CHAPTER ONE

Eating, Cleaning, and Writing: Female Abjection and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*[♣]

Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
of our own doubts, while dubiously
we mother man in his doubt!

—Denise Levertov, "Hypocrite Women"

"Mira was hiding in the ladies' room. She called it that, even though someone had scratched out the word *ladies'* in the sign on the door, and written *women's* underneath. She called it that out of thirty-eight years of habit, and until she saw the cross-out on the door, had never thought about it. 'Ladies' room' was a euphemism, she supposed, and she disliked euphemisms on principle. However, she also detested what she called vulgarity, and had never in her life, even when handling it, uttered the word *shit*. But here she was at the age of thirty-eight huddled for safety in a toilet booth in the basement of Sever Hall, gazing at, no, studying that word and others of the same genre, scrawled on the gray enameled door and walls."

—Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or any- thing else that I ever heard of.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

[♣] An earlier versions of this chapter appeared in *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30.1 (January 2004): 93-129. I thank *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* for its permission to include this revised version in my thesis.

Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, like her previous novels, is fraught with culinary imagery. Although the novel has nested within it stories of three different genres—a memoir by an octogenarian woman, a romance between two clandestine lovers, and a science fiction story about the planet Zycron—nearly all the female characters are pertinent to eating and food. For example, in the memoir, Iris elaborately records her daily diet, her sister Laura is described as a martyr to eating disorders, and her sister-in-law Winifred Griffen Prior is depicted as a fastidious and voracious eater; in the professed romance, the unknown woman usually brings food to meet with her secret lover; and in the science fiction story, there are virgins sacrificed to the carnivorous Gods, dead women "slavering for blood" (250), and Peach Women of the Planet Aa'A. As Emma Parker points out, in Atwood's novels "eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men" (349). While most characters in *The Blind Assassin* can be analyzed by this observation, Parker fails to clarify Laura's problems with food. Unlike Marian's anorexia in *The Edible Woman*, Laura's eating disorder has little to do with her awareness of patriarchal consumption in this male-dominated society, though she does suffer from the sexual violence of Iris's husband, Richard Griffen. Therefore, to depict Laura's difficulty with food, it is advisable to read *The Blind Assassin* in a new light.

In this chapter, I attempt to explicate women's emergence from the shade of abjection and their entrance onto the stage of subjectivity, with a special focus on physical and textual boundaries. Beginning with the power dynamics of eating and food, I shall center on Laura's eating disorder, Winifred's "voraciously elegant" consumption (185),[5] Iris's omnivorous scavenging in the wake of her non-eating hibernation (222), and the contrast between the dead women of Sakiel-Norn and the Peach Women of Aa'A in order to illustrate three issues:

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[5] Although here "voraciously elegant" is used by Atwood to describe Winifred's dressing style, it also can depict her eating style. A lady of the *nouveau riche*, Winifred has to eat "elegantly" to meet the standards of her class. However, her purposeful consumption of food resembles that of a "voracious" animal. In fact, husbandless and "voraciously elegant" in eating and dressing, Winifred is analogous to a black widow. No wonder Iris pictures Winifred as killing her husband in order to be with her adulterer chauffeur (185).

food-refusing as a protest on behalf of bodily autonomy, eating as a demonstration of power, and the sexist stereotypes of women as represented through culinary metaphors. Interestingly, though Laura's refusal to eat is unfavorable to her health, it nevertheless declares her bodily autonomy when we set her malady in the trajectory of Kristeva's "abjection" theory. In other words, by refusing food Laura not only jeopardizes her life but draws a line between herself and the environment as well. Yet, while Laura acquires her subjectivity by her alienation from food, her inability to eat also exposes her vulnerability to predators in a cannibalistic society. For people like Winifred, eating not merely denotes a readiness to assimilate or/and be assimilated into the environment; a consummate consumer even proves his or her competence to thrive in this dog-eat-dog society *via* what Sharon Rose Wilson terms "societal cannibalism" ("Fairy-Tale Cannibalism" 79).

Therefore, while Laura's alienation from food attests to her subjectivity vis-à-vis the other, Winifred's assimilation of/by food vouches for her survivability in this Darwinian society. The former demarcates her bodily boundary by rejecting food; the latter expands her hunting territory by taking it in. While Kristeva's "abjection" theory and Wilson's "societal cannibalism" construct women's subjectivity and survivability through the quotidian activity of eating, the culinary metaphor generates further meanings if we think it in terms of "patriarchal cannibalism." By limning the dead women in Sakiel-Norn as greedy to consume men's essence and the Peach Women of Aa'A as delicious to men's carnal appetite, the science fiction story in *The Blind Assassin* actually lampoons the misrepresentation of female images in the real world, belying the polarization of sanguivorous ogresses and titillating toys in men's sexual fantasy.

Indeed, be they demonized or objectified, such imaginary female figures in effect hold a mirror to the grotesque female images in or of actual reality. In this phallogocentric society, wherein culinary consumption parallels sexual consummation, these fictional distortions

actually reflect women's ideological disfigurations. Beneath these culinary metaphors, the "greedy" women disclose men's fear of female sexuality, while the "delicious" women function as a euphemism for men's sexual conquest. In a nutshell, when eating passes from a tricky dialectic between self and other concerning subjectivity to a hunting game between prey and predator implying "societal cannibalism" and then to an ideological play between man and woman suggesting "patriarchal cannibalism," this "eating" encompasses not only personal/social dimensions but also physical/textual boundaries. Intrapersonal and interpersonal, factual and fictional, eating in this novel hence becomes an indicator of subjectivity, an expression of survivability, and a metaphor for sexist stereotypes.

While food-refusing itself is ambivalent because it is both a positive protest in support of personal subjectivity and a negative force in view to societal survivability, I want to place Iris and Laura in contraposition, further comparing their hygienic habits in order to answer this question: why can Iris grow out of her eating disorder, but Laura cannot? Intriguingly, Iris becomes obsessed with morning showers after she marries Richard, whereas Laura feels comfortable with the dirty bedpans and vomit when she serves as a volunteer nurse among the sick. Although Kristeva's concept of "abjection" can explain Laura's food-refusing as a demarcation of her bodily boundary, her "gravitat[ion] to the [filthy] poverty wards" (421) conversely violates this fortification, rendering her susceptible to outer contamination. On the other hand, though Iris's eating disorder cannot cease her from Richard's sexual invasion, her daily showers as "dawn rituals" (35) nevertheless provide her with a compensatory boundary against him. In this sense, while Laura's obstinate food-refusing contradicts her sloppy hygienic habits in regard to her bodily boundary, Iris's eating disorder and her obsession with cleanliness are consistent strategies to claim her subjectivity. When Iris finds out that she can resort to morning showers to restore her lost bodily boundary to Richard, she can thus gradually get over such eating disorders as poor appetite or vomiting. Moreover, when she

realizes that the better way to tackle societal/patriarchal cannibalism is to be a tough consumer, her problems with food is bound to be cured. Evolving from the level of Laura the prey to that of Winifred the predator, Iris becomes even more adaptive to the cannibalistic society than her sister-in-law inasmuch as she learns to be "voraciously elegant" when in power and "omnivorous" when at odds. Thanks to her obsession with cleanliness, Iris can reclaim her bodily boundary whenever it is transgressed by Richard without the eventual suicide led by her eating disorder in the form of "hunger strike."[6]

The settings with which this chapter will be concerned are then mostly the kitchen (eating) and the women's washroom (cleaning). Although these two sites are regarded as "abject spaces" of domesticity, that is, "female spaces," they are also *exclusively* female domains. With "a room of one's own," to borrow Virgin Woolf's catchword, female subjectivity can therefore blossom through the manipulations of language. In other words, analyzing the permeability of physical space, domestic space in particular, and textual space, I intend to delineate the matrix formed by female writing, space, and subjectivity in the third section of this chapter.[7] Interestingly, though men assert that they are "hosts" of the house,

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[6] In this chapter I intend to depathologize the eating disorder as a kind of physical disease and interpret it as a form of "hunger strike." Even though Laura's refusal to eat clinically passes for an illness, I read it as a protest on behalf of subjectivity, a petition for bodily autonomy. However, as an unequivocal division between self and other, a radical eating order can be suicidal. In this case, I suggest that Iris's obsession with cleanliness achieve the same effect (subjectivity) without the same result (death).

[7] Concerning female writings in this novel, I hesitate to use the term *écriture féminine*, or "feminine writing," because there is only a rough correspondence between Cixous's "anti-logos" writing ("Medusa" 250) and the writing practices in Atwood's novel. For instance, where Cixous proposes *écriture féminine* as an authentic use of women's voice, most writings by Atwood's female characters in *The Blind Assassin* remain on the underside of patriarchy. Intriguingly, it is not until Iris has Laura's professed romance published and Atwood has her romance *The Blind Assassin* published that the voices of Adelia, Reenie, Laura, Iris, the women in the washroom, and even Atwood herself can be heard. Besides, although Cixous claims that *écriture féminine* is a "bisexual" writing style that "inscribes femininity" ("Medusa" 254, 248) rather than a gendered privilege exclusive to women, male characters in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* are not given the chance to engage in this kind of writing. In fact, compared to women in this novel, they seldom write. Even though Alex writes science fiction to parody capitalism, a phallogocentric apparatus that erases the "difference" of communism, women in his writing remain oppressed.

However, despite these nuances, most female characters in this novel, Iris in particular, do materialize Cixous's idea(l)s of *écriture féminine*: they write (through) their body, articulate their voices (though mostly in secret), and try to inscribe femininity. I shall elaborate on Cixous's idea(l)s of *écriture féminine* in the third section of this chapter. For a detailed polemic on women's problems with writing and the bisexual, non-exclusive nature of *écriture féminine*, see Cixous, "Medusa" 246-47 and 253-54.

kings of the world, the fact that women "occupy" the kitchen and the women's washroom manifests the porousness of this patriarchal topography, disclosing the apertures intrinsic in this system. On the other hand, even though some people may argue that women's occupation of the kitchen and the washroom is in effect a subtle internment rather than a form of ownership because these two places usually pass for gifts bestowed upon women in comparison with men's vast territory, I regard women's manipulation of words in these limited spaces as witnesses in resistance to the patriarchal oppression. Caged by phallogocentrism, women who notice the imbalanced power relation implicit in the division of physical space may hence employ their writing so as to soar into the textual space and to de-/re-/un-territorialize the field of male writing.[8]

Thus, Adelia's eccentric scrapbooks and cookbook, Reenie's inheritance of Adelia's cookbook, Iris's confessional memoir based on Laura's coded notebooks, and the various inscriptions on the walls of the female washroom disrupt or dispute the monolithic phallogocentrism by bringing the filthiest story/space to a celebration of a female community *different* from the patriarchal society. Even though there are discords and conflicts in this imaginary community, these women's "whimsical" inscriptions on the wall/paper bear a striking resemblance to the apparitions on the wall/paper of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" inasmuch as they elicit an "uncanny" feeling, one that confronts and breaks down the wall of patriarchy.[9] "A return of the repressed," female writings in this novel, particularly

[8] Here I borrow Cixous's metaphor of flying, with its double meanings of "flight" and "stealing" from the verb *voler* in French. According to Cixous, *écriture féminine* enables women to "go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" ("Medusa" 258). By soaring in textual space, women thus play the roles of "birds" and "robbers" ("Medusa" 258); they cross boundaries partitioned off by men, steal them, and redefine them. Ultimately, they even "unterritorialize" them because the concept of "boundary" is disrupted.

[9] While "whimsical" is likely to be associated with something capricious, unreliable, and illogical, I want to cast into relief its subversive potential as one of the features in *écriture féminine.* In Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," when the female narrator/wife/patient is pacified by her physician/husband after making a fuss about the grotesque wallpaper, she says to herself, "[i]t is as airy and comfortable a room as anyone need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a *whim*" (1135; my italics). Although here the "whim" refers to the "foolish fancy" and "hysterical tendency" (1139, 1133) with which the

those in the name of Laura, thus emerge from behind, from the space to which they used to be confined.[10] Indeed, if "it is his identification with the 'dead letter' of the symbolic mandate that bestows authority on [a real father]" (*Looking Awry* 109), as Slavoj Žižek says regarding the dis/embodied power of the Name of the Father, I will contend that Laura's embodiment through the signature on the women's washroom wall and as the author of the romance *The Blind Assassin* enable her to transcend death and to give an "uncanny" aura to the female community. Remarkably, then, women's subjectivity surfaces at the moment of writing—"I write, therefore I am," or more surprisingly, "I was written, therefore I am."[11]

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narrator is afflicted, the "whimsical" writings she exerts on the wall/paper actually resist the tradition of male writing: while the fragmentary writing on the pages of her journal defies the linear development of male narrative, the revolting patterns on the wallpaper challenge "the principle of design" (1137), a "Name of the Father" in the aesthetic sense. In other words, where phallogocentrism privileges the one and only rule in sexuality, medication, writing and everything else, *écriture féminine*, with its implication of heterogeneity and complexity, treats "whimsical" writing as a means to implode male-centered formality. However, even if women must learn to manipulate words, the final goal of *écriture féminine* is "not to take possession [of language, snatching it from men,] but rather to dash through and to 'fly'" (Cixous, "Medusa" 258).

[10] Here I draw an analogy between the eerie specters in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the graffiti on the women's washroom in Atwood's novel. If the "uncanny," as Freud defines it, is "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241), I claim that both the phantoms in Gilman's story and Laura's signature in Atwood's novel evoke a similar "uncanny" effect. Where the phantoms are the incarnations of the narrator's repressed self, Laura's signature in the washroom surprisingly survives her physical death.

[11] As writing constructs subjectivity, it matters whether the writing is made public or not. Women like Atwood and Cixous have audiences to read their writing; therefore, they are "recognized." However, there are other women, and a lot of them, writing in secret. Even though they may be as talented as Emily Dickinson, dormant volcanoes are easily mistaken for dead ones if they are not seen to utter.

While authorship is essential to the emergence of female subjectivity, representation, that is, the way how a woman is represented in a book, is as important. When I say, "I was written, therefore I am," I mean that women must be written into a text in order to materialize their subjectivity and to transcend their physical death. However, not all women gain their subjectivity when they are "put into a text." For instance, Bertha Mason is actually "sentenced" to death in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Demonized as "a madwoman in the attic," she barely has a chance to speak. It is not until Jean Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* that she achieves a subjectivity that rises from the ruins of Brontë's ghostly Thornfield and the misrepresentation of "Third World women" under the influence of British imperialism.

Interestingly, in liberating language from male restrictions, Atwood also keeps reminding her readers of the potential subversion of domesticity. As the sewing scissors Laura uses to cut her disagreeable passages from the Bible, the household recipes Adelia passes down to Reenie, and the inscriptions on the wall of the women's washroom all hint at the operation of a female community, Atwood's comparison of Callie Fitzsimmons's taupe jersey dress to an ice pick also manifests the "silent" but "sharp" attributes of female power (185). As Iris describes it, Callie's "*mole*" dress "implied that such things were beneath notice—but rather of something easy to overlook but sharp, like a common kitchen implement—an ice pick, say—just before the murder. As a dress, it was a raised fist, but in a silent crowd" (185). Surprisingly, no sooner does Iris associate Callie's plain dress to ordinary cooking utensils—"just before the murder"—than the homely ice pick becomes as shocking as a bloody dagger, and the warm kitchen for mothers suddenly turns to an icy slaughterhouse for killers. In this sense, as domesticity assigns women the job of cooking for their family, their skillful utilization of knives and forks can be interpreted not merely as a promise of *bon appétit* but also as training for a deft assassin. Beneath

Unlike the subjectivity created by the destructive refusal of food or the less malignant obsession with cleanliness, female writing shapes subjects that not merely draw a line against the other—man, predator, the cannibalistic society—but also negotiate with it. Significantly, though Laura's food-refusing and Iris's obsessive shower attest to the correlation between bodily boundary and autonomy, the former estranges the self from the other while the latter restores subjectivity after it is transgressed. Successfully as they help the subjects claim their hard-won bodily autonomy, Iris and Laura still have to live with such maladies. Actually, since there *is* always an irresolvable tension between self and other, opposition can only aggravate or reverse this confrontation. In view of this, female writing tackles this self/other dialectic in a different way. In addition to opposition, it further initiates a negotiation, working toward a possible coexistence. Indeed, when Iris claims that she and Laura collaborate on the romance *The Blind Assassin*, she not only salvages Laura from the most abject space—death—and brings her into the female community but also inaugurates a communion with her as the other. Although we do not see the ultimate reconciliation between man and woman in this novel (if there is one), Iris's collaboration with Laura does anticipate a possibility of coexistence between self and other. Moreover, when Iris "sacrifices" herself for her granddaughter Sabrina at the end of the novel, the line between self and other finally dissolves.[12] Since Iris is always anxious about her subjectivity, her "sacrifice" for Sabrina is

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the conformity to gender codes lies the most perverse act of homicide; underneath the devotion to housewifery hides the enormity of butchery.

[12] Here Iris's "sacrifice" for Sabrina is understood not in terms of "masculine economy" but in terms of "feminine economy." According to Cixous, while the former describes the traditional man who wants to "gain more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power, money, or pleasure, all of which reinforce his phallogocentric narcissism at the same time," the latter is a "gift economy" that involves no profitable return: "she doesn't try to 'recover her expenses.' She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other" (*Newly Born Woman* 87). When Iris ties up all the papers of her memoir and slides them on top of everything else in the steamer trunk, she does not expect to get "love" or "forgiveness" from her granddaughter; she only hopes that some day Sabrina will come back, unlock the trunk, and listen to her story. As she says, "I leave myself in your hands. [...] By the time you read this last page, that—if anywhere—is the only place I will be" (521). Here Iris, though bestowing a new identity on Sabrina by revealing the secret of her parentage, does not expect to gain anything from her granddaughter (except for a listener). As a giver that does not brood over benefit or interest, Iris finally can negotiate with, or even give herself to, others without fidgeting about the self/other conflicts.

thus neither an identification that renders the subject void (as Laura tends to feel sorry for the poor) nor a suicide enforced by the patriarchal society (as the virgins in the science fiction story are sacrificed to Gods). Instead, it is a negotiation between self and other, a giving in spite of the self/other conflicts.

I. Consumption and Cannibalism

Readers will immediately notice that Laura has a problem with food. In her girlhood, she saves all the "bread men" in her top drawer. Instead of eating them as Iris does, she insists on a mass burial when Reenie threatens to throw them into the garbage can in case of mice (86). During the Depression, she refuses to eat rabbits. Haunted by their resemblance to "skinned babies," Laura protests: "You'd have to be a cannibal to eat them" (167). She even locks herself up for three days without eating anything because a boy to whom she has served a bowl of soup gets crushed under a train's wheels (196). Interestingly, while Laura, like "a saint in training" (212), may "fast" for the misery of humankind, she also rejects anything suggestive of cannibalism, inanimate bread included. Unlike ordinary people, who regard eating as a reward for a hard day's work or as a consolation for haphazard angst, Laura treats eating as "[a] sort of tedious maintenance routine" (209). Divested of its emotional overtones, eating to Laura is purely physical, biological, and mechanical.

To depict Laura's dietary problems, Kristeva's concept of "abjection" and Wilson's "fairy-tale cannibalism" ("Fairy-Tale Cannibalism" 78) may draw us from a speculation on religious fasting to an investigation of bodily boundaries and the correlation between eating and survivability. As Kristeva says, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). When I decline the entry of the food, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish

myself' (3). Noticeably, Kristeva contends that the refusal to eat should be rid of its pathological import, inasmuch as the self emerges at the moment the subject resists the assimilation of food. To proclaim bodily autonomy, "abjection" thus functions as a defense mechanism, drawing a line between self and other. In other words, "[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). In this sense, Laura's food-refusing, though demarcating the border between self and the environment at the cost of satiety, also validates her bodily autonomy in terms of Kristeva's "abjection" theory.[13]

However, one question remains: although Laura's food-refusing is a declaration of bodily autonomy, it also implies an incongruity between her body and mind. As the body needs nourishment to sustain life but the mind refuses it, Laura has unwittingly become a prey to "societal cannibalism." According to Wilson, Atwood's novels often present readers with twisted "fairy tales involving dismemberment and cannibalism" (*Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 82). Although Atwood's main purpose in appropriating these stories is to crack the saccharine fantasy that the prince and princess will live happily ever after, I want to shift the focus from sexual relationships to a societal one. In bedtime stories and nursery rhymes like "Little Red Cap," "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Hansel and Gretel," there are gobbling wolves, ravenous ogres and wicked witches lurking to eat women and children alive (Wilson, *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 86-88, 90; "Fairy-Tale Cannibalism" 80-82, 84). Appalling as these tales are, they are told to teach children, girls in particular, not to go out alone or to use their wits and courage in the face of danger. Yet, as the huntsman righteously cuts open the

[13] Besides Kristeva, scholars like James W. Brown and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong also conceive of the mouth as a liminal portal between self and other. As Brown says, "appetite attests to, and even comes to symbolize, the space existing between subject and object, between 'me' and the "world'" (qtd. in Wong 18). Likewise, Wong notices that "[i]ngestion is the physical act that mediates between self and not-self, native essence and foreign matter, the inside and the outside" (26). For a thematic reading of eating and food in Asian American literature, see Wong 18-76.

wolf's stomach to save the Little Red Cap and her grandmother, as the bride recounts her hair-raising dream about the murderous groom's crime, and as the cunning Gretel tricks the witch into the boiling cauldron, these brutal images of amputation or cannibalism are actually unsuitable materials for toddlers. Demanding poetic justice in the extreme, these fairy tales turn foul and indirectly sanction ferocious retribution. Thus, if these stories teach children to wage war for peace, to kill enemies in order to save themselves from being devoured, Laura's inability to consume the anthropomorphic "bread men" confirms her ineligibility for survival in this cannibalistic society based on "Survival of the Fittest." Unable to kill and unable to eat, Laura puts her own life at peril; she is likely to be devoured before she has the chance to die of hunger herself.

While Laura's refusal to eat renders her incapable of coping with the treacherous environment, Winifred's "voraciously elegant" eating attests to her competence to thrive in this cannibalistic society. Remarkably, though Winifred "never finish[es] a meal" (233), her ability to consume is unquestionable. At the Avilion dinner party, she inserts a cheese ball into her mouth and pushes her lips outward, "into a sort of funnel" (184). Here the funnel image, while drolly illustrating Winifred's circumspection about the possible oil stain, caricatures her ravenous personality as well. If Winifred really cares about her public image, she should firmly restrain herself from touching the oversize cheese ball. However, she is overcome, in spite of herself, by the desire to eat, and her way of eating hence turns her into a devouring snake: while she wants to eat "graciously" (184) without a trace on her lip, her swallowing is calculating and purposeful. As Parker speaks of "the female mouth as a locus of potential strength" (358), Winifred's mouth does epitomize her insatiable desire and her predatory nature. To such a refined consumer at the top of the pecking order, eating is never a matter of stomach capacity but one of table etiquette. The reason Winifred hardly finishes a meal actually has more to do with her ladyship than with her appetite.

In fact, Winifred is so ravenous that even her clothes are tinged with codes of consumption and predation. The first time she shows up at the button factory picnic, she dons "diaphanous orange-tinted muslin like the steam from a watery tomato soup" (175). When she appears at the Avilion dinner party, she is in "a black dress, simply cut but voraciously elegant" (185). Later, when she is at the Arcadian Court, she wears "green alligator shoes" the color of which being "chlorophyll chewing gum;" a green hat, shaped "like a poisonous cake;" and lipstick, the shade of which being "dark pinkish orange [like] *shrimp*" (230-31; original italics). Metaphorically speaking, the blood-red tomato soup may symbolize Winifred's sanguinary temperament; the alligator and chewing imagery may allude to her rapacious ferocity; the aphrodisiac shrimp may denote her wanton desire; the poison cake may betray her deadly essence beneath the charming appearance. A woman who regards clothes as "skin" and always would like to "wear them to effect" (233), Winifred dresses up not only to protect herself but also to attract, to attack and to devour her prey.[14]

Placing female characters in the food chain of this cannibalistic society, we find that Laura's food-refusing manifests her deficiency in consumption, whereas Winifred's swallowing signifies her power of mastery. By this criterion, Iris's eating thus presents us with a tricky case inasmuch as Iris develops a case of eating disorder similar to Laura's when she marries Richard but later becomes a cannibal, an omnivore, and even a scavenger far more ravenous than Winifred in her eighties.[15] Significantly, while Iris has no difficulty

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[14] Although Winifred's clothes denote her rapacious nature, her status as a predator is not absolute. Comparing her sable dress at the Avilion dinner party with Callie's taupe jersey, we find an interesting contrast: whereas Winifred's spectacular gown renders her an eye-catcher that draws people's attention, Callie's earthy dress allows her to elude people's notice. Ostensibly, Callie is far less alluring than Winifred because of her plain apparel. Yet, when we take into consideration the male gaze in this scopophilic society wherein women are objectified into images while men are bearers of the look (Mulvey 16-19), Winifred's conspicuous outfit ironically makes her an easy target for the devouring eyes of male spectators, whereas Collie's unsavory "*mole*" dress enables her to avoid such annoyance. Therefore, in comparison to Callie's sober attire, Winifred's loud gown, though proving effective in seducing men, must reduce its wearer from human to food before it ensnares its victims. For an incisive analysis of female images in cinema and a pungent discussion of voyeurism, see Laura Mulvey 14-26.

[15] In fact, Iris's eating disorder bears more resemblance to Marian's in *The Edible Woman* than to Laura's because her eating problem, like Marian's, is triggered by her coming marriage, articulated by symptoms like

eating in her childhood—she chews the “bread men” to her heart’s content, in contrast to Laura’s weird benevolence, and gleefully eats Laura’s cake on her own birthday despite her mother’s recent funeral (86, 142)—her appetite becomes poor when she knows that she has to marry Richard for the preservation of her father’s button factory. Forced to be a society bride, Iris feels “as if [her] stomach had vanished” at Richard’s proposal (226). Then, when Richard deceases and she becomes an octogenarian, Iris surprisingly eats chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter, remnant plums, and everything else—just to stay alive (52, 56, 180). Sometimes she even becomes so gluttonous that she eats or drinks forbidden things, coffee for instance, in spite of the doctor’s cautions of heart attack.

To elaborate on Iris’s eating disorder, we have to decode her dream of hibernation and her fear of wolves. Recalling her marriage to Richard, Iris has an uncanny nightmare:

> The winter was coming, I dreamed, and so I would hibernate. First I would grow fur, then crawl into a cave, then go to sleep. It all seemed normal, as if I’d done it before. Then I remembered, even in the dream, that I’d never been a hairy woman in that way and was now bald as a newt, or at least my legs were; so although they appeared to be attached to my body, these hairy legs couldn’t possibly be mine. Also they had no feeling in them. They were the legs of something else, or someone. (222)

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stomachache and vomiting, and overcome by her negotiation with patriarchal cannibalism. As Jennifer Hobgood observes in her study of Marian’s anorexia on the basis of Freud’s “decomposition,” coupled with Deleuze and Guattari’s “deterritorialization,” Marian’s difficulty with food should be valorized as “her body announc[ing] its refusal to participate in consumerism” instead of simply an alienation of/between body and mind (148, 155). Significantly, when she later comes up with a substitute cake and forces Peter to confess his “devouring” scheme, she has begun her negotiation with the consumer capitalism. Although this conversation means Marian’s reenlistment in the capitalist system, she does not return without any change: by seeing the cake “as a fetish invested [...] with a sort of magical power of renewal” (160), Marian has uncovered the contradiction in this apparatus. Indeed, to survive the subject should consume without any misgivings. In this case, compared to Laura’s abiding fidgeting about food, Iris’s convalescence from her eating disorder bespeaks her adaptability in a cannibalistic society.

Remarkably, as animals become torpid and usually fast during hibernation, Iris's dream insinuates her sleep-like blindness in marrying Richard and her refusal to eat during this dreaded relationship. On the very night Richard proposes, Iris feels like being buried alive by a stretch of icy snow, her body eaten by wolves: "I would be discovered [...] years later by some intrepid team—fallen in my tracks, one arm outflung as if grasping at straws, my features desiccated, my fingers gnawed by wolves" (228). Indeed, due to his cupidity and lechery, Iris instinctively compares Richard to a wolf: a fierce beast with saber teeth to facilitate his voracious appetite for wealth; a territorial creature with an odorous perfume to demarcate his sexual turf; and a lewd animal that divides women into "apples and pears, according to the shapes of their bottoms" (318) and commits incest with his sister-in-law. When asked to put on cream and gloves so as to feel "the texture of uncooked bacon fat" the night before the wedding, Iris feels like a "trussed" turkey "packed away" for Richard's stomach (235, 238).[16] Then, after her first sexual experience with Richard, she starts having problems eating meat: "The dinner was a steak, along with a salad. I ate mostly the salad. All the lettuce in hotels at that time was the same. It tasted like pale-green water. It tasted like frost" (242). As the "hairy legs" in the dream has implied Richard's wolfish sexual violation of her body during the intimacy, Iris thus unconsciously appeals to one of the most dramatic and passive declarations of bodily autonomy—eating disorder—in order to accentuate her physical border against Richard. When she is so sick that she starts vomiting on the trip to Europe, Iris secretly thanks herself for the discomfort: "The benefit to my seasickness was that Richard showed no inclination to climb into bed with me. Sex may go nicely with many things, but vomit isn't one of them" (243-44). Since Iris cannot get rid of Richard as the hairy

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[16] According to J. Brooks Bouson, the depictions of Iris as a "trussed" turkey and as an animal in hibernation construct "the painful objectification of women who consent to femininity in a masculinist system in which women are viewed as objects for male consumption and sexual pleasure" (258). Likewise, Parker claims that Atwood "deconstructs the traditional metaphor of woman as food and explores the effects of symbolic cannibalism as a sanctioned cultural system. [...] The presentation of cannibalism as the governing ethos exposes the disturbing underside of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only thinly disguised as civilization" (363).

wolf, her poor appetite and her vomiting denote an urge to claim her bodily autonomy through such eating disorders.

Since Iris's eating disorder results from her desire yet failure to set up a bodily boundary against Richard, she is likely to regain her appetite when her husband passes away. Surprisingly, the octogenarian Iris not only outgrows her problems with food but evolves into a carnivorous scavenger, consuming everything that comes her way. Waking up in the morning, she at once brushes her teeth and wonders about "what bones [she]'d been gnawing in [her] sleep" (35). In addition, she occasionally violates the doctor's instructions and partakes of something forbidden like coffee. Sometimes she may leave her table manners behind and "scoop[s the peanut butter] directly from the jaw with a forefinger" (56) or may munch her chocolate-glazed doughnut on a bench "placed handily right beside the garbage bin" (202), putting Epicureanism at top priority and ignoring the unsanitary environment. Above all, she even picks up the plums "the squirrels and raccoons and drunken yellow-jackets ha[ve] left [her]—and [eats] them greedily, the juice of their bruised flesh bloodying [her] chin" (180). (Seeing the mess, Mara, "with her breathless avian laugh, [asks] *Who've you been fighting*?" [180].) Noticeably, in sharp contrast to the almost morbid dyspeptic in her earlier wifehood, there are either images of carnivores, scavengers or transgressions of table etiquette and sanitation in Iris's widowhood. In her eighties, Iris has grown into a big eater, taking in everything at hand not only to survive but also to gratify her gastronautic flings.[17]

As Iris's appetite becomes exceptionally eupeptic at her old age, Sau-ling Wong's observations on Asian American food consumption may help to clarify her superb eating behavior. Reading food thematically in Asian American literature, Wong contends that the

[17] "Gastronautic," a compound word made of the prefix "gastr-" (stomach) and the Greek noun "naut-" (ship, traveler), describes those who would eat unusual dainties like the Japanese fugus at the risk of their lives. In Iris's case, she is a gastronaut because she would rather put her life at stake than refrain from drinking coffee.

immigrants' omnivorousness expresses their power to turn waste to repast: "What unites the immigrants [...] is an ability to eat unpromising substances and to extract substance, even a sort of willed enjoyment, from them; to put it symbolically, it is the ability to cope with the constraints and persecutions Asian Americans have had to endure as immigrants and racial minorities" (25). Although Iris is far from racially marginalized, the sexual abuse with which she is afflicted puts her in a situation similar to those "aliens from the other shore." To such social minorities, racial and sexual in this context, eating what people regard as unpalatable, unsavory, or in a word inedible does not merely indicate the ability to revivify residue but further denotes the power to proclaim autonomy. By devouring the unlikely food, such people implicitly prove that they are more valiant than their dominators and oppressors, and thus more eligible to live in this cannibalistic society. Accordingly, when the elderly Iris dares to eat berries left by rodents and insects or to drink coffee despite the doctor's cautions, she is declaring herself a tough consumer. To answer Maya's question—"Who've you been fighting?"—apparently it is the patriarchal cannibalism, which designates Iris as food, a human sacrifice for men such as her father Norval, her husband Richard, and even her lover Alex, that she is in battle with.

While the female characters in Iris's memoir illustrate the power configuration of food, bodily autonomy and societal/patriarchal cannibalism, those in Alex's science fiction stories reveal male fantasies and female stereotypes through culinary metaphors or images. At first glance, the dead women in the remote mountains of Sakiel-Norn and the Peach Women of the Planet Aa'A are polarized as images of *femme fatale* and "angel in the house." As Alex depicts them, the former are "beautiful nude dead women with azure hair, curvaceous figures, ruby-red lips and eyes like snake-filled pits" (115). Betrayed in love, they prey upon men to "suck out their essence, and turn them into obedient zombies, bound to satisfy [their] unnatural cravings on demand" (116). On the other hand, the latter are virgins with "succulent

golden pink" skin and an "undulating" gait (353). With the power to read minds, they are sophisticated in art, literature, philosophy, and theology. While people may make a big difference between the demonic dead virgins and the angelic Peach Women, a closer scrutiny proves that they are actually twisted projections of the same male fantasy: either craving for men's stamina or realizing men's "most outrageous fantasies" (253), they both invoke the sexist stereotypes of women.[18] If we rejoice at the Peach Women but chafe at the dead women insofar as the former fulfill men's rape fantasy whereas the latter turn men into senseless zombies, we have distorted the sexual relationship between man and woman to a power relationship between prey and predator. When the representations of female characters become "a power trip rather than a sexual one" (Atwood, "Pornography" 440), pornography in science fiction is no longer for pure thrills or sheer entertainment. Underneath, misogyny is prowling.

II. Menstruation and Consummation

Earlier when I said that Laura was endowed with bodily autonomy *via* her refusal of food, it was only half the story. If we take into account her disregard for personal hygiene, her excessive identification with the wretched vagabonds and invalids, and her loose sense of ownership, we may notice that Laura actually has problems managing her bodily boundary. The reason why Iris can "grow out of" her eating disorder but Laura cannot is that the former is flexible about her bodily boundary, while the latter either clings to the boundary or totally

[18] According to Bouson, Alex, though aware of the problems between classes, falls for the gender stereotypes between sexes:

> Alex, who once wanted to write fiction to help bring down the corrupt class system, [...] invokes classic sexist stereotypes in his depiction of the women characters he refers to as B, which stands, variously, for Beyond Belief, or Bird Brain, or Big Boobs, or Beautiful Blonde; or the Peach Women of the planet Aa'A, whose sole function is to satisfy the sexual fantasies of the earth men marooned on their planet; or the dead women with lithe, curvaceous figures and ruby-red lips who prey on men; or the sacrificial veiled virgins of Zycron who are passively sacrificed by men. (262)

forsakes it. In other words, whereas Iris can resort to vomiting and showers to reclaim her bodily boundary against Richard's intrusion, yet also enjoy her communion with Alex by *temporarily* erasing the line, hardly has Laura benefited from her fumbles with this boundary. Lamentably, she either intransigently refuses sustenance at the expense of her own life or unconditionally sacrifices herself for those in need. As Iris says, "Laura touches people. I do not" (192). The biggest difference between these two sisters is one between flexibility and fixity: while Laura, driven by her "tendency towards absolutism" (288), fails to control her protective boundary, Iris, aware of the latent dangers of communion with people, knows when to stay aloof and when to get close—*at a distance*.

Laura's inability to manipulate her self-boundary is manifested most clearly in her loose attitude toward personal hygiene and in her "skinless" being (73). When she drops out of school and joins Winifred's volunteer organization (The Abigails) in the hospital, Laura surprisingly feels at ease with the dirty bedpans, gross vomit, sweat and other forms of filth. Unlike other egoistic Abigails, who are "girls of good family" and thus loathe the smell of the patients, Laura "gravitate[s] to the poverty wards," even though there are "derelicts, old women with dementia, impecunious veterans down on their luck, noseless men with tertiary syphilis and the like" (421). From this perspective, Laura is so "skinless" that she would tear away her line of defense just to help those in need. Toiling in the hospital, she does not even think about the putrid, infectious environment she has put herself in. Compared with the food-refusing Laura, this "skinless" Laura is so ready to embrace the crowd as others that she disarms herself, removing her protective "skin" with few misgivings.[19]

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[19] Interestingly, Atwood insists on a difference between being "selfless" and being "skinless." Take Iris's mother for example. She is "selfless" because she would take care of the maimed soldiers at the expense of her own health. As Iris says in her memoir, "[n]obody is born with that kind of selflessness: it can be acquired only by the most relentless discipline, a crushing-out of natural inclination. [...] As for Laura, she was not selfless, not at all. Instead she was skinless, which is a different thing" (73). Although here being "selfless" describes a nobler deed than being "skinless"—inasmuch as the former talks about the self-sacrifice for the nation, the altruistic devotion to the well-being of others, while the latter is limited to the susceptibility to people's suffering—I tend to read Laura's "skinless" disposition as a less serious case of "selflessness." In other words,

As noted, Laura is "skinless" and lax about personal hygiene. Curiously, though she may cry for a dead crow, a smashed cat, a dark cloud or maimed veterans, she nevertheless has "an uncanny resistance to physical pain" (85). Besides, while other people manage to conceal their "odd, skewed element" (89), Laura exposes it, making herself vulnerable to people's malice. In fact, Laura's "uncanny resistance to physical pain" does not derive from her superhuman tolerance but from her unsubstantial self; her reckless exposure to hazards should not be attributed to her dauntless self-confidence but to her "skinless" subjectivity. As a person without boundaries tends to identify herself with others and becomes unfeeling toward herself, Laura is thus susceptible to exterior dangers but feels no pain about her suffering.[20] Deprived of any demarcation to tell her apart from others, she can scarcely be herself.

If being skinless renders Laura undaunted by the squalor in the hospital and unwincing at identifying with others, her problems of bodily boundaries can be further expounded in terms of ownership. As Iris grumbles, Laura "[has] only the haziest notions of ownership" (83). Throughout the novel, she borrows Iris's fountain pen without asking (42), pushes back her cuticles with Iris's orange stick without permission (424), or uses Iris's hairbrush with few qualms about sanitation (425). She even exchanges Elwood Murray's hand-tinting materials with Reenie's jam without telling either party and steals Murray's photograph taken at the button factory picnic on the sly (194-95). Judging from such peccadilloes, it seems that Laura is a willful adolescent. Yet, while one may reprimand her for her bossy temperament or psychopathic fetishes, I contend that the idea of ownership is foreign to her. That is, the reason why Laura does not scruple to take or to remove others' objects is not that she is

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Laura's "skinless" being implies a porous subject, a subject who is so inclined to identify herself with others that she is "selfless" to a degree.

[20] When I say that Laura is a person without boundaries, I do not really mean that she has no bodily boundary at all. In fact, while Laura's refusal of food confirms her bodily boundary, her disregard of personal hygiene, her habitual identification with others, and her faint idea of ownership all indicate that her bodily boundary is porous, unguarded, and dysfunctional. In the same vein, when I say that Laura's subjectivity is "skinless," it applies only to her problems of personal hygiene, identification, and ownership, not to her eating disorder.

possessive about or covetous of their belongings, but that she is so inclined to identify herself with others that she undoes the line between self and others. As we know that Laura's supple identification derives from her unguarded bodily boundary, her foggy idea of ownership here indicates the same problem.

While Laura is neglectful of ownership, Iris is meticulous about it. Entering Alex's hiding abode, she immediately averts her eyes at the sight of "[h]is toothbrush in an enamelled tin cup," not because it is dirty but because it is too "intimate" (110). Moreover, "[s]he never manages to overcome her sense of transgression in [others'] rooms—the feeling that she's violating the private boundaries of whoever ordinarily lives in them. She'd like to go through the closets, the bureau drawers—not to take, only to look; to see how other people live" (253). Indeed, even though Iris would like to unshield her defense while with Alex, hardly does she feel at ease when infringing upon others' territory or prying into others' lives. Hence, while intimacy implies a volatile subjectivity to Laura, it suggests friction and injury to Iris. Wary of the fine line between pleasure and pressure and alert to the perils beneath intimacy, Iris is circumspect about ownership and its connotation of personal space and bodily boundaries. If the "skinless" Laura is too ready to identify herself with others, the gloved Iris is relatively self-protected. Unlike her sister, Iris clearly knows that when she devotes herself to others, to men in particular, she also exposes herself to the hazards of crashes and burns.

Since Iris is so conscious of the border between self and other, her obsession with showers after the marriage can be therefore understood as an urge to reclaim her bodily boundary against Richard. Yet, before depicting her particularity about cleanliness, we may briefly digress to her first experience of menstruation—an incident that mistakenly portrays the female body as grubby and grotesque—in order to trace her almost paranoiac anxiety about sordidness. When Iris has her first period, she thinks that she has "developed a horrible

disease, because blood [is] seeping out from between [her] legs" (159). Meanwhile, though Reenie removes its pathological connotation, she refers to the menstrual blood as a "mess," a "curse" that "[is] yet one more peculiar arrangement of God's, devised to make life disagreeable" (159). Thus, for adolescents and adults alike, menstrual blood is yoked to such abhorrent things as diseases or disasters rather than to its actual biological significance: reproduction. As Kristeva observes, "[m]enstrual blood [...] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (71). While Reenie correlates menstrual blood with scourges from above, Iris is likely to further internalize the *gestalt* of filth and excretion because the blood comes from her own body. Misconstruing menstruation as a female malady and her body as the source of contamination, Iris is thus keen on self-purification.

As Iris's menstruation has contributed to her internalization of filth, Richard's sexual invasion and his verbal violence further remind her of her uncleanness, thus exacerbating her solicitude about squalor. On the very night of their consummation, Iris initiates her "rite of passage" with blood and bruises. Cleaning herself with a washcloth, she "wonder[s] what should be done with this: the red on it was so visible, as if [she's] had a nosebleed" (241). Indeed, when the bridal blood seeps out from between her legs after intercourse in the same way which the menstrual blood does, Iris intuitively believes copulation to be as dirty. To undo such maculation, she is thus compelled to wash herself. In fact, when Richard explains to her the utility of bidets on their honeymoon trip, Iris begins to admire the French for their recognition of bodily anxiety (303). Resenting Richard's sexual abuse, she is desperate for a "bidet" to rid herself of Richard's marks and scents on her body. However, as she learns to clean herself of her husband's bodily inscriptions—bruises and smells—by taking frequent baths: "I memorized the cities through their hotels, the hotels through their bathrooms.

Dressing, undressing, lying in the water" (305), Richard does not mitigate his assault. Instead, he warns Iris not to leave her hair on the bathroom floor "[l]ike shedding animals" (318). In a sense, Iris does resemble a shedding animal: in the face of Richard's sexual and verbal violence, she has been excoriated to the extent of becoming "skinless." (We note that while Laura is "skinless" because she renounces her bodily boundary, Iris becomes "skinless" because Richard keeps "rubbing her the wrong way.") Consequently, due to Richard's traumatic violation of her bodily autonomy, the octogenarian Iris has to "get the smell of nocturnal darkness off the skin" by taking morning showers before feeling "restored" (35). Haunted by the residuum of Richard's odor, which has made her "smell odd" since the first sexual experience (242), Iris now still has to cope with the smell in her eighties. Not surprisingly, from wifehood to widowhood, Iris has always tried to maintain a line between herself and Richard. Since she cannot forestall Richard's aggressions, she has to sublimate her repressed anxieties in the repeated "rituals" of washing, thus recouping her bodily autonomy in a(n) (over)compensative way.

In comparison with Laura's slight regard for her self-boundary, Iris's obsession with cleanliness, though producing symptoms like morning showers, does prevent her from extraneous contamination. In fact, ever since Iris was an adolescent, Miss Violet Goreham's and Mr. Erskine's tutoring have instilled in her such survivalist knacks as sanitation and duplicity in order to set up citadels or fences against others' attacks. As Iris describes it, despite Miss Violet's "lumpy and inelegant" attitude toward academic education, "she had high standards of delicacy and a long list of things she wanted us [Iris and Laura] to *pretend* to be: flowering trees, butterflies, the gentle breezes. Anything but little girls with dirty knees and their fingers up their noses; about matters of *personal hygiene* she was fastidious" (155; my italics). Intriguingly, for Miss Violet education is all about pretense and cleanliness; it is a matter of performance and (en)acting, not one of intelligence or logic. As such, Mr. Erskine's

draconian teaching of classical literature and philosophy seems to be a perfect remedy for Miss Violet's "feminine" education, yet his "cutting irony [, his] nasty temper, and [... his] smell like the bottom of a damp laundry hamper" are intolerable to the Chase sisters (161). To make the matter worse, underneath his pedantic façade Mr. Erskine is a misogynist: he enjoys scolding Iris, abusing Laura, and reciting stories "from Virgil's *Aeneid* [...] or from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the parts where unpleasant things were done by gods to various young women" (163). Under such circumstances, Iris is likely to yield to Erskine's patriarchal prejudice; however, thanks to Miss Violet's previous "feminine" education, she absorbs from Erskine something beyond his arrogance and misogyny: "In addition to lying and cheating, I'd learned half-concealed insolence and silent resistance. I'd learned that revenge is a dish best eaten cold. I'd learned not to get caught" (167). In this case, though duplicity is a moral flaw in terms of religious doctrines, it is a saving grace to a woman vulnerable to patriarchal cannibalism.

III. Writing and Righting

In the previous sections, I have highlighted the differences between Iris and Laura regarding their eating and cleaning habits under the rubric of bodily boundaries. Remarkably, even though they refuse food to declare their bodily autonomy, their reasons are quite different: while Laura's dietary problem results from her *fear of consuming* the rabbits and bread men, Iris's eating disorder results from her *fear of being consumed* by Richard. Therefore, since Laura dreads consuming, rather than being consumed, she can easily identify herself with others, careless about personal hygiene, ownership, and other codes suggestive of bodily boundaries *unless she is asked to eat others*. On the other hand, since Iris dreads being devoured, she is forever keeping a line between herself and the environment. She never

gets too close to others, people and food included. Even though later Iris realizes that she can challenge patriarchal cannibalism by becoming a "tough eater," who, regardless of personal hygiene, eats up everything in order to survive and sate her gastronautic flings, her apprehension about the bodily boundary remains in her obsession with showers.[21]

Based on the foregoing discussion of eating and cleaning, it seems that women have always been assigned the role of victims either in terms of societal cannibalism (Laura) or in terms of patriarchal cannibalism (Iris). Even though occasionally there are female predators like Winifred, they often become the accomplices of patriarchy. However, when we turn from the "trivia" of eating and cleaning to an investigation of female writings in this novel, we find that Adelia's scrapbooks and cookbook, Reenie's inheritance of Adelia's cookbook, Laura's notebooks, Iris's memoir, and the hypertextual inscriptions on the wall of a women's washroom all forge a female community, wherein the subjects do not simply negatively defend/detach their self against/from the symbolic Other through eating disorders or obsession with cleanliness but positively facilitate coexistence with this Other through writing. No longer a tomb-like "trunk" wherein women are inscribed, interred and locked away, this female community is a womb-like "Avilion" wherein the symbolic order is rectified and dead women come to life.[22] Before I discuss how female writings in this novel

[21] While some readers may find Iris's fastidiousness about morning showers inconsistent with her disregard of personal hygiene when she munches on a chocolate doughnut right beside the garbage bin, it actually shows that Iris has learned to allow her desire to come into play. Unlike the repressed, youthful Iris, who develops an eating disorder and obsession with cleanliness in order to reclaim her bodily autonomy in the face of Richard's violations, the octogenarian Iris can enjoy eating because she realizes that she has to be a "tough eater" in order to survive in this cannibalistic society. Thus, while the bodily boundary is still important for the integrity of self, eating takes precedence over cleanliness. An active consumer now, Iris is the one to eat and to transgress boundaries, not the one to be eaten or transgressed. As for her daily shower, it becomes a symptom of Richard's traumatic invasions, a less radical manifesto of her bodily boundary in place of the destructive eating disorder.

[22] Analyzing the trunk imagery in *The Blind Assassin*, Wilson contends that the trunk, "suggesting the subconscious," hides Laura's notebooks, "the doors to the forbidden knowledge of the Bluebeard fairy tale" ("Popular Culture" 271). Although I agree with Wilson on the psychological level of this trunk imagery, I also treat it as a coffin that locks women away in this phallogocentric society. Then, while the trunk keeps women in the dark, the Avilion imagery is much more complicated, inasmuch as it alludes both to the mythic isle where King Arthur is said to pass after he receives a mortal wound and to Adelia's mansion, which "signifies how hopelessly in exile [Adelia] considered herself to be" (61). Yet, even though Avilion is depicted as a burial ground in the Arthurian legend, it is also a place for Arthur to revive. As "The Passing of Arthur" implies both

shape a female community, rectify the symbolic order and resurrect the dead, allow me to briefly touch on Cixous's idea(l) of *écriture féminine* and Gilman's earlier materialization of such *écriture* in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in order to establish a theoretical ground for my reading of these female writings.

In her political manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous, though resisting a theorization of *écriture féminine*, sketches its two senses.[23] First, *écriture féminine* is a way to redeem the female body from phallogocentric ideology insofar as "[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (250). Second, *écriture féminine* is an urge to voice differences, "[a]n act that will [...] be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on *her suppression*" (250; original italics). In other words, whereas people traditionally believe that writing is an exclusive privilege by men, to men, and about men, Cixous proclaims that *écriture féminine* is bisexual. Highlighting the coexistence of a pregnant woman and her unborn baby, she claims that *écriture féminine* is needed to achieve harmony between self and m/other and acknowledgement of differences (254, 262).

Promising as it sounds, *écriture féminine* yet challenges a way of thinking whose history is as long as that of human languages. In tackling phallogocentrism, Cixous protests that *écriture féminine* will enact "a return of the repressed": "When the 'repressed' of [femininity] returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (256; original italics). Indeed, like the apparitions in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," *écriture féminine* may

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death (passing away) and resurrection (passing on, passing through), Adelia's exile in Avilion can also be seen as a chance to found a female utopia. In this sense, Avilion is more like a womb to nourish civilization than a tomb to bury one. For a closer exposition of Laura's notebooks, see Wilson, "Popular Culture" 271-72.

[23] According to Cixous, "[i]t is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (253; original italics).

metamorphose from sheer "optic horror" (1137) to utter psychic disorientation when the overbearing patriarchy fails to contain it.

As Gilman's narrator witnesses the "real" specters emerging from behind the screen-like wallpaper, the truth behind the wall of patriarchy is unbearably dizzy, spooky, and harsh to the eye/I:

> The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!
>
> Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.
>
> Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.
>
> And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.
>
> They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! (1141-42; original italics)

Significantly, the woman with multiple heads, the narrator's ravings, and the phantom's returned gaze all account for an uncanny sight/site here. For one thing, the woman with multiple heads takes after Medusa with a legion of animate snakes twitching on her head, thus provoking among male spectators the castration anxiety about the phallic snakes. For another, the narrator's hallucinations petrify her readers when she expresses her identification with these barred specters. Claiming once to be one of them, she distorts the line between fact and fiction. Last but not least, the returned gaze of the apparitions materializes the Lacanian *objet petit a*, which "stands for what in the perceived positive, empirical object necessarily eludes my gaze and as such serves as the driving force of my desiring it" (Žižek, "I Hear

You" 105). In other words, while the returned gaze is originally a "surplus" that exceeds the optics of the symbolic order, it now exposes us to the "scotoma" we are not supposed to see, the "real" truth that stings our eye/I.

If we read Gilman's wall/paper as a locus for Cixous's *écriture féminine* apropos of the uncanny effect they both arouse, what the narrator sees on the wall and what she writes on the pages of her journal/story can be thus seen as *écriture féminine*. From this perspective, the emergence of the apparitions, like that of *écriture féminine*, designates the inerasable existence of the other, an irreducible residue indicative of the symbolic scotoma. When we are able to recognize the formerly invisible other (Gilman's/her narrator's non-linear writing, the "real" phantoms, and *écriture féminine*), we may understand why phallogocentrism cannot thoroughly contain women, why it cannot fully capture women's writing. Powerful as the symbolic snare may be, there are always leftovers escaping the meshes; there are always some female writings, in private or in public, surpassing the ensemble of the symbolic order.

In view of the irreducibility of *écriture féminine* vis-à-vis phallogocentricism, we may then interpret the female characters in a new light. Apparently Iris's grandmother Adelia is an "angel in the house" who obeys the austere Victorian decorum, nourishes her husband with fine art, and takes good care of every trifle in the household. However, when we ply into her culinary idiosyncrasies—her sly eating in the bedroom, her odd scrapbooks, and her quaint cookbook—she actually possesses a witchlike personality underneath the angelic façade. Interestingly, even though Iris never literally meets her grandmother, she believes that Adelia, while avoiding being seen to devour food in public, must have a tray sent up to her room, where she eats it with ten fingers (60). In contrast to the honorable image of a serene hostess, Adelia is now described as a grabbing barbarian in Iris's imagination. In effect, Iris's romanticization of her grandmother is not groundless because Adelia's bizarre scrapbooks and her incantatory cookbook do betray her queer inner self to the readers. On the one hand,

the scrapbooks are a contradictory combination of earthly glories and occult mysteries. Among those motley clippings, there are pictures of “natives practis[ing] witchcraft or hid[ing] their women behind elaborate wooden masks or decorat[ing] the skulls of their ancestors with red paint and cowrie shells” (158), all of which violate the customs of the rational, sensible and monotheistic Port Ticonderoga. On the other, Adelia’s cookbook looks more like an encyclopedia of potions than a collection of recipes. Instead of describing “[t]aste and pleasure” (181), it expatiates on the functions of beverages. An *outré* amalgam of science and witchcraft, medication and domesticity, this cookbook even begins with an esoteric epigraph by John Ruskin: “Cookery means the knowledge of Media and of Circe and of Helen and of the Queen of Sheba. [... I]t means that you are to be perfectly and always ladies—loaf givers” (181).[24] While readers of this epigraph may stare bewilderingly at the odd connection between those mythological *femmes fatales* and the commonplace chores of cooking, the “loaf-giver” with whom Adelia identifies is actually “possessed of arcane and potentially lethal recipes, and capable of inspiring the most incendiary passions in men” (182-83). Noticeably then, this “loaf-giver” image is thus simultaneously reassuring and disturbing—reassuring because one is supplied with provisions by a caring and virtuous “angel in the house,” disturbing because the food may turn out to be fatal poisons brought by a *femme fatale*. In this sense Adelia, with her “cat-ate-the-canary smile,” is actually “the Queen of Sheba” (182). A generous lady in appearance, she is a domineering tsarina at heart.

If Adelia’s scrapbooks and cookbook implicitly denote her incommensurability with the

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[24] While I focus on the grotesque combinations of Adelia’s cookbook, Anne LeCory, in her study of the history of cookbooks, indicates that humanity is “attenuated” in modern cookbooks. As LeCory argues:

> When cookery turned from art to “science” of nutrition, exact measurement, home ec [*sic*] principles and second-rate imitators of Fannie Farmer, the broader study of the relation between food and humanity disappeared from view. Efficiency, speed, cost, precooked foods, replaced (for many) loving preparation of food, concern for taste, understanding that a plain, simple menu was appropriate for guests as well as family. (23)

Although LeCory’s observation is correct about the scientific side of Adelia’s cookbook, this collection of recipes distinguishes itself from other modern cookbooks by its quaint epigraph. Namely, while the contents of Adelia’s cookbook are rational, scientific, and careless about tastes, its epigraph is romantic, mythological, and thus contradictory to the contents. Concerning the correlation between literature and cooking, see LeCory.

patriarchal system, her naming of everything in and out of the mansion Avilion must explicitly arrogate a right usually exclusive to men.[25] When Adelia becomes a name-giver, taking charge of such properties as the yacht Water Nixie, the stone sphinxes by the pond, the faun in the conservatory, the white Victorian angels in the family cemetery, and the marble sculpture of Medusa in the library, Avilion *literally* becomes a caldron of Greco-Roman, Arthurian and Christian mythology. In contrast to the powerless society bride in reality, Adelia now becomes a sovereign who commands deities in her imagination. Paralleling the angels in the cemetery with the Medusa in the library, we find that the eyes of the former "are blurred now, softened and porous, as if they have cataracts" (45), whereas those of the latter still dart "a lovely impervious gaze, the snakes writhing up out of her head like anguished thoughts" (58). If the angel represents Adelia's social image—tender, self-effacing, and prone to blindness—the Medusa must reveal her visceral side: stern, petrifying, and blazing with power. Remarkably, while the angelic appearance provides Adelia with a mask behind which she can masquerade in the symbolic order, the mythic image of Medusa, together with the Queen of Sheba, indicates her essence as a name-giver and loaf-giver, *a giver that does not lack*, a giver who is so fecund that she would like to dole out her "gracious largesse" (182).[26]

Decoding Adelia's cookbook, we know that this woman can be the matriarchal *queen regnant* who invents gastronomic courses to counter the patriarchal discourse. When she passes her cookbook down to her heiress Reenie, the latter even turns the kitchen from a domestic space of hosts and guests to an ideological arena of big eaters and non-eaters. At the

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[25] According to Mary Daly, "women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue—a fact inadvertently admitted in the Genesis story of Adam's naming the animals and the woman. Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial" (8; original italics). Concerning a discussion of women's oppression in theology and a critique of logocentrism, see Daly.

[26] Here my interpretation of the "giver" image alludes to Cixous's concept of giving in "The Laugh of the Medusa." According to Cixous, "woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with, without annihilating herself: because she's a giver" (259). In other words, retorting the Lacanian "conceptual orthopedics" (253), which constructs women as lack, Cixous protests that women are not castrated; nor do they have penis envy. They are givers that have, not holes that lack.

Avilion party, as Reenie presents dishes learned from Adelia's cookbook, everyone at the table chews "with such thoughtfulness and vigour [that m]astication [is] the right name for it—not eating" (186). Although, or rather because, Reenie is not a good cook, she "[keeps] tabs on who ha[s] eaten what" (187). Unnoticeable as this act may be, a significant split has taken place at this moment: unlike those conventional housewives, whose greatest wish is to please their guests' palate, Reenie's surveillance of the eaters transforms cooking from the culinary art of spicing and tasting to the martial art of spying and testing. When people have to "masticate" so as to swallow Reenie's dishes, they are literally put to the trial of consumption. Instead of enjoying the taste of food, they now have to conquer its rough texture before they can actually consume it. Meanwhile, Reenie is snooping, recording, comparing, and calculating her guests' masticatory progress like a sort of tyrannical nurse or prison warden. Intriguingly, Reenie's unsavory courses thus present a hilarious counter-image to the Griffens' ferocious societal cannibalism. While Richard and Winifred later devour Norval's button factory, they now have problems eating Reenie's tough chicken. As Reenie is good at fabrication—she accuses Mr. Erskine of hiding pornography under his bed (165), invents a slur against Richard regarding his family history (175), and makes up a story about Alex's orphanage (187)—her appropriation of Adelia's cookbook allows her to create new dishes of her own.

Now that Reenie's surveillance has shifted our attention from the actual contents of the cookbook to the ingenuity of appropriation, we may leave the kitchen and enter the women's washroom in the doughnut shop. Reminiscent of Iris's doughnut-eating by the trash can and her obsession with cleanliness, this washroom, with its myriad of inscriptions on the wall, is a playground where eating, cleaning and writing congregate. In fact, due to those female writings, this washroom is elevated from an abject site for excrement to the headquarters of a female community. Before elaborating the female writings on the wall, we should take note

of the spatial differences between this place and the household kitchen. Since the washroom is a private space within a public area, it is in a sense an exceptional club, whose membership is limited to "the second sex" taken abstractly, that is, to women unknown to each other. As a place exclusive to one female at a time but open to all at any time, this "room of her/their own" becomes another space for women in addition to the kitchen. Yet, whereas the kitchen is open to a limited number of women, the women's washroom is open to half the population of the area. An extension of the kitchen regarding female space, and a "sortie" or "way out of" (Cixous, *Newly Born Woman* 63) the kitchen as a patriarchal cage, this washroom serves as a juncture in the network of female communication. Moreover, because Port Ticonderoga is a tourist city near the Canada-U.S. border, this washroom may even take on a certain transnational or global dimension.

In addition to spatiality, the washroom and the kitchen are further distinguished by their receptive modes of communication. While the female gossip in the kitchen may easily fade away without a trace, the inscriptions on the washroom wall confer on women a more durable medium of communication: written words. As in most cases writings outlive voices, and the ideological coverage of these washroom cubicles is in effect global, the texts and commentaries on the wall are akin to the hypertexts on the internet. Intriguingly, as most units in this novel's "Table of Contents" are named after curious odds and ends that suggest specific episodes, the hypertextual connection between the graffiti in the women's washroom and the themes of this novel likewise depends on the mechanism of association.[27] While

[27] Readers may notice that the plots of *The Blind Assassin* develop in a non-linear fashion. As the novel itself is nested with stories of three genres, and these fragmentary storylines are further chopped into finer shreds by the intervening newspaper clippings, readers may easily get lost in Atwood's labyrinth of words, trapped within the belly of her "baggy monster" when they are forced to ply different roads of storytelling. In view of this unconventional deployment of plots, Atwood provides her readers with a table of contents—not to help them march smoothly along a single reading route, but to help them jump abruptly among various reading "passages." In other words, the items in the table of contents are more like internet hypertexts flinging their readers into different units of stories than like overpass signs directing them along a single plot line. Even though these units more or less connect to one another in the long run, most of them may as well be read as individual stories. Thus, while it is the readers' duty to remap the shuffled patches of stories into a family saga with a chronological order when they read this novel from cover to cover for the first time, Atwood's table of contents, though of little help

there are quarrels between advocates of societal/patriarchal cannibalism and its cynical opponents beneath the surface of wordplays, a total deciphering of these female scribblings would take a lengthy textual study**.** Insofar as my focus here is on eating and writing, I shall highlight the first set of inscriptions, a non-academic symposium on eating and killing.[28] Noticeably, the female writings here, though (im)printed on an abject space, are not as surreptitious as those in Adelia's scrapbooks and cookbook. In fact, they are inscribed to be seen; they have other women as their targeted readers. Therefore, be they interdictions, aphorisms, caveats, gospels or tirades, these inscriptions display the diversity of female thinking (though most of them are still invested with phallogocentrism), and the conversations among them thus foretell the possibility of *écriture féminine*, a language of multiplicity and heterogeneity.

The first set of inscriptions is a fierce debate on eating and killing. Significantly, even though these are genuinely female writings—not necessarily *écriture féminine*—most of them still take the form of imperative, a device reminiscent of the Name of the Father, the symbolic order that bombards subjects with taboos and prohibitions. Thus, it is arguable that even though women are now encouraged to speak in this small compartment, most of them are so brainwashed by the phallogocentric logic that they "dub" its voice, reinforcing its ideology upon other women. However, the last sentence, ventriloquizing in the name of Laura, challenges this monolithic logic by blaspheming its ultimate monarchs: Gods. Let us read these sentences before I elaborate in terms of consumption and cannibalism:

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to readers on their first reading, leads them directly to their desired units on their later readings. Constructed by the mechanism of association rather than by the order of chronology, the table of contents in *The Blind Assassin* thus bears a resemblance to hypertexts, texts that allow their readers to move among related items in a non-sequential way.

[28] Although I center on the first set of female inscriptions, others are equally meaningful. For example, the inscriptions in the second set, while apparently a debate on the functions of mouths, actually concern women's right to speech and their autonomy during sexual intercourse. In the third set, the scribblings play on the word "experience" in two senses—theological and sexual—thus disrupting the sacredness of religion. In the fourth set, these female writings further argue over the existence of Jesus and Heaven, exposing their artificial constructs. For these inscriptions, see *The Blind Assassin* 202, 419, and 482.

> The first sentence is in pencil, in rounded lettering like those on Roman tombs, engraved deeply in the paint: *Don't Eat Anything You Aren't Prepared to Kill*.
>
> Then, in green marker: *Don't Kill Anything You Aren't Prepared to Eat*.
>
> Under that, in ballpoint, *Don't Kill*.
>
> Under that, in purple marker: *Don't Eat*.
>
> And under that, the last word to date, in bold black lettering: *Fuck Vegetarians—"All Gods Are Carnivorous"—Laura Chase*.
>
> Thus Laura lives on. (84)[29]

At first glance, the five inscriptions seem to be playful badinage and parody on the practice of vegetarianism and Buddhism. However, when we replace "Anything" with "People," the facetious banter immediately becomes a serious discourse on the legitimacy of cannibalism. Namely, the first imperative actually endorses willful homicide because one may kill others not only for the satiety of hunger but for the pleasure of killing itself. On the other hand, the second imperative could be simply describing a special praxis of human husbandry: one cannot kill others unless it is for eating. Then, invested with the codes of societal/patriarchal cannibalism, the first sentence can be further interpreted as a perverse form of consumption. Since one kills *before* eating, not *for* eating, what one consumes is actually human life, not human flesh. By contrast, inasmuch as the second sentence allows people to live as long as the killer is hungry, its seemingly brutal sanction for cannibalism it is in effect based on the survival of the killer.

[29] Before a comprehensive analysis of this passage, there is some background knowledge to be noticed. First, the signature "Laura Chase" cannot be signed by Laura herself because she has died of a suicidal "car accident" in 1945. Since Iris publishes the romance *The Blind Assassin* in the name of Laura, the signature is likely to be signed by one of Laura's fans. Besides, when the last inscription quotes "All Gods are Carnivorous," it alludes to the science fiction story within the romance. Here Gods are described as "carnivorous" not because they really eat people, but because they demand sacrifices of virgins on the altar.

If the first two sentences create a tension between killing *before* eating and killing *for* eating, the next two sentences go on to prohibit women from killing or/and eating altogether. In fact, if one does not kill or/and eat, how can one survive? Even though vegetarians claim that they do not live on meat, vegetables are also living things. In this sense, the imperative "*Don't Eat*" can be read as a parody of the ostensibly benevolent but actually self-destructive interdiction, "*Don't Kill*." Furthermore, as the prohibition of killing resonates with God's commandment—"You shall not murder"—the next sentence thus exposes its absurdity by mimicking its absolutism. In other words, if the command "*Don't Kill*" is a taboo, a symbolic mandate, a masculine law that issues orders without any explanation, the follow-up command "*Don't Eat*" is correspondingly a travesty, a semiotic counterpart, a feminine voice that questions the presumptuous Name of the Father. While this feminine voice mocks the preceding masculine mandate, it is not to engender a dualism but to belie the authority of phallogocentrism. Since to be different does not necessarily mean to be opposite, the sentence "*Don't Eat*" is exemplary of Cixous's *écriture féminine*: it counters phallogocentric ideology *via* an ironic imitation and dethrones the symbolic order by an articulation of difference.

In the same vein, when the last sentence screeches "*Fuck Vegetarians—'All Gods Are Carnivorous*,'" it is a long-repressed howl, a shout of overdue rage at the monopoly of masculine laws and religious prohibitions. Intriguingly, in contrast to the first four imperatives, the last sentence does not follow any form of phallogocentric logic. Nor does it imitate its syntax. Thus, if this set of inscriptions can be seen as a gamut of female voices ranging from complete adherence to the symbolic order to skeptical resistance to it, the third imperative "*Don't Kill*" is most likely to be a replica of the symbolic mandate, whereas the last two scribblings obviously articulate differences. As crystallizations of *écriture féminine*, these two sentences, especially the second one, are what Cixous terms the "sexts": "a privilege of *voice*: *writing* and *voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's

continuity/voice's rhyme take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries" (*Newly Born Woman* 69, 92; original italics). As the quote "All Gods are Carnivorous" alludes to the sacrifice of virgins in Alex's science fiction, its profane citation turns out to be a reprimand on the hypocrisy of some religions, exposing their cannibalism behind the gilded doctrines of vegetarianism.

While we have witnessed the manifestations of *écriture féminine* in the last two female inscriptions, we nevertheless have left out one important icon: Laura. Noticeably, the critical power of the last sentence actually lies in the uncanny appearance of Laura's signature. I say that it is uncanny in two senses: first, it is unlikely, if not impossible, for a person to inscribe her name on the wall of the women's washroom now that she has been dead for decades. Second, if the signature belongs to someone else, who is she then? Since there is no telling who writes this blasphemous remark and signs it in Laura's name, this mysterious inscription is thus at once embodied and disembodied—embodied because someone must have identified with Laura, appointing herself as Laura's deputy on earth; disembodied because Laura may really transcend death, committing this desecration in some spiritual or immaterial form. While the first inference sounds much more plausible than the second, it is the faint possibility of Laura's return from the grave that fuels the juggernaut of the uncanny. Indeed, the return of the dead, like the "return of the repressed," is the uncanniest thing of all because it violates the law of mortality, animating what ought to be lifeless, bringing to light what "ought to have remained secret and hidden" (Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" 226, 225).

Knowing that Laura's signature is powered by the uncanny, we must then ask: what message does Laura bring from the bleak underworld to this abject women's washroom? Why cannot she simply rest in peace but crosses the border between life and death? According to Žižek, if the dead "*were not properly buried*, i.e., [if] something went wrong

with their obsequies," they may rise from the graves "as collectors of some unpaid debt"; in other words, "[t]he return of the living dead, then, materializes a certain symbolic debt persisting beyond physical expiration" (*Looking Awry* 23; original italics). Ironically, here the "symbolic debt" Laura demands is actually what the symbolic order owes to women. By blaspheming Gods as carnivores, Laura not only reveals Gods' violation of their own commandment against killing but debunks the falsehood of religion as well. Physically decayed but spiritually activated, Laura now becomes the disembodied "Name of the *Mother*." She rises from the tomb; she transcends death because she cannot die. Pointing an accusing finger at the gluttonous theological system, Laura is elevated to a sort of deification parallel to the "carnivorous Gods." Moreover, when she comes back from Hades, she brings with her those nameless, unlamented sacrificial virgins in the science fiction story. Like the relentless Nemesis, they now demand their overdue "symbolic debt" from the cannibalistic society. Dramatically, their embodiment in Laura's signature decries the societal/patriarchal cannibalism to which other women still fall prey.

As Laura's signature brings her and those sacrificial virgins to life, we may conclude our exploration of female writings with an analysis of Iris's memoir, which is actually a confessional autobiography that, in Frank Chin's words, "celebrate[s] the process of conversion from an object of contempt to an object of acceptance" (qtd. in Cheung 238). While there are, as Chin says, "oozings of viscous putrescence and luminous radiant guilt" (qtd. in Cheung 238) in such autobiographical writings, all of Iris's trauma in the face of Richard's sexual violence and her stigma as a mother who deserts her daughter are sublimated and purged in the memoir. Unlike the romance she earlier publishes in Laura's name, this memoir brings to light all the filthiest stories in Iris's family—her affair with Alex, her daughter's illegitimacy, and her husband's incest with Laura, all of which are too intimate

for a self-protective subject to reveal.[30] Yet, as Iris exposes her disgrace, she also allows it to bathe in the sun, to fester, to itch, in order to be cured. Disclosing her innermost self to her granddaughter, she also relieves herself of the burden of lies, salvaging truth from heaps of fiction and declaring her subjectivity out of the abyss of abjection.

Furthermore, since Iris refers to Laura as her "collaborator" (513) in writing the romance *The Blind Assassin*, we may read Iris and Laura as the mirror images of each other—while the latter encodes her messages, the former interprets them. From this perspective, Laura's death in a sense nourishes Iris, bestowing upon her the power to manipulate words, the power to construct truth (not necessarily facts). Invisible as she is, Laura is never absent in Iris's memoir. As Iris says, "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" (512), she is writing not only with her hand but also with Laura's. Like the doughnut she often mentions, "[Laura]'s the round O, the zero at the bone. A space that defines itself by not being there at all" (409). Paradoxically, this nothingness is where female subjectivity comes from. As Stefan Jonsson aptly claims, "[s]ubjectivity *is* [...] a process best understood in terms of *negativity*. It cannot be grasped in pure form except as lack, a lack that generates a need, which, in turn, drives the human agent toward the identifications offered to it by the social milieu, and then away from them" (8-9; original italics). While Iris and Laura are constructed as lacked subjects at the beginning, they declare their selves through refusal of food. Then, as Laura keeps identifying herself with others, reaching only the halfway mark in the emergence of her

[30] As Stein indicates, in attributing the authorship and the female protagonist of the romance *The Blind Assassin* to Laura, Iris "simultaneously hides and reveals her own story. By publishing the [romance] she is able to proclaim [her] affair [with Alex] publicly, while shielding herself from blame" ("Left-Handed Story" 149). However, though this self-effacing romance saves Iris from public tirades when she makes people believe that the female secret lover is Laura, I find Iris's self-revealing memoir a better way to deal with her affair with Alex. Revealing the secret lover's real identity in the memoir, this confession not only attests to Laura's innocence but also unmoors Sabrina from the burden of her ancestors' sins. Unlocking the trunk containing Iris's memoir, Sabrina will know that her real grandfather is Alex, not Richard. Since Alex is an orphan, she can thus relieve herself of her scandalous family history and create an identity of her own. Concerning Iris's self-protective tactics in writing the romance, see Stein, "Left-Handed Story."

subjectivity, Iris is the one who goes through the whole process of metamorphosis and eventually distinguishes herself from the messy crowd. Significantly, here to declare one's subjectivity does not mean to estrange self from other. Since the self/other dialectic is not always a rivalry or an opposition, there must be the possibility of coexistence. In this case, when Iris proclaims that her writing is a sort of collaboration with Laura, she not only entitles herself to be the mouthpiece of her dead sister but also begins her negotiation with Laura as the other. Through writing, Iris starts to reimagine, reconstruct, and re(dis)cover her relation with the other.

In fact, Iris's memoir is not just a book of/about herself or a duet of/about her and Laura; it is also a chorus of the entire female community. With the inscriptions on the wall of the women's washroom now put down on paper, this memoir has literarily become a choir, one wherein women voicing their sound and fury in this cannibalistic society, airing their innocent sacrifices on the altar of patriarchal history, and above all articulating their differences out of the homogeneous phallogocentrism. Not surprisingly, their tones are not as passionate as the universal "I" in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," nor are their female speakers as all-embracing as the male romanticist. Knowing that there are always conflicts between self and other, they do not plunge headlong into communion with others, food and people included. Instead, as their subjectivity is gradually secured through the manipulation of their appetite, through the obsession with cleanliness, and above all through writing, they start to consider the possibility of coexistence, outgrowing the construct of women as "lack."

If Iris's memoir is a chorus that utters women's difference, it also inscribes femininity into the formerly male-centered symbolic order. As Cixous exclaims at the very beginning of "The Laugh of the Medusa": when "[w]oman [does] put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (243), female subjectivity will emerge out of the very abject realm of domesticity and crystallize through women's own writings. Indeed,

the urge to write, as Iris says, is often provoked by a lack of witnesses: "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" (95). If Iris's writing is a kind of *écriture féminine*, her articulation in the romance *The Blind Assassin* does pull down one of the pillars that uphold the symbolic order: Richard the womanizer, the capitalist, the misogynist. However, the goal of *écriture féminine* is not to castrate men but to coexist with them. Although we do not really see any stable communion between man and woman in this novel, Iris's collaboration with Laura and her "sacrifice" for Sabrina confirm the possibility of coexistence between self and other.

Thus, rereading the sacrifice theme in *The Blind Assassin*, we notice that even though "[t]here is a history of female sacrifice in the Chase family" (Stein, "Left-Handed Story" 146), Iris is the first one who would sacrifice herself for another woman (Sabrina) rather than for/to men like Benjamin, Norval, Richard, or Alex.[31] In fact, none of these men deserves sacrifices because they extort it in the name of phallogocentrism. Under the pretext of familial responsibility, filial piety or personal heroism, they sully the original meaning of sacrifice—giving without getting repaid—and wrench it into a test for women's allegiance to patriarchy. On the other hand, when Iris tells Sabrina her parentage at the cost of her own honor, she sacrifices with no profit in mind. As Cixous's "feminine economy" indicates, "she doesn't try to 'recover her expenses.' She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other" (*Newly Born Woman* 87). Resting herself in Sabrina's hands, Iris has dissolved the conflict between self and other. While freeing her granddaughter from the fetters of self-identity and allowing her to create a subjectivity of her own, Iris herself also crosses the threshold between phallogocentrism and *écriture féminine*,

[31] In *The Blind Assassin*, nearly all women in Iris's family have to sacrifice to/for men: Adelia marries Benjamin because her father's factory encounters a financial crisis; Iris marries Richard because Norval's button factory is on the verge of bankruptcy; and Laura succumbs to Richard because he threatens to report Alex for the alleged arson of the button factory. As Adelia's and Iris's marriages manifest "the traffic in women," a tradition that exchanges women like commodities among men, Laura's sacrifice to Richard even unfolds the problem of women's bodily autonomy.

rendering herself a "giver" that loves the other in spite of differences.[32]

Exhilaratingly, the kitchen and the women's washroom in *The Blind Assassin* are not merely the sordid sites for women's dirty chores but also the sorceress's cauldron that turns waste into repast and excretion into nutrition. While such female maladies as eating disorders and the obsession with cleanliness express women's urge for their bodily autonomy, they inadvertently reinforce the self/other opposition: by refusing food, I declare a line between myself and the environment; by cleaning myself, I reclaim the bodily boundary invaded by the other. In view of this, writing reconstructs the self/other dialectic from conflict to coexistence. As Adelia's cookbook and Reenie's inheritance of it have proved that women can invent "culinary courses" against the patriarchal discourse, the scribblings on the wall of the women's washroom even foresee the possibility of *écriture féminine* to substitute a language of heterogeneity for the monolithic phallogocentrism. Above all, when Adelia declares herself a "loaf-giver," a "name-giver" and Iris claim herself a collaborator with Laura, a giver of Sabrina's new identity, women are no longer constructed as "holes" in search of subjectivity, but as "wholes" that give despite the self/other conflicts.

[32] Here the "giver" alludes to Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." When Iris sacrifices herself for Sabrina, she does not forego her subjectivity, empting her self to identify with the other. Instead, she is a giver, a substantial subject that gives herself to the other "without annihilating herself" (259).