual self-worth', precisely. Both cultural forms are oppositional in that they set themselves against racist representations of black people and confer senses of self and belonging which involvement in political activity presupposes. But neither are oppositional in the sense that they anticipate particular political objectives and the strategies by which they might be achieved. Whether biblical allegory or Africanist myth will promote or hinder such objectives cannot be determined in advance; their value in this sense will depend on the particular context in which they are appealed to.<sup>4</sup>

4. For a fuller discussion of the issues here see Alrick Cambridge, 'Cultural Recognition and Identity', in Cambridge and Feuchtwang, *op. cit.*

### III

*The Black Atlantic* discusses a wide range of texts from Douglass' *Narrative* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Some writers such as Martin Delany are virtually unknown in Britain, and there are a number of works by more well-known authors he is no doubt introducing to many for the first time: Wright's travel writing, for instance, or Du Bois' novel *Dark Princess*. If just some of these books

are made available in this country as the result of Gilroy's efforts we will have cause to be grateful.

If I have indicated a number of weaknesses in his substantive theory, this should not detract from what Gilroy suggests his main purpose to be, which is to show how untenable 'absolutist' or 'essentialist' theories of race and culture really are. As a polemic against those critics and historians, especially in the United States, who have written about black literature, music and so on as if they were solely 'African-American', *The Black Atlantic* is most welcome. Gilroy's readings superbly refute this racial, ethnic and indeed national chauvinism. The European dimension to their life and work should no longer be scrutinised for signs of inauthenticity; it attests, as he says, to 'the inescapable hybridity of intermixture of ideas' (pxi). An observation which ought to be unexceptional, but alas, when applied to black culture, it is not. And that, in the end, is why this book is important.

# IDEOLOGY AND INGESTION

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*Emma Parker*

Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment*, Virago, London, 1993, 136pp; £7.99 paperback.

Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth Of The British Drug Underground*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1992, 198pp; £11.99 paperback.

Food itself provides much food for thought. As Evelyn J. Hinz argues, 'eating and drinking in themselves constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience'.<sup>1</sup> Consumption, of food and drugs, and the cultural inscription of ideology upon the body, is indirectly the theme of Maud Ellmann's *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* and Marek Kohn's *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground*. While neither book is concerned solely with women, both raise the issue of women's entitlement – to consume and to take up a satisfactory place in the social order.

*The Hunger Artists* proposes that there is a complicity between starving, writing and imprisonment. Ellmann begins by exploring the different meanings starvation embodies and by linking anorexics and hunger-strikers. She goes on to outline how eating is related to identity by positing the body as the locus of meaning. She adopts the Foucauldian theory of the body as a cultural construct and suggests that eating is intrinsically related to subjectivity. She cites Freud and Klein, as well as Hegel, Marx, Feuerbach and Abraham, to discuss body boundaries, the distinction between inside and outside, subject and object, self and other, that structures the ego. Having established that eating is related to the body, she then uses this to demonstrate how flesh and text are related. Ellmann is not the only critic to have explored the relationship between writing and food, but she does so from an entirely different perspective. Like Ellmann, Mary Anne Schofield believes 'there is a symbiotic relationship between food and the written word'.<sup>2</sup> Schofield focuses on the relationship between cooking and writing. These are not only both forms of creativity, she suggests, but create each other. Cooking results in a creation of food and words. Her book, entitled, *Cooking By the Book*, a collection of essays about food, epitomizes this. Ellmann, however, sees rejection of food, rather than creation, as a stimulus for writing. A critique of Yeats' *The King's Threshold* and Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Investigations of a Dog* demonstrates how the body is transformed into words through writing and starving. From here, Ellmann proceeds to apply her theory to *Clarissa* and the experience of the Irish hunger-strikers of 1981.

1. Evelyn J. Hinz, 'Diet Consciousness and Literary Trends', *Mosaic* 24, Summer/Fall 1991, University of Manitoba, pv.

2. Mary Anne Schofield, (ed), *Cooking By The Book: Food in Literature and Culture*, Bowling Green State University, Popular Press, Ohio, 1989, p2.



Finally, Ellmann concentrates on the context of imprisonment to suggest that starving and writing can be seen as a means of emancipation through disembodiment. She continues a close and sophisticated comparison of the meaning of starving and writing in *Clarissa* and for the Irish strikers. Imprisoned both physically by her father and Lovelace, and symbolically by a restrictive patriarchal order, Clarissa refuses food but starts to write prolifically. Clarissa's rejection of food is a symbolic rejection of her sexual manipulation. She is metaphorically force-fed by her family's demand that she become Solmes' wife and, more literally, by Lovelace's rape. What she cannot refuse with her nether mouth, she rejects orally. The Irish hunger-strikers, prisoners in the Maze, starve themselves in demonstration of the withdrawal of their status as political prisoners, and write secret notes to each other. As they starve, they write. For Clarissa and the Irish hunger-strikers, diet and discourse become complicit in the effort to achieve emancipation through transfiguration. Their emaciating flesh gives weight to their words and the body shares with the word an eloquent loquacity. The physical body becomes the site of protest against the body politic. Food refusal symbolizes a refusal to ingest prevailing ideology and physical hungering represents more profoundly political desires. Ellmann thus takes the established idea that food refusal is a muted form of self-expression and develops it by demonstrating the relationship between starving and writing in conditions of incarceration.

While the comparison of Clarissa with the Irish hunger-strikers forms the crux of the book, it is interwoven with references to Kafka, Yeats, Keats, Dickens, Stoker, Woolf, the Brontës, Conrad and Atwood, among others. Ellmann draws primarily on psychoanalysis for theory and literature for example, but combines this with a taste of anthropology, sociology, theology and political theory which makes the book both rich and original. The argument is fundamentally structured although the interdisciplinary approach results in a cacophony of ideas which sometimes makes it challenging, but nevertheless rewarding, to follow.

*The Hunger Artists* is not a sociological or psychological analysis of food refusal but does implicitly draw on feminist theories of eating disorders. The comparison of a literary anorexic with political hunger-strikers echoes and endorses Orbach's insistence that anorexia must be situated in the realm of the political. Unlike the analysis of anorexia in books such as Susie Orbach's *Hunger Strike* (1986), Kim Chernin's *The Hungry Self* (1986) and Marilyn Lawrence's *The Anorexic Experience* (1984), Ellmann does not 'aim to find the cause of self-starvation but to follow the adventures of its metaphors' (p15). She agrees that self-starvation is intrinsically related to power and control but, out of this, creates a new context for discussion.

Gender issues, however, are almost entirely obscured in Ellmann's analysis. The way in which she meshes the literal and the metaphoric to force new meaning is persuasive but the similarities of meaning unearthed efface some essential differences between Clarissa and the Irish hunger-strikers. Ellmann acknowledges that hunger 'brings to light the fierce dissymmetries between the

sexes' (p72) but argues that 'even the disparities between them are crucial to their strange confederacy' (p71). Ultimately, she considers that the similarities override the differences because 'both belong to an economy of sacrifice, and both are founded on the dream of miraculous transfiguration' (p14). Self-starvation is an everyday experience for most women, not an extraordinary and rare campaign. Women's protest is personal and isolated, the Irish hunger-strikers starved collectively and supportively. The former is mostly unconscious, the latter highly self-conscious. For anorexics, food refusal becomes involuntary, for the hunger-strikers it was a concerted effort. Apart from occasional, marginal, media interest, women starve themselves in privacy and anonymity. They do not receive the major publicity the Irish hunger-strikers received. In addition to those forms of writing Ellmann cites, imprisonment and self-starvation also led to a profusion of newspaper articles.

There is nothing unusual about women who refuse food. On the contrary, starvation has become synonymous with femininity. Atrophying men, however, are an outrageous anomaly which attracts and disturbs public attention. Men who die on public hunger-strike permeate public consciousness and enter the history books; women who die on their personal hunger strike become a statistic. Celebrities such as Karen Carpenter who die of anorexia make the headlines simply because they are already famous. The fact of their death, rather than the cause, constitutes the news. The media coverage of the Irish hunger-strikers also highlights another contrast. Clarissa's starvation may induce a profusion of words, but these are written, not spoken. She has no-one to talk to and there is no-one who is willing to listen to her. She remains voiceless. In contrast, television and newspapers gave the Irish hunger-strikers a voice that spoke of their protest to the whole world.

Meaning is also affected by the fact that women have a radically different relationship with their bodies from men. For women, a strategy of disembodiment is particularly dangerous because of the fundamentally precarious relationship they have with corporeality. The body has long been the site of subjection for women and the location of meaning in a woman's body creates the possibility of imprisoning her there. In addition, while women have been identified with the body, the female form has been persistently exploited, abused and denigrated. In an effort to distance the experience of victimisation and retain some aspect of selfhood, women psychically remove themselves from their physical selves. The process of dissociation from the corporeal has resulted in women's alienation from their bodies. This is epitomized by the act of protest itself. By carrying their writing within their bodies, the Irish hunger-strikers used their physicality as an instrument to subvert the ideology which exerted its authority directly upon their bodies. In addition, their fast was accompanied by the 'blanket protest' and the 'dirty protest'. Prisoners stripped themselves naked (accepting only blankets for warmth) and smeared excrement on the cell walls. Men's protest involves an assertion of the body, women's a repression of the body. One of the first effects of anorexia is the cessation of menstruation. Ellmann demonstrates how disembodiment can be

understood in terms of emancipation and liberation. She finds meaning in what is generally perceived as psychotic female behaviour. This is positive and valuable. Yet, her argument is based on a dichotomy between power and the body which suggests women can only achieve power through disembodiment. There is no suggestion that women can move beyond the binary opposition of mind and body and learn to protest *through* their bodies.

Although both Clarissa and the Irish hunger-strikers stop consuming in an effort to resist being themselves consumed by an ideology which denies them an identity, this struggle has a particular significance for women. Traditionally, the female body has been persistently depicted as food and devoured by 'the male gaze'. Kim Chernin argues that men dominate women because they fear engulfment by the female body.<sup>3</sup> As Adrienne Rich reminds us, 'all human life on the planet is born of woman'.<sup>4</sup> Men enter the world from the bodies of women and, Chernin argues, fear a return to this state of dependency and powerlessness. Today, capitalist societies use women's bodies to sell their commodities and simultaneously present those bodies as available for sexual consumption. Language itself communicates an image of women as consumable objects. As Jane Mills has illustrated, there is a strong semantic relationship between food and women. Many food words have assumed a female gender and many synonyms for women are foods – 'tart', 'honey', 'sweetie-pie', 'sugar', 'crumpet' and 'chick' to name but a few.<sup>5</sup> Ours is a consumer society not only in an economic sense. Symbolic cannibalism has become a sanctioned cultural system and an institutionalized way of life in contemporary society. Ellmann does give a brief consideration of anorexia as 'a defense against the fantasy of cannibalism' from a psychoanalytic perspective (p42) and provides textual evidence that Clarissa not only stops eating but also symbolically becomes that which is eaten. The Irish hunger-strikers were protesting about specific conditions in a specific environment. Anorexic hunger strikers protest about the condition of women in society as a whole. Of course, it is untenable to reproach Ellmann for not exploring these differences when this was not her project. Indeed, little critical attention has been paid to how men use food as a form of protest and her analysis of the events in the Maze forms one of the most powerful and illuminating parts of the book. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, in a subtle way, such differences irrevocably alter the meaning of self-starvation for women and men.

Marek Kohn's *Dope Girls* is concerned with another kind of consumption, that of drugs, but also with the covert meanings drugs embody and how that meaning is inscribed on the body of women. The close lexical association between food and drugs suggests that the two possess certain similarities. Colloquial names of drugs are often taken from the realm of the culinary. Contemporary synonyms for cocaine include 'nose candy' or 'sugar', ecstasy is known as 'disco biscuits', LSD as 'strawberries' and speed as 'champagne sulphate'. Both appeal to carnality and sensuality. Like food, Kohn proposes that drugs have a strong symbolic as well as narcotic value.

3. Kim Chernin, *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness*, Women's Press, London, 1983.

4. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*, Virago, London, 1977, p11.

5. Jane Mills, *Womanwords*, Longman, London, 1989.

Kohn's principal thesis is that anxieties about drugs articulate other unconscious social fears. His book explores the development of the British drug subculture during the First World War and charts the changing cultural attitude to drug use in relation to the changing nature of society with the advent of modernity. He focuses particularly on attitudes to women and immigrants. The book is primarily structured around the personalities who dominated the drug scene but, couched within this, is analysis of the moral panic that arose around drugs as a response to the disruption of the social order and its subversive effect on issues of class, gender and race.

Before the war, possession and use of drugs was not only acceptable but often respectable. Kohn provides various examples of how drugs were associated with the upper classes, professionals and artists. They may have been seen as a danger to the individual but not to society. However, during the war, Kohn argues, certain factors conspired to create conditions conducive to the emergence of a drug subculture. Alcohol was restricted and curfews imposed on nightclubs. In addition, the theory of a German conspiracy in which prostitutes were used to drug soldiers developed. This resulted in a tentative move towards criminalization and the gradual evolution of a drugs subculture around the clubs and theatres of the West End of London. Kohn argues that what made drugs subversive initially was that for the first time they transcended class boundaries.

As well as highlighting anxieties about class, Kohn argues the drug panic also voiced concerns about women. Women's increasing use of drugs both epitomized and was considered to be the dire consequence of the freedom afforded women by the war. Kohn outlines how working women emerged with a strong new identity as they filled the vacuum left by men who vanished to the Front. At the same time, the suffragettes were campaigning vigorously for enfranchisement. Kohn makes a convincing case for his theory that conservative anxieties about women's changing role and identity were transferred to drugs. However, his argument is marred by generalization. Women are discussed as a homogenous group and class differences are overlooked. The women who entered employment for the first time during the war were predominantly single, middle-class women. Working-class women had been forced to work by an economic imperative even before the war. Similarly, Kohn argues that the drug subculture centred around the West End and the women who worked in the entertainment industry, but these were also predominantly working-class women who already enjoyed many of the freedoms middle-class women were just beginning to discover. Such incongruities subtly undermine an otherwise engaging analysis.

Although Kohn never interprets anxieties about drugs in terms of female appetite, to do so endorses his own argument. Women's appetite for drugs symbolized their appetite for personal, economic and political power. The German conspiracy theory assumes an even greater significance than Kohn attributes to it when considered in relation to the theme of consumption. The re-emergence of the myth of woman as poisoner not only aroused anxiety

about drugs but also about woman's role as feeder and nourisher. The new middle-class career women were treacherously betraying their primal role as mothers to serve themselves. These women's changing relationship to feeding and consumption was, arguably, one of the main causes for social anxiety. An overdose represented greed and excess. The myth of the insatiable woman, epitomized by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, loomed frighteningly large and conservative forces became obsessed with banishing her.

Public hysteria about drugs, encouraged by the press, films and popular novels ensued. Drug-related deaths sparked a sensation and Kohn illustrates how it was upon the dead bodies of women that the forces of authority inscribed their self-sustaining ideology. Arrests and overdoses were used to confirm the tacit conservative belief that this was the tragic consequence of women's new role. Ultimately, conservative forces used the drug scandals to endorse old stereotypes of femininity. Films, novels and the popular press presented women who took drugs as frail, morally weak and manipulated creatures who deserved pity. Kohn notes that while the media redeemed women after death, romanticising and reducing them to the image of helpless victims, the epitome of femininity, men were demonized. Orthodox rhetoric declared that drugs destroyed women. While men fought a war abroad, at home women's bodies came under siege in a war of competing ideologies.

Drugs also articulated anxieties about race. Even more disturbing than women's use of drugs was their relationship with those who sold them. Drugs were supplied by foreigners and immigrants: opium, in particular, was associated with the Chinese community. Although the Chinese were generally tolerated, and their opium-smoking ignored, their liaisons with white women aroused horror. 'Otherness' has traditionally been characterized by heightened sexuality, and the combination of women, racial minorities and drugs provoked a sizzling sexual scandal. Kohn describes a perverse but retrospectively amusing theory which developed during the period about the effect of war on women's sexual appetite. Blood, it was believed, wielded an extremely erotic power for women. The absence of British men, however, led women to turn to foreigners for sexual partners. War gave women greater sexual freedom, which they chose to exercise with whom they liked. This was a double affront to British men: not only were women exercising sexual independence, they were not doing so with them. Kohn argues that drugs became a vehicle for the criticism of inter-racial relationships and that the most frightening thing about drugs was that they dissolved boundaries between the races.

Here again, it might be argued that the real issue was not so much what was consumed but rather the desire to consume itself. The social concern for women's appetite for drugs became a coded attack on women's sexual appetite. As has been suggested, food and drugs are not completely dissimilar in character, and given the historical synthesis that exists between food and sex, it is unsurprising that female sexual activity became a target for criticism in relation to drugs. Eating has traditionally been considered an erotic activity and

a woman's eating seen as whorish. Inter-racial relationships indeed provoked outrage, as Kohn illustrates, but the expression of women's sexuality was as much a cause for concern as who they expressed it with. The public display of female sexual appetite was as felonious as the drugs themselves.

Bakhtin argues that eating is powerful because of consumption's ability to blur and disrupt boundaries. When Bakhtin writes of the grotesque body, fatted on carnival feast, he asserts that 'the distinctive character of this body is its open, unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses its own limits'.<sup>6</sup> One of the primary motives for taking drugs is to induce transcendence of everyday consciousness. In addition to the expansion of mental boundaries, dope girls transgressed the ideological boundaries that defined female behaviour. Sexual consummation, in particular, blurs the boundary between self and other. Although Ellmann discusses body boundaries in relation to identity, she does not cite Bakhtin. His argument, however, concurs with her theory of starving. Self-starvers also transgress the physical boundaries of their bodies. Feast and fast are paradoxically similar in terms of excess: one is excessive indulgence, the other excessive abstinence. Bakhtin and Ellman agree that consumption is related to the transcendence of body boundaries. In these terms, eating is especially subversive for women. By gorging nothing or by gorging the illicit, both dope girls and anorexics transgress rigid gender distinctions and obfuscate the traditional boundaries which define and contain femininity. This is highly significant because the disruption of such boundaries demonstrates that women's bodies are not fixed but a product of plurality, multiplicity and process. Such a process of definition and change places women's bodies beyond possession.

*Dope Girls* provides a detailed account of the personalities who dominated the drug scene. Edith and Ida Yeoland, Billie Carleton and Reggie de Veulle, Freda Kempton, the Paul sisters, Edgar Manning and Brilliant Chang are vividly presented. However, this makes the book heavily anecdotal. It contains more narrative than theory. Ultimately, Kohn's central idea, that drugs discourse is a coded expression of other social anxieties, is better than the book itself. In addition, it is not quite what it purports to be. The book is certainly an interesting account of the birth of the British drug underground, but not really a history of its dope girls. Despite the mention of many female names, and despite Kohn's reiterated insistence upon the central and crucial role that women played in the development of a drug subculture, the title is misleading. The female figures, although they outnumber the men, mostly remain anonymous while the male characters are exalted to the status of legendary heroes. It seems that to some degree the drug subculture merely offered an illicit mirror-image of the social order rather than a subversion of it. Ironically, his own narrative mirrors that of society's response to the women and men involved in the drug scandals.

Kohn states that drug panic evaporated in the 1920s but provides no analysis of why this was so. However, this phenomenon can be elucidated by a further

6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, 1965, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p281.

7. Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, Collins, London, 1986.

consideration of the theme of consumption. The post-war period witnessed a sharp backlash against the progress women had made during the war. A propaganda campaign was launched to coerce women back into the home. Home management manuals and domestic science handbooks, flourishing since the late nineteenth century, reached the apex of their popularity. As Laura Shapiro has illustrated, the emphasis in such cookery books was on economy and nutrition.<sup>7</sup> Taste and enjoyment were never factors for consideration in meal preparation. Cookery books became a covert way of placing female appetite under surveillance. At the moment when the issues of the women's movement appeared on the political menu, women's appetite was repressed. Since Kohn suggests that women's increasing use of drugs coincided with their emergence as a new, more powerful group within society, it is possible to infer from his argument that a wane in the taste for drugs might be related to women's return to their former role and the repression of female appetite.

*The Hunger Artists* and *Dope Girls* illustrate the ideological nature of all we imbibe and show how such ideology becomes inscribed on the body, particularly the body of women. By developing an understanding of the body as a site of knowledge and meaning, Ellmann and Kohn illuminate how what we consume says much about the society we live in and the role of women's bodies within that society.

# FROM WORK TO DEATH: NEW WRITING ON THE BODY

*Amanda Boulter and Ruth Gilbert*

Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Harvard University Press, 1993, 325pp, £39.95 cloth, £15.95 paperback.

Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Manchester University Press, 1992, 460pp, £14.95 paperback.

'How does the body mean?' This question, from Peter Brooks' *Body Work*, delineates much recent critical debate about how to theorize the body; how to bring the body into language. From meditations on Cartesian dualism, to the postmodern questioning of whether a 'natural body' exists at all beyond its discursive formation, the meanings of embodiment continue to motivate textual production. Can this 'new somatics', however, articulate the particularities of embodiment – can it address the constitution of *bodies* rather than *the* body – or is this critical trend, as Terry Eagleton has recently argued, no more than 'footnotes to Foucault'?<sup>1</sup>

Brooks asserts that his main concern in *Body Work* is 'with the creation of fictions that address the body, that imbed it in narrative, and therefore embody meanings: stories on the body and the body in story' (pxi). This statement, whilst clearly articulating the trajectory of Brooks' project, also signals an underlying ambivalence within the interplay of *sema* and *soma*, word and flesh. When we speak of 'stories on the body and the body in story' do we speak of an inscription on the body, an initializing mark that brings the body into language, or do we speak of the body as an object of desire within language, and a motivating force of its production? This is the interstice upon which Brooks focuses his critical attention, illustrating in a series of detailed textual analyses of eighteenth and nineteenth century texts and paintings how the body (and especially the female body) is signified.

Brooks analyses the impulse to narrativize the body through the theoretical terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, drawing especially upon Toril Moi's theorization of the epistemophilic drive as 'crucially bound to the body'. He characterizes this narrativistic urge as epistemophilia: as the desire to *know* the body. But this curiosity, as Moi suggests, is 'self-defeating', a frustrated project.<sup>2</sup> Expressed as a scopophilic drive, the search for an ultimate knowledge of the body initiates a process of unveiling in which the object of desire continually recedes from view. To the extent that Brooks' own critical project here is equally engaged in this epistemophilic enterprise, *Body Work* can

1. Terry Eagleton, 'It is not quite true that I have a body, and not quite true that I am one either', *London Review of Books*, 27 May, 1993, pp7-8.

2. Toril Moi, 'Patriarchal thought and the drive for knowledge', in Teresa Brennan, (ed), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1989, p203.



itself be read as a series of unveilings that are never fully satisfactory, that never really grasp the body in front of us. The way in which the body always slips away from this analytical scrutiny is signalled when Brooks outlines the difficulty of defining the body in question: is it an anatomical machine, a psycho-sexual entity, or a cultural construction?

In a gesture perhaps pre-emptive of Terry Eagleton's analysis of the 'new somatics', Brooks suggests that the recent 'outpouring of books ... that evoke the body in one form or another' (pxi) may not have brought it within our epistemological grasp, but rather have 'banalized the body, demystified it, displayed it to the point that there may be no more to learn about it ... [and yet] we still don't know the body' (p286). At the end of this study, which he has invited his readers to regard as an *essai* 'a trying out of ideas', he concludes, or rather resists conclusion, by affirming the curiosity of the epistemophilic drive. With a certain irony his final phrase evokes the 'ever-renewed writing project' (p286) on the body which guarantees that his word certainly won't be the last.

Brooks' critical inquiry begins with an exploration of the dialectic between privacy and invasion which is dramatized both in the thematic concerns and the domestic consumption of the eighteenth-century novel. This conflict, he argues, is played out in the emerging genre of quasi-pornography – Rousseau's 'books that can only be read with one hand.' Brooks argues that this conflation of the erotic and the textual is exemplified in Rousseau's own work, which he suggests marks a signal moment in the conceptual development of the 'modern body'. He suggests that Rousseau's manipulation of the dynamics of intimacy and invasion, for example in his 'exposure' of his own body in the *Confessions*, designated a new somatic investment in narrative. By focusing on two particular moments in the *Confessions* and *La nouvelle Héloïse* in which the body is marked or leaves its mark (the childhood spanking which marks Rousseau's backside as an erotic signifier, and Saint-Preux's eroticization of the marks on Julie's clothing) Brooks suggests how Rousseau connects the erogenous body to fiction making.

Saint-Preux's letter to Julie, written in her cabinet, metonymically reconstitutes her absent body by fetishistically cataloguing her abandoned clothing. These accessories not only *stand in for* her body, but also *re-present* it metaphorically through the physical impressions left on her clothing. Julie's corset exemplifies the reciprocity of this representational process, in that it both shapes her body and is shaped by it, and this doubleness is reflected in the semantic ambiguity of the french *le corps*, which means both corset and body.

Brooks argues that this passage is a 'representation of representation itself', as it marks the passage of the body from 'non-representationality into writing'. Using the language of computer technology, Brooks explains that, 'it is as if the body could not take place in narrative writing without first being 'initialized' ... by way of a mark to indicate that it has become capable of receiving the imprint of messages. It has been signed; it has become signifiable and indeed itself a signifier' (p46).

Brooks then traces a transition in the way the body signifies, arguing that Rousseau's articulation of the body, in relation to emerging ideas of personal

identity, was represented, as fully politically invested, in the wake of the French Revolution. He argues that in its disruption of the old order, of the old systems of meaning, the Revolution necessitated the creation of new representational structures that 'worked directly on the external world' (p56). He suggests that the apparently abstract rhetoric of Jacobin oratory in fact worked to put bodies on the line, and that the spectacular punishments enacted during the Terror demonstrated this inauguration of the body into meaning.

He relates the performativity of this revolutionary discourse to the emerging genre of melodrama, arguing that the Revolution saw a new 'aesthetics of embodiment' (p55). One of the more macabre, but symbolically potent, examples of this new aesthetic is perhaps the disinterment of the kings of France from the Abbey of Saint-Denis in October 1793. In a gesture that, perhaps more than any other, signalled the melodramatic investment of the body as signifier, the bodies of the dead kings, including Henri IV and the Sun King, Louis XIV, were exhumed and thrown into the common pit.

This new conception of the body, as a signifier of personal identity and a site of political investment, is fully realized in the novels of Balzac, Flaubert, James and Zola, that Brooks goes on to discuss. He argues that the representation of this 'modern' body in realist texts, 'insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world' (p88). Drawing from his earlier arguments in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks suggests that narrative engages in a process of undressing, or as Barthes puts it, striptease, in which the whole is built up metonymically through a detailing of its parts. This focus on the scopophilic impulse within narrative is then developed into a sustained analysis of the problems of depicting the female nude in nineteenth century literature and art.

Brooks then concludes his study by returning to these themes in a consideration of the hyper-realist figures of post-modern sculptor, John de Andrea. In the nineteenth century the problem, as expressed by Zola's Claude in *L'oeuvre*, was of the rationale for the nude; should the nude be represented as an idealized figure or as a sexually particularized naked body? The way in which this realist aesthetic inherently problematizes the spectator's relation to the artwork then re-emerges as the focal issue in Brooks' final analysis.

De Andrea's uncannily life-like simulcra of particular women's bodies (they are sometimes named) disturbs the scopophilic pleasures of 'art' by making the spectator feel like a voyeur. Within the art gallery the hyper-naturalism of de Andrea's sculptures of beautiful women forces a certain self-reflexivity into the spectator's gaze, an acute self-awareness in looking. This scopophilic anxiety, however, although made explicit here, in fact reverberates throughout *Body Work* as an implicit disquiet about just who is looking at who looking. This self-consciousness is expressed through Brooks' interaction with his implied (critical, perhaps feminist) reader, to whom he directs a number of disclaimers about the implicit gender codings of his study.

Although Brooks, in a final paragraph, specifically addresses the question of spectatorship and gender, arguing that 'the realm of imaginative works may be the area in which rigid gender distinctions are ... relaxed, where we are free to

explore some of the polymorphousness and bisexuality which have been subject to repression' (p283), the substance of his analysis does not engage with the terms of these concluding remarks. Rather he ends his discussion of de Andrea by suggesting that these figures, in their very banality, frustrate the epistemophilic intent by reducing it to a 'kind of tautology, or a mere gesture of pointing: *that is the body.*' 'The project of making the body signify' he concludes, perhaps self-reflexively, 'thus issues in a lovingly detailed impasse' (p283).

In contrast to Brooks' claim that his text forms part of a loosely defined but ever-renewed critical enterprise of writing about the body, Bronfen characterizes her text as speaking into a surprising cultural silence. She argues that although images of dead women are almost banally commonplace in western culture, their very familiarity distracts our critical attention and perpetuates a cultural blindness. Like Poe's purloined letter, she suggests, their very obviousness confers upon them an aura of invisibility. In this sense Bronfen regards her project in *Over Her Dead Body* as an exposé, a disclosure that overcomes this blindness by throwing light upon the unconscious mechanisms that repress both death and the feminine subject position. This confluence of death and femininity, is tellingly (although perhaps unsurprisingly) illustrated, when in a *Times* interview Bronfen's attempt to re-present these female corpses is reflected back to the site of her own body, which is inspected for signs of excessive morbidity, '... her long black hair is ever so slightly Cruella de Vil.'<sup>3</sup> Bronfen herself however is careful to articulate her own ambivalence about the correlation between the aesthetic construction of feminine death and the effects on the lives (and deaths) of historical women.

Central to Bronfen's thesis in the book, as the sub-title, 'death, femininity and the aesthetic' implies, is the triangulation of femininity, death and representation. Following from Freud's claim that death and femininity are the 'most consistent enigmas and tropes in western culture', Bronfen argues that the confluence of these two terms occurs as an ambivalence because both represent alterity, a concept that is inherently unfixable (this is the position she develops in the third part of her book).

The premise of her thesis is that representations of death in fact function as cultural symptoms that signal the failed repression of the desire for, and coincident anxiety about, death. In 1846, Poe claimed that the death of a beautiful woman was 'the most poetical topic in the world' and it is here, Bronfen contends, in the aestheticization of feminine death, that the repressed knowledge of mortality finds its most elegant expression. Femininity's construction as a position of contradiction creates Woman as a symptom for the split in the self and as a cipher of death. By transferring the site of death from the (masculine) self onto the body of the other (Woman) the threat posed by the doubly disturbing conjunction of femininity and death is effectively recuperated. This substitution means that the beautiful body of the dead woman, whilst the site of a superlative alterity, also *stands in* for the artist and audience, so that the corpse acts as a displaced signifier for 'masculinity, survival, preservation and continuation' (p433).

3. Linda Grant, *The Times*, 30 September, 1992, p5.

This replacement is complicated, however, because the representation of the feminine corpse, as an absence represented, can never stage a perfect return. Rather, as Bronfen argues, the 'regained order encompasses a shift: that is to say it is never again/no longer entirely devoid of traces of difference' (pxii).

In an extended critique of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Bronfen articulates a sophisticated dialectic of absence and presence. She ties her analysis of the *fort-da* game played by Freud's grandchild to the death of his daughter, Sophie Freud-Halberstadt, the child's mother, who died during the period of the book's completion. She suggests that what is at stake in this *fort-da* game is the duplicity of the second term, 'the undecidability and impropriety of the *fort* feminine body *da* in representation; of the way this *da* transports the feminine body *fort* of the *da* as *fort*' (p256). The spool that substitutes the lost maternal body (like the image of the female corpse) underscores its own act of representation as it refers to that absence. The image of the female corpse both absents and represents in an uncanny staging that reveals the analogous relation of image and corpse, which Blanchot describes as their 'shared quality of strangeness ... a doubledness and a lack of material reference.'

Bronfen's opening analysis of Gabriel von Max's painting, *der Anatom* (first shown in 1869) is presented in similar terms as a doubled representation. She suggests that this image will resonate throughout her text, not only as paradigmatic of much nineteenth century representation of death, but also as an analogy to her own critical position. The situation of the anatomist, suspended in a moment of hesitation as he prepares to cut into the beautiful female corpse, is, she implies, akin to her own position before her analytical dissection of a corpus of texts; texts about 'women dying, dead, resurrected, dead in life, living beyond their death on returning as revenants' (pxii). Von Max's representation of this particular moment however, which anticipates the defilement of the woman's beauty, without ever staging it, marks a particularly nineteenth century aesthetic investment in death, and is in contrast to what Jonathan Sawday describes as the 'ruthless dynamism' of earlier depictions of the anatomical project.<sup>4</sup>

This change in the conception of death, Bronfen argues, occurred in the eighteenth century when the emergence of individualism and the decline of stable social and religious points of reference led to an increasingly estranged relationship to death and the dead. The eighteenth century saw, in contrast to Enlightenment thinking, greater anxiety about premature burial, about the reanimated corpse (the vampire) and about necrophilia. The eroticization of the feminine corpse, and the unconscious investment in its representation, as a 'stabilizing point of meaning'<sup>5</sup> formed part of this new fascination with, and repulsion towards death. In the nineteenth century the industrial achievements of a technologized economy were defined against, and seen to ensure domination of, a 'savage' and destructive nature, which continually threatened the rational order. Death was culturally constructed as the mark of nature's triumph over man's rationality and thus the image of the dead woman, as a displacement of this anxiety, functioned as an 'superlative figure for the inevitable return of the repressed' (86). With reference to a vast array of textual

4. Jonathan Sawday, *The Mirror and the Knife: the Renaissance Culture of Dissection*, (forthcoming).

5. Bronfen in 'Dead Ringers', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 30 October, 1992, p8.

and pictorial material, including work by Richardson, Poe, Rousseau, Tennyson and the Brontës; Hodler, Rossetti, and Hitchcock, Bronfen traces the various ways in which this failed repression functions in representations of dead women. In the penultimate section of her text she consolidates her analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century representations by focusing on the image of the dead bride, an image that, in the conjunction of bridal and death plots, presents the ultimate expression of Eros and Thanatos.

The way in which Bronfen sees these two plots working together is uncannily demonstrated by Gustave Courbet's unfinished work *La toilette de la morte (mariée)*, in which death subtends the apparent beautification of the bride. This painting, which was never exhibited during Courbet's lifetime, was until recently considered to portray the preparations of a bridal party. But in 1977 Helen Toussaint disputed this, and pointing to a range of evidence, including an X-ray photograph which revealed the bride to be naked and strangely slumped, she argued instead that the central figure was a corpse. Bronfen points out that the effacement of the 'doubly macabre' spectacle of death and female genitalia (presumably to make the picture more saleable) does not in fact erase 'difference' but rather, as an example of this failed repression, functions inversely to 'highlight the act of erasure and the production of difference', therefore 'inducing a blindness towards ... [and] an insight into, one's own mortality' (p261).

This image of the doubled and yet absent bride/corpse reappears animated, and yet permanently arrested, in the decaying form of Miss Havisham, the revenant bride in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. In her reading of this novel, Bronfen argues that the position of the bride between life and death is also the site of storytelling. She invokes Blanchot's claim that 'when we tell stories we are resting on an unclosed grave' in conjunction with André Green's analysis of fiction as 'transnarcissistic communication'. In Green's terms 'the writer's and reader's doubles communicate through the fictional text' where this doubling/absence signifies death.

Within her decaying mansion Miss Havisham preserves the moment of loss, when she was jilted at the altar, by perpetually re-enacting it in a self-representation that uses her body as the 'materialized form of fiction' (p352). As 'director and only audience' (p355), Miss Havisham oversees Pip and Estella's representation of her own psychic trauma. When Pip then declares love, this re-enactment of her own wounded narcissism at the site of another marks both the death of her 'hysterical dissimulation' and a 'superlative moment of self-reflexivity' (p355) in Dickens' text. Bronfen argues that this *mise en abyme* shows fiction caught between doubling and absence and she concludes that, 'the production of fiction requires an absence from worldly reality and a duplication of the teller in a site of potentiality positioned between life and death' (p358).

Bronfen's concluding chapters, which focus on twentieth century texts authored by women (Plath, Weldon, Carter, Atwood and Gee), continue by addressing directly the question that underlies her reading of *Great Expectations*: how do women create a space for their own representation within these cultural

conventions of femininity and death? In this final section of her text, however, Bronfen perhaps misses an opportunity to move away from an almost exclusive concentration on white femininity to a consideration of the way in which contemporary black women are approaching this aesthetic. How, for example, would Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or *Jazz*, or Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* inflect Bronfen's claim that these writers effectively 'install' these cultural conventions into their narratives 'in the same gesture that they critique [them]' (p432)? Bronfen argues that the oscillation between compliance and resistance renders a self-conscious textual duplicity that corresponds to the interstice between Woman and women at the same time as it recognizes that 'Woman cannot be defined outside of discursive formations that assign to femininity the position of void' (p433).

This duplicity is shown up perhaps most clearly in Fay Weldon's text *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* in which Ruth literally carves up her body in order to comply with the etiquette of beauty. The grossness of this gesture of complicity, however, 'engenders a sublation of the comic into the serious' (p413) that in turn underscores the non-coincidence of Woman and women and effectively resists the impress of the restraining *corps*.

Bronfen then concludes her text by again creating an analogy between her critical practice and the subject of her analysis. Like these contemporary women writers, she does not just demonstrate the pervasive conventions of feminine death. Instead, through this process of exposure of the unconscious structures embedded within these images, she engenders the possibility of moving beyond them.