Adventures of the Spirit

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PART II

Margaret Atwood

Doubling Back Through the Labyrinth
Margaret Atwood’s Booker Prize novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) represents the spiritual adventure of its narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, as she struggles to complete her memoirs and the story of her family “before it’s too late.” Iris has a heart, as an earlier generation would have phrased it, along with an octogenarian’s body, sliding relentlessly toward disintegration. Her old body would probably be less interesting in this narrative, were it not for the fact that this body is the increasingly unreliable vehicle for getting the story itself told, because Iris is almost the last person left who knows enough about what happened to tell it. If Doris Lessing had not already entitled one of her novels *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Atwood might well have adopted that title, since much of the pathos of this tragicomedy is the product of Iris’s having survived all of her family, except for her estranged granddaughter with whom she has had no contact in years. Thus *The Blind Assassin* is flirting with a catastrophe in narration—the possibility that Iris’s aged body could very well give out before she finishes telling the story. By the double accounting of narrative, such a catastrophe is unlikely to happen since readers have been led to believe in the First Law of First-Person Narration: the narrator will be alive at the end of the story. Even so, Iris’s advanced age and heart condition create tension in this narrative, especially as the end nears, and some readers might worry that the narrative could simply stop, without an ending.

The narrative exposes a complex of tensions and anxieties in Iris as the responsibilities of telling this story force her to go back over elements of her family history and her own biography that are tremen-
dously painful and increasingly laden with guilt. Atwood clearly sets her viewpoint character off on a variety of spiritual journeys in which Iris will confront daunting challenges and pitfalls, with no guarantee that she will achieve the state of grace readers might be expecting at the end of such a journey of the human spirit. Because (like most of us) Iris wants to believe in her own innocence as a child, she will have to face the specter of at least contemplating vengeance on those who exploited her vulnerability as a little girl and as a young woman. These “memoirs” grant her the power to turn her enemies into villains whose evil she now can paint in its darkest hues. Similarly, she confronts the disabling trap of victimhood, of absolving herself of any agency in the past, painting herself as “innocent” because she was powerless to defend herself against those, such as her husband and sister-in-law, who seem to have enjoyed having the power to cause her pain. And there is the very large issue of her own sense of failure and guilt in treating others, even more vulnerable than she, with a cruelty mirroring the abuse she suffered at the hands of others. Another novel whose title Atwood might have borrowed is Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, because one major reason why Iris has undertaken the writing of these “memoirs” is an impulse toward a variety of deathbed atoning, an attempt to set things right by confessing her sins. If the reader who has become invested in the dynamic of Iris’s inner life is impelled by a desire to finish her story, that desire may be grounded in some concern that Iris might give up the project, not only because the truth is so difficult to grasp but also because this confession offers a self-portrait of a not entirely “nice” individual who has some rather unpleasant things to reveal about herself. Accordingly, these memoirs represent a spiritual journey of immense proportions, the ascent of a steep mountain path strewn with impulses toward revenge, delusions of victimhood, a cluster of guilt feelings—any group of which might be sufficient to encourage this aged pilgrim to sit down by the wayside in despair. Thus the very fact that Iris finishes this spiritual journey represented by her narrative is a testimony to Atwood’s faith in the possibility of such triumphs of the spirit, especially in the old who have every right to refuse the call to make such arduous journeys in their latter days.

In the context of fictional form, Iris’s premature death would be a catastrophe of immense consequences for the story because Atwood has framed the narrative as a variety of whodunit. As Peter Brooks has theorized, the desire to know how a story ends generates the “narratable,” or what can be told as a story. That desire to know how the
narrative will end, according to Brooks, is the stimulus, rousing readers from their state of quiescence as they begin reading. Pushing Brooks’s thesis to the limit, desire in *The Blind Assassin* is generated out of its mysterious opening sentence: “Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge.” As narrator and writer of her family’s history, Iris also functions as a variety of detective, leading her readers toward a “truth” at the climax of the novel’s plot. Given the notion of the *déjà lu* proposed by Roland Barthes, this text is generated out of a prodigious history of the “already read,” or all the texts of detection, stretching back to the beginning with Oedipus, commonly credited with being the first detective in Western literature. And narrative’s implication in desire is immediately apparent with the mention of Oedipus and his associations with Freudian psychoanalysis, but also with one particular variety of the whodunit, established in the Oedipus story, the narrative of the detective who discovers that the criminal he is pursuing is ultimately himself. Accordingly, readers are drawn toward the ending of *The Blind Assassin* to confirm their suspicions that it was Iris, *not* her dead sister Laura, who wrote the novel-within-a-novel “The Blind Assassin” and was therefore the lover of Alex Thomas, with whom Laura was also in love. But most importantly those readers are impelled forward by a desire for the truth of Iris’s complicity in the apparent suicide of her sister, announced in the opening sentence.

Thus despite its vintage-Atwood moments of comedy, *The Blind Assassin* offers a contemporary tragedy in which the narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, is impelled to relate the story of her life in part as expiation for the “crime” she will reveal at the end. Because the narrative does indeed offer the “memoirs of a survivor,” it ought not to be surprising that those memoirs have their origins in what W. B. Yeats so aptly troped as “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.” Iris sets out on the spiritual adventure of writing her memoirs to explain in part why, like Herman Melville’s Ishmael, she “alone survived” the calamity of her family’s downfall. And yet because Iris is the one “whodunit,” these memoirs are also inevitably implicated in her desire for atonement, for that state of grace in which the sinner, if not the “criminal,” feels he or she has expiated past sins or crimes.

Perhaps more than the “whodunit” model, the genre of memoir offers a more appropriate paradigm for a journey of spiritual adventure for this older woman. Like the detective story, memoirs have become increasingly contaminated with illicit desire, for one patent
impulse of that genre is the expectation that the writer will eventually lead readers out of the “living room,” and other public areas of the writer’s history, and into the “bedroom,” with its erotic promise of exposing the private(s). As a very old writer of “memoirs,” Iris also excites expectations that she will reveal fugitive desires because having survived virtually everyone, she has nothing to lose in telling all.

If anything, the revelations of the aging are all the more appealing because of our culture’s embarrassment with the old body. Thus the spiritual journey of the aged—one thinks perhaps immediately of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”—is an even more powerful adventure because of the inevitable reminders of bodily decay. Bodily decrepitude produces not only the challenges of a physical being that has become undependable to ferry the spirit abroad, as the Greeks envisioned it being borne on the backs of dolphins, but also the frustrations with a body whose potential odiousness seems guaranteed to encourage the spirit to unmoor itself from a physical being, resulting at best in humor and at worse in a sense of unbearable loathsomeness. One recalls Yeats’s troping of his own elderly body as a “battered kettle” “tied to me / As to a dog’s tail.” In a sense Atwood pioneers the representation in Iris of the old female writer, setting out like Tennyson’s Ulysses on one last adventure of the spirit, confronting what readers have learned to expect more frequently in old male writers such as Yeats, the writer forced to confront declining energy to make the words dance their way across the page, questioning the sanity of attempting what may be no longer possible, and despite it all defying the potential catastrophe of the novelist for whom the end of her life may come before the end of her narrative.

It is not entirely a digression to note here that these concerns with writing and the writer’s death are not unique to The Blind Assassin. In her book of essays Negotiating with the Dead, Atwood devotes the final chapter, or essay, to teasing out the implications of the book’s title. To begin with, the “Dead” represent for the writer all those Dead Authors with whose ghosts she must negotiate while writing, in a context not so far afield from T. S. Eliot’s notion in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” or from the more recent notion of intertextuality, the weaving of texts in the context of the déja lu, the already read. Atwood generalizes that “all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (156). The “all” at
the beginning of the excerpt above marks Atwood’s own emphasis, suggesting that this is a very strong statement of her belief as a storyteller. Furthermore, she is concerned in this chapter with answering a central question of “why should it be writing, over and beyond any other art or medium, that should be linked so closely with anxiety about one’s own personal, final extinction?” (158). It is hardly coincidence that she was at work on the Cambridge lectures on which these essays were based while she was also working on *The Blind Assassin*. And even though she would likely be annoyed by my interjecting biographical considerations here, it is difficult not to read some of Atwood’s own growing concern with mortality in both *Negotiating with the Dead* and *The Blind Assassin.*

With the assumption that if she doesn’t laugh she will cry, Iris holds up her deteriorating, increasingly unreliable body as a comic mask, or perhaps more accurately as a mirror reflecting our culture’s sense of horror and dark humor in confronting the very old body. In the first scene of the novel’s “present,” Iris catalogs the menaces of her home, beginning with the shower, where she must not drop the soap: “I’m apprehensive of falling. Still, the body must be hosed down, to get the smell of nocturnal darkness off the skin. I suspect myself of having an odour I myself can no longer detect—a stink of stale flesh and clouded, aging pee.” The stairs have become another challenge: “I have a horror of tumbling down them—of breaking my neck, lying sprawled with undergarments on display, then melting into a festering puddle” (35). And her body, reflected in the eyes of the young, verges on the obscene: her arm is “a brittle radius covered slackly with porridge and string,” and her scalp is “the greyish pink of mice feet. If I ever get caught in a high wind my hair will all blow off like dandelion fluff, leaving only a tiny pockmarked nubbin of bald head” (37). The greatest threat, however, is her doctor’s report of what she remembers was once called having “a heart, as if healthy people didn’t have one” (42). Setting aside for the time being the metaphoric implications of this “heart,” it is the resulting dizzy spells, more than anything else, that warn her of the possibility that death could be only seconds away. Once again humor seems her last weapon to defend herself from spiritual death, or despair, while waiting for the end: “Having long ago whispered *I want to die*, I now realize that this wish will indeed be fulfilled, and sooner rather than later. No matter that I’ve changed my mind about it” (42). To counter such “morbidity,” Iris shares her strategy for dealing with the deterioration of her sphincters, having mapped her
neighborhood’s toileting facilities—“so useful if you’re caught short” (84). This, then, is the broken-down writing instrument through whom the narrative has chosen to represent itself, an aging body beginning a marathon race with “a heart” threatening to stop before her story has a chance to end, or end with any sense of closure. Alternately, Iris tropes the heart she relies on this way: “I think of my heart as my companion on an endless forced march, the two of us roped together, unwilling conspirators in some plot or tactic we’ve got no handle on” (83).

In a sense, then, Iris’s advanced age is central to her narrating and to the narrative it produces. Given her “heart,” Iris could easily short-circuit the reader’s desire for the end by revealing the “truth” of her complicity in Laura’s suicide in the first chapter and with it end the story quickly, while she still has a chance to. Like other writers, however, Iris knows that “the readiness is all,” that narrative takes on a life of its own, and, as Peter Brooks has reminded us, plot must end only after a sufficient time has elapsed and “the middle” has prepared readers for “the end.” And the “truth” is a good deal more complicated: unlike the whodunit depending entirely on the simplistic notion that the “truth” has a criminal’s name written on it, this narrative cannot begin to reveal a truth, recalled and imagined by Iris, without persuading its readers to believe that only a history of the Chase family, beginning at least with Iris and Laura’s grandparents, can help in explaining why Laura drove a car off a bridge. In addition, that sense of a long history, reaching back to encompass the lives of her parents and grandparents, undoubtedly exacerbates Iris’s sense of old age and bodily decrepitude, almost as though she feels that she now bears the weight of the family’s age, along with her own. Finally, since the “present” of the novel is the year 1998, Iris’s sense of age and decrepitude is also exacerbated by this fin-de-siècle atmosphere, produced by an awareness that the century ushered in with the bright hopes of her grandparents is now tottering toward its (millennial) end, as Iris struggles to complete a history of its dark and painful events.

As memoirist and family historian, Iris engages her readers through her wit, her intelligence, but mainly her effort to be honest in revealing her moral failings as well as her awareness of the limits of her art. As earlier indicated, Iris as a spiritual adventurer is hardly anyone’s sweet and lovable old granny. Increasingly, her cruelty toward those she loves—especially but not exclusively toward her sister Laura—and her sins of omission reveal her immersion in the “fury and the mire of human veins.” It is, however, Iris’s growing pessimism concerning the
potential for her writing to make truth-claims that cannot keep readers from suspecting the author’s own awareness of truth being always at least in part the product of human imagination and the poetic reconstruction of the past, and that historiography is less science than art, and accordingly like other texts it is inevitably implicated in “fiction.”

Indeed, the text tropes the body in terms of history. Iris reports: “My bones have been aching again, as they often do in humid weather. They ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain” (56). Her own personal history survives in the form of a few metonyms her survivors will dispose of in dark plastic bags, although “any life is a rubbish dump even while it’s being lived.” These metonyms are offered like a small impressionist poem: “The nutcracker shaped like an alligator, the lone mother-of-pearl cuff link, the tortoiseshell comb with missing teeth. The broken silver lighter, the saucerless cup, the cruets stand minus the vinegar. The scattered bones of home, the rags, the relics. Shards washed ashore after shipwreck” (57). For readers with an investment in writing, however, the real fascination lies in Iris’s revelations of the arduous effort to get the words down on paper. She writes: “I’m not as swift as I was. My fingers are stiff and clumsy, the pen waves and rambles, it takes me a long time to form the words. And yet I persist, hunched over as if sewing by moonlight” (43). We should also note that because she is more than eighty years old, Iris has missed the technological revolution of word processing. A primitivist writer, Iris relies on a cheap ballpoint pen—threatening, like her heart, to run out on her—and a single hard copy, with all the existential vulnerability such an artifact used to hold for writers who could not easily make copies of a day’s textual production. Like her wispy hair that, as she reports, a strong wind could blow away, the manuscript she generates while sitting in her garden could vanish in a sudden gale. At the same time, Iris’s textual production becomes a trope for the web her narrative spins, as though her being were flowing, as she describes it, down her arm and through her finger, onto the blank page before her—a concretizing of Hélène Cixous’s injunction to women that they ought to “write through their bodies and fluids” (290).

Like the delegating of the narration to Iris, this focus on textual production enhances the novel’s self-reflexivity, as readers are encouraged to visualize the text being generated right before their eyes. The notion of writing with the body is closely related to Iris’s concern with an even larger challenge to writing than the lack of the strength and dexterity required by the physical act. That concern is with yet
another source of potential despair for the writer—the virtual impos-
sibility of telling the truth. Iris begins with the assumption that she has
no audience in mind for this text, not even herself, since she may not
be fortunate enough to complete the story, much less read it if she does.
“Perhaps I write for no one,” she proposes. In her eyes, that would be
the best of all possible worlds, and it is crucial that we note this aspira-
tion at the outset because, as we suspect, it is an ideal her narrative
will ultimately fail to achieve. However, this is her statement of the
ideal:

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 some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself.
You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from
the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand
erasing it.

Impossible, of course.

I pay out my line, I pay out my line, this black thread I’m spin-
ing across the page. (283)

Few passages are so central to this narrative. This passage establishes a
kind of absurdist, self-destructing line of reasoning, reminiscent of the
Greek Stoic philosopher Zeno’s famous self-defeating logical mecha-
nisms. A text can represent the truth only if its author erases with
the left hand what she has just written with her right, thus obliterat-
ing the text to preserve its truth or “destroying the text to save it.”
For us weaker mortals who cannot conceive of an art that must be
immediately destroyed, a web to be unraveled as it is woven—like the
shroud Penelope weaves each day for her father-in-law, Laertes, only
to unravel it each night—the only alternative is to bear the text’s inevi-
table contamination by the “fury and the mire of the human heart”
impelling writers to ensnare their readers, including themselves, in the
“fiction,” the “excusing yourself” for the writer’s humanness.

In this way The Blind Assassin seems intent on problematizing the
notion of “the truth” as the immediately preceding novel, Alias Grace,
also did with its subversion of the whodunit. Readers of the earlier
novel who were familiar with the subtle, “poetic” narrative Atwood
crafted in, say, The Handmaid's Tale, also rendering the conventional
notion of the ending problematic, were unlikely to have much faith
that Grace was apt to reveal herself as a guilty accomplice to murder
near the end of the story she was narrating. As I have argued, Alias Grace subverts the whodunit’s simplistic confidence that guilt can be so easily ascertained, or that those involved in crimes, if anyone, ought to know the extent of their guilt. Like Alias Grace, The Blind Assassin offers a narrative being generated by a participant in the events represented, acknowledging that memoir, like historiography, is a reconstruction and not some precise and accurate snapshot of “the truth.” Thus, in a sort of parody of the denied expectations of readers, as she is nearing the end of The Blind Assassin, Iris will reveal that it was she “whodunit,” and yet, as she has prepared “her” readers to expect, this narrative has been (inevitably) a web in which she has been excusing herself to the (single) reader for whom it has been generated, her granddaughter Sabrina, the (sole) heiress of the Chase and Griffen families and, probably more importantly, the heiress of the next century and millennium. Once again, following this pastiche of Zeno’s logic, if this text has not been erased by its writer, it is inevitably implicated in “fiction” or “excusing yourself.”

And Iris has her work cut out for her if this family history is to be, in part at least, an apologia pro vita sua. As it becomes readily apparent, Iris is bent less on “telling the truth” than on explaining herself to the last member of the family whose good opinion she cares about—her granddaughter Sabrina. Like another aging novelist, Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan’s novel Atonement, Iris is motivated to explain, and excuse, her role in what amounts to the destruction of her own sister. It becomes important to begin her explanation by moving back to the generation of her grandparents for a variety of reasons. First, Iris wants to affirm that the Chases represent an “old family,” in contrast to the hated and hateful Griffens whom she enjoys hearing dismissed at a social gathering as “arrivistes.” Grandfather Chase may have made the family fortune in something as mundane as buttons, but he had the social good sense to marry into a family more established than his own, an expression of the hypergamy, or marrying up the social ladder, common in the nineteenth century as entrepreneurs often married the daughters of their social “betters.” Iris’s father took over the button business when he returned, battered, from the killing fields of the Great War his two brothers did not survive. A hollow man in the wasteland the war produced, Chase eventually lost the family fortune in his quixotic efforts to look after the interests of his workers in a world of depression and, more crucially, a world of change, in which buttons became not just mundane but unprofitable. Like her sister
Laura in a more dramatic manner, Iris depicts herself as a victim of her family fortunes and her society’s construction of her as a woman in a patriarchal, increasingly fascist world.

Iris explains herself thus as a poor little rich girl, bred to be a society lady and therefore denied a meaningful education, her youth being merely an apprenticeship of patiently waiting for a man to choose her to dance with him through marriage and motherhood. Although the analogy is not evident on the novel’s surface, Iris cannot have been unaware of Laura’s and her resemblance on a minor scale to the “Little Princesses,” one of whom was in training to become queen of the British Empire while the other waited as potential substitute. Because Mrs. Chase died of a miscarriage when the girls were young—perhaps this lost child was to be the son and heir who would manage the button-making, and later society’s underwear as well—it was the girls’ nanny, Reenie, who raised them. Like many traditional servants, Reenie is more socially conscious than her betters, and she schools Iris, in particular, in the necessity of always living according to the expectations of the townsfolk in Port Ticonderoga. A marvelous example of that schooling is demonstrated in the issues of how to dress for the annual picnic sponsored by the Chases, who invite literally the whole town to the celebration. The girls must not dress too well, for that would be seen as arrogant, especially during the Depression; however, they also could not dress too casually, for that would show contempt for the limited means of the townsfolk.

Because of her status Iris must not only dress for her social inferiors; she must also acknowledge that she has no real “identity” but is essentially a social construction, a text on which others may write their desire. And since hers is a patriarchal society, it goes without saying that all the “writers” are men. She is Daddy’s little girl until Chase fails in business. Because it is impossible for him to be cruel to his workers by laying them off, he struggles to be kind by saving as many jobs as possible and eventually makes it unprofitable to employ any of them. This business failure feminizes him by making him powerless and therefore vulnerable, and he is forced to throw himself on the mercy of his largest business competitor, Richard Griffen. Or to be more accurate, Chase throws his daughter Iris to these wolves, not only the macho, fascist Richard but also his sister Winifred, modeled on the Wicked Witch of the West. Mr. Chase tells Iris that he and Griffen have talked about the prospective “merger,” and although he would not force her to marry a man she chose not to, he is compelled to add
Chapter 4: The Blind Assassin as Spiritual Adventure

that if she demurs he will no longer have the means to maintain the status of either of his daughters as “ladies.” Trained to be a traditional woman who says, “Do whatever you will with me,” Iris at eighteen agrees to marry a man old enough to be her father and submits for years to his virtual rape in the marriage bed. It is crucial that the Iris who has been trained to dumb down her potential to think logically fails to put two and two together. Her father takes his own life when her husband betrays the “gentleman’s agreement” to spare the Chase workers in a merger—the agreement for which Iris’s body was the down payment—and she learns on returning from Europe that her husband tore up all of Reenie’s telegrams with the news of her father’s death so the honeymoon would not be spoiled for her. Furthermore, she bears Griffen’s sadistic sexual assaults, knowing his pleasure grows with his awareness that she feels nothing for him sexually, and yet she apparently fails to see that her husband, the crafty capitalist, has told her sister Laura in so many words: “Let’s make a deal! You submit to my raping you, and I will not reveal the whereabouts of your lover-boy, Alex Thomas.”

Iris Chase is not, of course, the first victim in Atwood’s fiction. One sister in victimage who comes to mind immediately is Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s dystopian vision of an American theocracy and patriarchy, in which “handmaids” could be coerced into becoming walking wombs for those in power who have lost their fertility through radioactive contamination. Like Iris, Offred takes a lover and produces a child, since her Commander could not. Iris is also reminiscent of Elaine Risley in Cat’s Eye, who submits to being tortured psychologically as well as physically by her preteen girlfriends, apparently because she feels she must have done something wrong to attract such sadistic treatment. In one of that novel’s most memorable images, Elaine begins flaying herself alive, so to speak, by peeling the skin off her feet. Her loving mother seems powerless to stop the abuse of her daughter, even though she suspects something horrible is taking place. There persists in Atwood’s writing the notion that evil will go on as long as good people fail to speak out against it. At the same time, Elaine is an important “sister” of Iris because, as even Elaine herself acknowledges, she develops a “mean mouth” as a young woman, almost as though her perception of earlier victimage authorizes verbal cruelty toward others. And finally, although Elaine as an adult voices a lack of anger and resentment toward her prime tormentor, Cordelia, it is open to question whether she forgives Cordelia or secretly hopes
that her childhood tormentor will roast in hell for eternity. Elaine is a graphic artist, rather than a writer, and yet her “texts” frequently are the products of that anger of the former victim, as she skewers women such as Mrs. Smeath, whom she once overheard acknowledging that Elaine was being tortured but deserved it. And these sisters in victim-age point up the challenge for Iris in making her journey of the spirit toward transcendence: how to shed the victim’s crutch as well as the impulse to see one’s story as a revenger’s tragedy. Certainly, Iris is a victim with more than sufficient grounds to call down vengeance on her victimizers; unless she can rise above those subject positions of victim and revenging fury, however, she may never reach the peak toward which her spiritual journey is aimed.

The issues of victimization in The Blind Assassin raise questions concerning “sacrifice” in Iris’s narrative. One beginning of this theme is her father’s embitterment by the slaughterhouse of the Great War in which the idealism of young men was betrayed by the Old Gang of economic leaders, like Richard Griffen, squabbling over markets for their products, cheap labor, and economic hegemony, and all of it gilded over with the cant of a “place in the sun” and “saving civilization from the barbarians.” In the wasteland of smashed ideals following the war, Chase dedicates himself to a latter-day noblesse oblige, ultimately turning his misguided notions of self-sacrifice into the destruction of the very workers for whom he thought he was making that sacrifice. His suicide ought to have offered his daughters a huge object lesson in the futility of “sacrifice.”

In the end, however, both Laura and Iris are their father’s daughters. Iris depicts Laura as a pathetic, even inane, believer in the high ideals of self-sacrifice. As a child Laura almost drowns herself in a misguided bargain in which she offers up her life for the return of her dead mother from the beyond. Similarly, Laura naïvely believes that she can protect Alex Thomas by submitting to Richard’s sexual advances, even though, as Callista Fitzsimmons later suggests, Richard probably had no idea where Alex was hiding (503). After all, Richard is apparently not bright enough to figure out that his wife is having an affair and that Aimee may not be his own child, even though his more suspicious sister comments on how dark the baby’s hair is—unlike the hair of the Chases and Griffens but very much like Alex’s. Laura’s childish commitment to sacrifice—making bargains with God and Richard Griffen—deflects attention, however, from the fact that Iris is, more importantly, her father’s daughter.
Much of Iris’s sense of victimage is implicit in her preoccupation with sacrifice. She wants very much to justify her willingness to marry Richard as an attempt to rescue the family fortunes. Accordingly, when she learns of her father’s suicide, resulting from Richard’s betrayal of the deal in which he bought her—at barely eighteen she was a “steal”—Iris thinks: “I’d married Richard for nothing, then—I hadn’t saved the factories, and I certainly hadn’t saved Father. But there was Laura, still; she wasn’t out on the street” (314). (Even the circumstances of Mr. Chase’s death entail a sacrifice of the truth, however, for the suicide has to be concealed, or else Laura would get nothing from her father’s life insurance policy.) What Iris ignores, of course, is that Laura may be even less safe off the street and in the Griffen home or, as it turns out, on the Water Nixie where he first rapes her. How culpable is Iris for not suspecting Richard’s designs on Laura? How culpable are we as readers for not figuring it out before Iris reveals the truth? Or is this surprise yet another bit of evidence that Iris is feeding us a line, or weaving a web, to snare her readers into acknowledging the difficulty of foreseeing the evil of the Richards of this world? To what degree was Iris unable to see Richard’s perverse interest in Laura because of her own involvement with Alex Thomas? On at least one occasion, Iris indicates an awareness of Richard’s infidelity but chooses to compartmentalize his vagrancy as the conventional sexual exploitation of secretaries by their bosses. Once again in the context of her journey of the spirit, how successful has Iris been in resisting the role of victim licensed by the cruelty of others and turning them into villains on whom she can call down the vengeance of the memoir writer?

The theme of sacrifice plays into Iris’s predilection for tragedy, especially Shakespeare’s later tragedies in which the innocent are often swept up in the bloodshed along with the evil. The staging of Richard’s suicide offers a pastiche of Macbeth, the defeat of an ambitious tyrant’s pursuit of political power, in this case, through the publication of Laura’s fantasy novel, “The Blind Assassin,” to embarrass him socially. In a moment it becomes apparent that Iris’s incredible performance of the role of a Patient Griselda from medieval lore has been her living out the cynical wisdom of the street that smart people “don’t get angry, they get even.” But what are we to make of the revelation of her culpability in Laura’s suicide? Like the evil stepmother Winifred, Richard plays out the fairy-tale role of a Bluebeard who is not content to marry a woman young enough to be his daughter but must also rape her even younger sister in a reworking of King Tereus and Philomela
Part II: Margaret Atwood

from Greek mythology. However, even as the Greek myth suggests, Laura plays the role of God’s fool, the innocent, whom Iris seems to carelessly destroy.

As I have argued in *Studies in the Novel*, one aspect of sacrifice in *The Blind Assassin* is its textual implication in “memorials” on several levels. Returning from the graveyard of ideals in Europe, Captain Chase is intent on defeating the Big Lie that the obscene destruction of young lives had any noble purpose. As a result, his struggle with the townsfolk over the war memorial defines this narrative’s immersion in “memoirs” and other vehicles for memorializing the past. The war memorial also foregrounds this memorializing of “sacrifice” as a Chase legacy so that the Iris who is working through her past in these memoirs is her father’s daughter. The narrative contains another memorial, this one to a Colonel Parkman, offering Iris the opening to suggest that who or what is being memorialized is only a reconstruction, since in this case no one knows what Parkman looked like. These monuments or memorials to those who have been lost in history’s organized violence establish a context within which Iris will reconstruct the past, in the novel we hold in our hands, as a monument to her family’s and her own tragedy.

This theme of reconstruction, stretching back at least to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, grounds Atwood’s sense of memoirs, or art itself, as always a reconstruction of the past for the conscious, and unconscious, purposes of the one who is doing the reconstructing. Once again this narrative could, like Lessing’s novel, be called “Memoirs of a Survivor,” because as the sole survivor of the older generations of the tragic Chase family, Iris is writing “history” to serve her own purposes. Iris has a counterpart in Briony Tallis of *Atonement*, Ian McEwan’s uncannily similar tale. Briony is yet another novelist/narrator who speaks of how the artist plays God in reconstructing the past to serve a higher aesthetic, if not moral, purpose. Like Briony, Iris gives us the impression that members of her family, but especially Laura, represent the raw material for her art, and, as we have seen, writing can aspire to “truth” only when it is immediately erased. Although Iris is less blunt in celebrating the power of her text to establish the only “truth” to survive, she would subscribe to Briony’s rather cavalier dismissal of the “real lives” of those she has survived when she asserts that “we will only exist in my inventions” (*Atonement* 350).

In a sense Iris is telling this story as a consolation for being unable to be a graphic artist. From its beginning this narrative has focused on
a single photographic image—Alex and Iris in love, Laura with only her hand stretching into the frame of the photograph. As Iris reveals, she wrote the novel-within-the-novel, another story called “The Blind Assassin,” as a memorial to Alex. She wrote the story because she could not recover the happiness of the Eden in the photograph, representing in its simple and unpretentious way what she aimed at preserving once she discovered Alex was forever lost to her. She writes: “The picture is of happiness, the story is not. Happiness is a garden walled with glass: there’s no way in or out. In Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys. It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road” (518). In this way the story reaches out to embrace, perhaps even to precipitate, the suffering that makes stories possible. Were it possible for us to enter the glass-walled garden of the photograph, there would no longer be any need for stories. We would have reached the blessed still-point where journeys end.

At the same time, this story is that glass-walled garden into which Iris has allowed her readers to peer. From the outset readers have noted the implications of the name of this “Iris” who is an “eye” as well as an “I.” In the act setting the story in motion, Laura may be troped as having passed through the looking glass with Iris’s self-revelation that she, not Laura, had been Alex’s beloved. Tragic art demands just such sacrifices, it would seem. Iris lived out her own life as a survivor in the wasteland of a world from which love had been eradicated. The drunkenness, the sexual promiscuity, the empty days—all are part of her tragic gesture of sacrifice to what had vanished with Alex’s death, and then Laura’s. In the closing pages Iris herself is about to pass through the glass she has spent a lifetime looking at and attempting to penetrate with envy and longing.22

The circumstances of her dying are central to Atwood’s very earthly construction of spiritual adventure. It bears repeating that Iris is a pioneer in embodying the challenge of making art as an old woman, struggling against the recognition of the muck with which the human heart is filled—a dark recognition of hatred and spite and grief and despair with the power to paralyze a weaker spirit that could barely glimpse the promised land of a journey’s end with its promise of rest for a decrepit body and a troubled soul. It is appropriate to her unwillingness to idealize this defining moment of her spiritual journey that Iris notes, “The end, a warm safe haven,” but she adds that in the distance is a “postwar motel, where no questions are asked and none of
the names in the front-desk register are real and it’s cash in advance.” She invokes the Furies in a particularly modern sense of heroic effort: “Guide my shaking arthritic fingers, my tacky black ballpoint pen; keep my leaking heart afloat for just a few more days, until I can set things in order.” Then implicating herself in the answer to the question, Who is the Blind Assassin? Iris confesses that in the beginning she “wanted only justice. I thought my heart was pure,” but eventually she recognized the appropriateness of justice being troped as a woman blindfolded with a sword, “a pretty good recipe for cutting yourself” (497), and others, we might add, since the novel Iris has been writing is her Atonement, or “confession,” in the service of her desire for forgiveness.

The passage from which the citations above have been excerpted has the imagistic density of poetry, and one more citation must be made before moving to the closing scene of the novel, as Iris’s storytelling and her life end with an eerie sense of synchronicity. Iris invokes her spiritual mother, Reenie, who often taught her an everyday philosophical truism: “All things have their place,” a statement that “in a fouler mood” Reenie troped as “No flowers without shit” on her way to justifying the darker side of the human heart she had exposed. “A well-wrought invocation to the Furies can come in handy, in case of need. When it’s primarily a question of revenge” (497). Important as this confession of revenge may be, it is the qualifier “well-wrought” that ought to signal yet another provenance for the tragedy called The Blind Assassin—John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” in which the persona posits the efficacy of the sonnet to hold mighty truths, “As well a well-wrought urn becomes / The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs.” Clearly, Iris has been fashioning this narrative as the “urn” containing not only her family’s remains but her own as well. In the end the Donne poem signals Iris’s accommodation of the sacred with the profane, the spirit’s journey toward transcendence with the “fury and the mire of human veins,” or, as Reenie so inelegantly suggested, No flowers without shit.

That accommodation of the sacred and the profane is grounded in the narrator’s death scene in spring—the narration almost without our awareness having completed a year’s cycle from its beginning with a school commencement ceremony. It is a warm, rainy evening, with Iris sitting in her garden, enjoying the wild phlox in bloom, or what she believes may be phlox, since she can no longer see very well. She is awash in the odor of “moist dirt and fresh growth,” and she adds: “It
smells like youth; it smells like heartbreak” (520). Unlike others perhaps on the threshold of death, Iris appears not to have severed the ties with the living who expose the heart to pain, for she ends with a vision of her heart’s desire—Sabrina appearing at the last moment and offering not love or forgiveness but only the ear of a listener. In the end Iris needs only the atonement of art, the simplest form of which may be the duo of a storyteller and her listener. It is left to the novel’s readers in the world outside this glass-walled garden to reassure themselves that Sabrina may have fulfilled her grandmother’s wish, for someone has to have gathered up “this jumbled mound of paper” beside Iris’s dead body and overseen its publication as the book we readers hold in our own hands. The death notice indicates that Sabrina “has just returned from abroad and is expected to visit this town shortly to see to her grandmother’s affairs” (519). The contaminated but ultimately heroic spirit of Iris has arrived at journey’s end and demonstrated the author’s pioneering efforts at confirming the possibility of the older woman’s pursuit of spiritual transcendence.25

This is, however, no immaculate and high-flown spiritual adventure that Iris has been involved in. It reeks of the rank aroma of wild phlox and the mire sustaining those flowers. It is a triumph of the spirit contaminated with the painful desire of remembered youth and the impatience with pretense and hypocrisy of those who, like Iris, are packing the hope chest of their futures with the few memorials to their having been briefly in this world as they ready themselves for a beyond in which their crimes and misdemeanors may be understood and perhaps even forgiven. As indicated earlier, “Atonement” might have served Atwood’s purposes well as a title for this spiritual journey. Increasingly, Iris seems to be writing these “memoirs” for her granddaughter, reaching out from the beyond to seek understanding and perhaps even forgiveness for her failures, if not her sins. Within the logical framework of a text Iris apparently left in handwritten manuscript, the very fact of the text’s existence as a book in print would argue that someone found the manuscript and directed the process of its publication. Is it sentimental to grasp at the possibility that it was Sabrina who chose to preserve this record of her family history, this testament of faith Iris created as her final voyage out, like Tennyson’s Ulysses, acknowledging the obstacles and resisting the comforts of old age’s reduced expectations and choosing to make this last heroic gesture toward understanding and trust in the compassion of others? Perhaps the old, if anyone, have a right to be sentimental.
Notes

1. As I have argued in my essay “Engendering Metafiction: Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace,” Atwood has had an interest in the whodunit at least since Alias Grace, in which she subverts that genre’s easy confidence that the truth can be established within a framework built on the elimination of “reasonable doubt.”

2. See Peter Brooks’s Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative.

3. See Roland Barthes’s S/Z.

4. Freud’s familiarity with the Sherlock Holmes stories is well known. The implication of Freudian psychoanalysis in the detective story is apparent in Nicholas Meyer’s fantasy novel and film, The Seven-Per-Cent Solution, in which Watson tricks Holmes into traveling to Vienna to be cured of his cocaine addiction by Sigmund Freud, who adopts Holmes’s method of detection for his own work in tracking the origins of neuroses in his analysands’ life stories as part of the “talking cure.”

5. At the end of his last major poem, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.”

6. While working on Ian McEwan’s novel Atonement (2002), I was excited by similarities between that novel and The Blind Assassin: both have very old female novelists attempting to achieve atonement through the writing of family memoirs in which they reveal how they destroyed a sister’s possibility for love. Then I discovered that John Updike had “scooped” me in his excellent review of Atonement.

7. See Peter Brooks’s provocative discussion of the novel and privacy in Body Works.

8. In the poem “The Tower.” Elsewhere, the older Yeats tropes the body as a “tattered coat upon a stick” (“Sailing to Byzantium”) or “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (“Among School Children”).

9. Atwood may have thought about the instance of her “foremother,” Virginia Woolf, dying before she had completed the revisions of her posthumously published novel, Between the Acts. While working on The Blind Assassin, Atwood would have been just about the age that Woolf was when she left Between the Acts uncompleted.

10. Although she eschews “theory,” Atwood might support the notion of the Death of the Author in the limited sense that the Author exists only during the writing of a particular text and “dies” with its completion, as Iris literally does in this novel. The second chapter of Negotiating with the Dead contains Atwood’s provocative troping of the Author as the doubles Jekyll and Hyde, Jekyll being the Author who signs books and grants interviews, while Hyde, on the other side of the looking glass, to mix metaphors, is the Author writing. Or, to be more precise, the site of writing is the looking glass itself, the narrow space that Jekyll and Hyde jointly occupy during composition.

11. Roberta Rubenstein has commented that “Atwood is a fiendishly clever manipulator of the reader’s knowledge” (234).

12. A fascinating analog for Iris’s/Atwood’s decision to begin the novel she is narrating with the grandparents’ generation is offered by D. H. Lawrence’s two greatest novels. Lawrence had written a draft for the novel eventually to become
Women in Love when he decided that his protagonist, Ursula Brangwen, needed a “past” before she settled with Rupert Birkin as her life partner. He wrote a draft of the youth of Ursula’s parents and, still unsatisfied, drafted the story of Ursula’s maternal grandparents, producing The Rainbow, the long “prequel” to the novel he originally planned, developing the “present,” before Ursula meets Birkin. Starting with the grandparents makes good sense psychologically, since most of us have at best dim memories of great-grandparents.

13. Yeats in “Byzantium.”

14. The classic example of the manuscript’s vulnerability occurs in Henrik Ibsen’s play Hedda Gabler. After her former lover Lövborg leaves with her his manuscript describing his vision of how civilization might be transformed, Hedda stuffs it into the stove and Lövborg takes his own life.

15. Iris seems to literalize writing with the body when she indicates an unwillingness to have a “woman” come in to do her laundry: “All those tatters, those crumpled fragments, like shed white skins. Though not entirely white. A testament to something: blank pages my body’s been scrawling on, leaving its cryptic evidence as it slowly but surely turns itself inside out” (367–68).

16. It must be added here that the body also represents a “text” in Iris’s narrative, as she later reveals that Richard’s sexual practices include deliberately bruising her body in areas publicly covered with clothing, as though he were marking it as a territory like a conquistador laying claim to new territories for his possession.

17. Ironically, “at the outset” belies the fact that this passage occurs late in the text, after Iris apparently has recognized the lack of “truth” in her text.

18. One of Zeno’s most famous paradoxes involved the impossibility of a runner #1 overtaking runner #2 because #1 would always be able to cover no more than a fraction of the distance separating him from #2.

19. Since this essay was first drafted, Atwood has published The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus.

20. See my “Engendering Metafiction.”


22. This looking-glass trope has its origins in Atwood’s provocative metaphorizing of the relationship between the halves of the Jekyll/Hyde figure of the Author. As indicated above, the essence of the composing process is the narrow space of glass in which Jekyll, the public Author, meets Hyde, the composing Author, during the composition process.

23. Reviewers of the novel have leapt into the breach opened by Atwood’s figure of the Blind Assassin. Barbara Mujica speculates that the Blind Assassin is time, which ends up doing everyone in, the good as well as the evil.

24. It is hardly a coincidence that the renowned New Critic Cleanth Brooks analyzed the John Donne poem in a classic example of “close reading” in his book The Well-Wrought Urn. Furthermore, in Atwood’s novel Oryx and Crake, the viewpoint character Jimmy/Snowman mentions Donne (167). Because Jimmy was an English major, his consciousness is full of literary allusions: he thinks, for example, of “gods cavorting with willing nymphs on some golden-age Grecian frieze” (169). Keats may not have invented the modifier “Grecian”; however, for most readers it has become associated with Ode on a Grecian Urn.
25. Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake* offers yet another performance of the aging, disintegrating viewpoint character as one of the last (if not the last) human beings in a futuristic world populated by genetically engineered humanoid beings. This character Jimmy/Abominable Snowman is a former English major turned advertising man, deprived of Iris’s gratification in writing her “memoirs of a survivor” by the cruel reality of the children of Crake who will inherit the earth being unable to read.

Works Cited


