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

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

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

Thomas Mallon in *The New York Times* ag Ŏ

evocations of childhood, and while the age of the narrator is often mentioned fleetingly in reviews, and Iris's merits as an entertaining and amusing narrator extolled[6], many still seem to neglect to mention the novel's wonderful depictions of old age with the perfect combination of humour and sadness, of what it is like to be an eighty-two-year-old widow engulfed in memory and regret, instead focusing on the story-within-a-story structure, its social synopsis of women's lives in the 1900s[7], on sibling rivalry and political chicanery[8]. In the academy also, relatively little attention has been paid to the text in terms of its depictions of ageing, although a few critics who read the text from a feminist point of view, such as Madeleine Davies in her article 'Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies', devote a few paragraphs to the novel's depictions of the ageing female body, yet in the case of Davies, this entails a reading of *The Blind Assassin* and its female bodies according to Cixous's 'écriture féminine' with focus on power struggles and writing metaphors employed by Atwood[9], and others such as J. Brooks Bouson mostly focus on the depiction of the female body in relation to domestic abuse and wider power struggles within a patriarchal society. This paper will attempt to address this oversight by looking at representations of old age within the text, as well as at the function of memory and the processes of remembering in old age in relation to the act of writing a memoir, and the implications in terms of reliability, the subject of which forms the basis of Ruth Parkin-Gounelas' 2004 article – duplicity[10]. Atwood draws attention to these concerns through the reflexivity of her text, not as a novel in the guise of an autobiography, but as a novel which documents and reveals the processes involved in the construction of and the need for such a text, whether it be memorial, confession, or testimonial. It is Iris's age and the fact that she may soon die that motivates her to write, so in this sense the ageing protagonist and the autobiographical narrative are, in this novel, intertwined. Iris states near the very end of the novel that "by the time you read this last page that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be."[11] She equates the end of the memoir with the end of her life, and is

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

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

Our first encounter with the narrator, Iris, is when she declares "Ten years after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge".[22] We learn she is a sister, a role that is integral to the plot. This first line also establishes the historical context of the novel, as in one sentence it reveals both personal family history and international history; in fact, as Howells observes "her autobiography is enmeshed in the wider currents of the Nation's history, though the main focus is always on Iris's relationship with her sister."[23] The novel spans most of a century, and references are continually made to personal history, the history of the nation and world history through its chronicling of events, from those as large-scale as the world wars, to things as small as picnics and fashion trends. Iris muses on the growing relevance of history in later life, where she herself has become part of it, recalling "I am after all a

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

Atwood chooses to explicitly depict the creative process involved in writing an autobiography or memoir in the narrative present of her novel in which the past is recalled and reconstructed, rather than simply presenting the memories as a first person past tense narrative or a first person present tense narrative in which the 'memories' are lived. It is this split between the self that writes and the self that is written about that is most enlightening – the distinction between past and present selves. We are first made aware that Iris is writing fifty-three pages in: "Laid out in front of me are a cup of tea, and apple cut into quarters and a pad of paper with blue lines on it…I've bought a new pen as well."[28] This is the first of many references to the writing process – she often describes how it feels to push the pen along the page, how the ink looks on the page –

the body, self and society."[34] Atwood explores these interactions though Iris' present tense narration of her everyday life.

The first indication of the age of the narrator that the reader encounters is on page 43, and this fits Hepworth's 'body' category: "I stepped into the shower, holding on to the grip bar Myra's bullied me in to, careful not to drop the soap: I am apprehensive of slipping"; and "Getting my clothes on helped. I am not at my best without scaffolding (yet what has become of my real clothes? Surely these shapeless pastels and orthopaedic shoes belong to someone else?"[35] The grip bar, the pastel

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

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

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

> Why is it we want so badly to memorialise ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire-hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It's all the same impulse. What do we hope from it? Applause, envy, respect? Or simply attention, of any kind we can get?
>
> At the very least we want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down.[59]

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

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

Secrets, Lies, Omitting and Forgetting

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

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

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

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

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

> The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at a later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the inm[e)-3( )-41 and nc(a)3(t)8(/74<5(d)6(2(n)-(to)5

I didn't think of what I was doing as writing – just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth.

[48] Ibid, 607.