

CONCLUSION

Unmooring Selves, Decentering Humans

“You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds.”

—Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony”

“All stories are about wolves.”

—Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

“Can a single ant be said to be alive, in any meaningful sense of the word, or does it only have relevance in terms of its anthill?”

—Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

In the very beginning of the introduction, I have selected two passages from Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake* to accentuate two ideas: one is Isis’s body as an inscribing surface; the other is the hierarchal dichotomy between body and mind. Here I would like to foreground a passage from Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” in response to Iris’s contemplation. As the officer tells the foreign narrator about the writing machine, there are always “flourishes” or “embellishments” in addition to the sentence proper:

“‘Yes,’ said the officer with a laugh, putting the paper away again, ‘it’s no calligraphy for school children. It needs to be studied closely. [...] Of course the script can’t be a simple one; it’s not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval of, on an average, twelve hours; the turning point is reckoned to

come at the sixth hour. So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs round the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments. [...]’” (102)

If we read this twelve-hour script as a montage of life from the cradle to the grave, the sentence—a cluster of words spelling the charge of the wrongdoer on the back by punctures of needles—can then be metaphorically regarded as various inscriptions imposed by others. Noticeably, while the whole process is tedious, calculating and exhausting, this inscribing machine does not simply put down the words, which occupy “only a narrow girdle.” Instead, there are “flourishes” and “embellishments” to render this convict a Foucauldian artifact. In fact, inasmuch as these decorations are relatively massive in comparison with the narrow girdle, they are likely to distract people from the sentence proper or even render it illegible altogether.

Throughout this thesis I reiterate that the body is a board for others’ inscriptions. Be it the lynching in *Beloved*, the imperial cartography in *The English Patient*, the eating disorders (caused by patriarchal/societal cannibalism) and phallogocentrism in *The Blind Assassin* or the transplantation and “cyborg monsters” in *Oryx and Crake*, others always manifest their influence on the subject either through wounds, scars, bruises or through the way in which the subject eats, dresses, behaves or thinks. In this sense, it is nearly impossible for the subject to sidestep others’ education and imposition, discipline and punishment, illumination and affliction. Yet, inevitable as the self/other confrontation is, the calligraphy in Kafka’s story tells us that the wound always needs deciphering or, better still, that it is open to interpretations. In other words, writing by others does not deprive the subject of the right to read his or her self. Despite the inescapable inscriptions of others, there is always room for interpretations.

Now that all the social forces can be seen as writings on the self, I then attempt to see how Iris and Snowman unmoor or decenter themselves in this self/other conflict by their interlocution with phallogocentrism or by their reflection on the concept of *homo faber*. As I have pointed out that Iris's memoir tries to liberate her granddaughter Sabrina from the shackles of familial history and self-identity, here I would like to bring to the fore one chapter—"Carnivore stories"—from the romance *The Blind Assassin* in order to observe how Iris's female writing comes into being and what possibilities this reimagination of things can bring to unmoor her restricted perspective on her self. On the other hand, as Posner has noticed a thematic correlation between Atwood's Snowman and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe but fails to put them in the context of human history,⁵⁷ my comparison between the eighteenth-century *homo faber* and the human remnant in the posthuman age will address the mutation or degeneration of human subjectivity. Unlike the almost omnipotent Robinson, who literally establishes a civilization in a deserted island by means of his tools and ingenuity, Snowman has become a monster among the Crakers. Noticeably, whilst Iris's rereading of Alex's story attests to the liberating power of female writing in regard to subjectivity, Snowman's monstrosity reflects upon anthropocentrism and the sense of enclosure inherent in *homo faber*. It is not until the subject learns to coexist with and respect others that phallogocentrism will embrace differences rather than oppositions and that *homo faber* may purge itself from such accusations as the wanton manipulation of lives and the complicity with capitalism.

Set in Iris's rendezvous with Alex, "Carnivore stories" can be the turning point of the whole novel because here the sacrificial subjects become those in power, the dead women on the planet Zycron metamorphose from monstrous ogresses to "folkloric pastoralists" (343), and above all, Iris starts claiming her authorship in the making of Alex's science fiction, a

⁵⁷ Posner simply comments that Snowman is "a knockoff of Robinson Crusoe: the title of [Atwood's] last chapter, 'Footprint,' is a clue" (31).

declaration later developing into female writing. While originally in Alex's version of the story, the blind assassin X and the mute sacrificial girl are courting death as fugitives—that is, they are likely to be killed by the People of Desolation, eaten by the wolves in the wilderness, or consumed by the ogresses when they flee from their hometown Sakiel-Norn (342)—Iris's participation in the storyline not only complicates the plot but also renders her version a counterpart of Alex's monopolistic phallogocentrism, an articulation of differences and possibilities, a prototypical praxis of *écriture féminine*. Retorting Alex's diabolization of the dead women in Zycron, Iris contends:

Listen—it's this way. The blind assassin hears all rumours, and so he knows the real truth about those women. They aren't actually dead at all. *They just put those stories around so they'll be left in peace.* Really they're escaped slaves, and other women who've run away to avoid being sold by their husbands or fathers. They aren't all women either—some are men, but they're kind and friendly men. [...] They take turns lurking around the tombs and frightening travelers—howling at them, and so forth—in order to keep up appearances.

In addition to that, the wolves aren't really wolves, they're just sheepdogs who've been trained to impersonate wolves. Really they're very tame, and very loyal. (342-43; my italics)

Thus, with this sleight of hand, Iris exonerates these fearful ogresses from their monstrosity, or, at least, she questions Alex's authenticity by offering another version. As the People of Desolation lay siege on Sakiel-Norn, the despotic King, the corrupt High Priestess, and the plotting courtiers are all punished for their former tyranny. Meanwhile, the blind assassin and the mute girl live happily ever after with those “escaped slaves” hoaxing as ogresses.

Significantly, it is the capability of retelling that enables Iris to survive her later hardship. Although Alex immediately reverts the “escaped slaves” to monsters again by claiming, “But I like my stories to be true to life, which means there have to be wolves in them. Wolves in one form or another” (344), Iris’s miff at Alex’s sophistic “wolf talk” is soon replaced by a Joycean epiphany. If what Alex says about the wolves is true, namely, “All stories are about wolves. [...] There’s escaping from the wolves, fighting the wolves, capturing the wolves, taming the wolves. Being thrown to the wolves, or throwing others to the wolves so the wolves will eat them instead of you. Running with the wolf pack. Turning into a wolf. Best of all, turning into the head wolf” (344), Iris should come to realize the improbability of fairy tales that end with the protagonists living happily ever after. As she turns to admit the very ubiquity of wolves, what she has to do then is not to shriek at the sight of the big bad wolves but to identify with their power, not to become monstrous in form or in reality (that will fulfill Alex’s demonization of women) but to become monstrous in people’s imagination so as to be “left in peace.” Interestingly, with this Deleuzian “becoming animal”—not to restrict oneself to the one and only identity but to liberate oneself by espousing multiplicity—Iris can be alleviated to some degree from the eating disorder imposed by Richard insofar as she does not regard herself as a molting animal but as a wolf woman in transformation. Arguably, when Iris begins to read all stories as numerous versions of “Carnivore stories,” her declaration of becoming a wolf—a proclamation different from being demonized as a wolf by men or being violated by men as wolves—is to refuse the maternal victimhood assigned by societal/patriarchal cannibalism and to unmoor her subjectivity from the pathologized womanhood.

As Iris’s participation in Alex’s storytelling initiates her female writing in the face of phallogocentrism, we find that Snowman has problems putting down words on pages in the posthuman age. Unlike Iris, who relies on words to cure her own eating disorder, to liberate

Sabrina, and to forge a female community, Snowman finds that “Language itself had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid film on which he was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate. An eyeball that could still see, however. That was the trouble” (260). Although he once tries to keep a journal so as to “give his life some structure,” the absence of any “future reader” negates such an attempt: “But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who’ll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions: he’ll have no future reader, because the Crakers can’t read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (41).

In fact, even though Snowman is later given the opportunity to recount his experience to the other three human stragglers, he as a Coleridgean ancient mariner does not rush forthright to his own kind but hesitates to share his tale. While at this moment he urges to exchange stories with the foreigners—“They could listen to him, they could hear his tale, he could hear theirs. They at least would understand something of what he’s been through” (374)—at next moment his defense mechanism curbs this impulse:

Or, *Get the hell off my turf before I blow you off*, as in some old-style Western film. *Hands up. Back away. Leave that spraygun*. That wouldn’t be the end of it though. There are three of them and only one of him. They’d do what he’d do in their place: they’d go away, but they’d lurk, they’d spy. They’d sneak up on him in the dark, conk him on the head with a rock. He’d never know when they might come. (374)

Intriguingly, though Snowman is willing to “wear nothing but his baseball cap” (372)—an ambiguous sign of openness and savagery—he grabs fast his spraygun for self-protection. Regarding his love-fear complex about the three persons, apparently the potential of

self/other conflicts or antagonism among human beings survives the JUVE plague. While Snowman means to be a gregarious pacifist or/and a congenial storyteller, such wishes have to compromise with his impulse of aggression, his desire for dominance, his belief in hierarchy, his urge of territorial control, his distrust of strangers, as well as his concern about the weapons both parties have.

In view of the suspicion between Snowman and the three foreigners, we may turn to compare Atwood's Snowman with Defoe's Robinson in order to investigate the enclosed subjectivity—the irresistible compulsion to stake out the claim, the ineffable craving for a border against others—and its correlation with *homo faber*. Interestingly, though both are marooned in the midst of nowhere, Robinson establishes himself as a burgeoning bourgeoisie while Snowman fails as a dissolving relic. As demonstrated, whereas Robinson succeeds in fortifying his fortresses against intruders, Snowman is constantly threatened by the deceitful wolvoogs, the cunning pigeons, the “perfect” Crakers, and even the vexing ants; whereas Robinson develops agriculture and animal husbandry all by himself, Snowman rummages about for what has been left by the dead; whereas Robinson keeps journals for future readers, Snowman can dedicate his writing to readers in the past only; whereas Robinson colonizes Friday and fends off the cannibals, Snowman not only stinks like a walrus but regresses into the apelike Abominable Snowman, who leaves “backward-pointing footprints” on the snow. From this viewpoint, if Robinson represents the solid, self-reliant “I,” Snowman then exposes the “I” as “fragmented body” before the Lacanian mirror (6)—no narcissistic misrecognition this time.⁵⁸ At best a parody of the perfect *imago*, Snowman is simian, bestial, and reminiscent of Frankenstein's Monster. In a sense a snowman under the sun, he is physically

⁵⁸ In the seminal “The Mirror Stage,” Jacques Lacan defines the term in two senses: while temporarily it designates a certain phase before the Oedipus phase, theatrically it is a platform for the *trotte-bébé* to perform in front of a mirror. According to Lacan, “the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (6).

and psychologically melting away.

And Snowman is not simply pessimistic, his inability to survive competently among the bioengineered creatures in fact disrupts Robinson's *homo faber* façade. Noticeably, hardly would Robinson's plantation prosper without the tools he fetches from the ship. While he makes tables, chairs, shelves and other necessities, all these comforts actually derive from his adze, hatchet, nails and other iron work. As he regards his collection of tools with relish—"So that had my Cave been to be seen, it look'd like a general Magazine of all Necessary things, and I had every thing so ready at my Hand, that it was a great Pleasure to me to see all my Goods in such Order, and especially to find my Stock of all Necessaries so great" (Defoe 68-69)—this order of things points out that human civilization is grounded on the praxis of *homo faber*. If Robinson becomes deprived of his tools, could he still build up a civilization of a similar scale in the wilderness?

As Robinson constructs his home and his subjectivity by dint of tools, Snowman simply cannot afford such a facile image. With the complicity between biotechnology and capitalism rendering *homo faber* a monstrous idea in this technocratic age, it is time to rethink the anthropocentric ideology embedded in such instrumentalism. In his discussion of Western colonization, Robert P. Marzec sagaciously detects "the *Robinson Crusoe* Syndrome," an idea originating from Defoe's Robinson, who spends his first night in a tree and does not feel quite at ease on the uninhabited island until he "spend[s] decades setting up a series of enclosures that slowly cover the landscape" (130; original italics). In other words, what Marzec means by "the *Robinson Crusoe* Syndrome" is a defense mechanism against others: "In order to cope with an entirely Other form of land than that to which he is accustomed, [Robinson] introduces an ideological apparatus to overcode the earth. In this fashion, he can 'quiet' his mind, relieve his anxiety, and resist the nightmare of actually 'being there' on the island: the terror of inhabiting an Other space *as* Other" (131; original italics). Remarkably, if *homo*

faber shapes up subjectivity through the framing of enclosure and separation—a gesture that resembles Kristeva’s “abjection” theory on one hand and seemingly endorses domination and territoriality concerning the self/other confrontation on the other—Snowman’s “becoming animal” among the Crakers actually exposes the hierarchy implicit in such a concept. When the human form becomes reproducible among other species and the human superiority turns passé in the age of transgenics, Snowman’s marginalization is therefore a stern penalty for humans’ former preponderance over other beings, his monstrosity a condign retribution for anthropocentrism. In this case, as *homo faber* occupies soil by force, demands submission from other people or animals, and experiments on lives at will, what Snowman shall learn from this illusion of self-importance is to decenter himself from the self/other hierarchy, to tolerate and to respect others as equals.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood devices an “eternal triangle: the writer, the reader, and the book as go between” (123); namely, the book serves as a messenger between writer and reader. Significantly, in the novels at issue, Iris and Snowman are both writers and messengers at the same time. On the one hand, Iris, like the divine namesake in Greek mythology, functions as an agent when she sends provision to her lover Alex and puts Laura’s coded notes into a romance published in her sister’s name. Then, as a romance and a memoir writer, she discloses her affair with Alex and reveals Sabrina’s pedigree.⁵⁹ On the other hand, though Snowman, as Breslin depicts, is a “shaman” communicating between Crake and the Crakers, his aspiration to converse with the “future reader” as a writer is problematic. Partly because the Crakers cannot read and partly because Snowman is still vigilant to, if not totally

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that the name Iris alludes not only to mythology but also to optics, cinema and gardening. Optically, iris is “the colored part of the eye that can expand or contract to allow the right amount of light to enter the eye” (“Iris”), a feature that stands out in a text abounding with images of blindness. In film production, iris is a “an earlier cinematographic technique or wipe effect, in the form of an expanding or diminishing circle, in which a part of the screen is blacked out so that only a portion of the image can be seen by the viewer” (Dirk, “Cinematic Terms”). Interestingly, this technique is equivalent to Iris’s editing of the romance *The Blind Assassin* as a writer. Then, inasmuch as iris is also a kind of flower that blooms in the wake of winter, it is more than a coincidence that Atwood sets this novel in the freezing wintertime, hoping that Iris’s life story shall survive the cold and blossom in spring. For a detailed definition of iris in cinematography, see Dirk “Cinematic Terms.”

distrustful of, the three strangers, here the communion between writer and reader is not as promising or optimistic as that in Iris's case. Yet, when we see Iris and Snowman as Atwood's messengers, the forlorn Snowman now does encounter readers in the past. He becomes a "shaman" for us from the futuristic posthuman world.⁶⁰

As messengers are to communicate between writers and readers, what is Atwood trying to convey through Iris as a dying octogenarian and Snowman as the allegedly last man on earth then? In our discussion of female malady and human monstrosity, we have attributed all the problems to the boundary between self and other. Since Iris's refusal of food and her obsession about cleanliness close up her self-boundary for the sake of bodily autonomy, she must outgrow this female abjection by resorting to a textual border-crossing in order to coexist with others. On the other hand, because Snowman's monstrosity derives from the collapse of his anthropocentric hierarchy and the debacle of his human superiority, he must open up the fence of enclosure and separation intrinsic in *homo faber* by respecting and tolerating others. In this sense, when Atwood allows Iris to collaborate with Laura and to "sacrifice" for Sabrina, these gestures are likely to denote the possibility of dissolving the line between self and other. When she depicts the encounter between Snowman and the other three stragglers as another "[z]ero hour" (374), it is an intriguing open ending: different from that "zero hour" in the beginning of the novel, one that signifies stasis, death and silence, this "zero hour" is a moment for Snowman to choose between war and peace. Hopefully with his experience as a monster marginalized by the bioengineered beings, he will tolerate and respect others this time.

⁶⁰ In discussing *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* as "science fiction" or as "speculative fiction," Atwood makes a passing comment: "[B]oth [novels] take place in the future, that never-never land equivalent to the other world visited by shamans [...]" ("Context" 516).