

Meddling with the Medium:

Language and Identity in Audrey Thomas' *Intertidal Life*

by Leslie-Ann Hales

Wendy Keitner asks: "how can 'phallogocentric' language create female poetic identity?"¹ Paraphrased slightly: how can phallogocentric language create female identity? Although "how can?" may imply that, indeed, there *is* a way for phallogocentric language to express female identity, women become increasingly less convinced of the possibility. Keitner also asks: "who is the creative woman's muse?"² When this muse is recognized, her name will surely connote her appreciation of wariness and doubt, because women's mistrust of patriarchal language is dawning into a hot bright awareness that their experience is not conveyed in the language with which they have been endowed. The dowry, in fact, is peculiarly ill-suited to convey women's private or shared female experience of themselves and of the world. Phallogocentric language 'overlays' gynocentric experience and both distorts and devalues it; female experience interpreted by phallogocentric language is re-engendered, no longer so much female as un-manly, an un-male experience. As noxious power lurks in "innocence"'s etymological roots, so words become suspect for women writers who recognize that, not only people but also words themselves, do not always tell the truth — at least not *their* truths.

Audrey Thomas is one writer whose stories and novels are organs of mistrust about language. Diary, blank page, cartoon, nursery rhyme, literary allusion, pun: all are, in her work, part of the "wet and steaming" birthing of female identity which goes painfully on through her protagonists. Each protagonist seeks, in some way, an identity — an identical sameness — between her female self and language.

In this process, Thomas's characters begin to understand that they have been reaved of their peculiar experience of the world. Reaved — and bereaved — they sound the alarm to readers, especially female readers not yet attuned to this morning-song of resistance. Literary theorist Terry Eagleton says that words carry meaning arbitrarily within "shared systems of signification."³ But women, particularly women writers whose creativity issues in language, realize that they do not always feel that they 'share' a system of signification with men. There is, as Barbara Godard calls it, a "crisis of language"⁴: the language of patriarchy does not make incarnate the experience of women, the flesh does not, in this "system of signification," become word.

Although the effort to redefine female identity, in part through a critical approach to language, ignites all Thomas's work, she gathers and centres it most powerfully in *Intertidal Life*. Thomas demonstrates, from her earliest stories, a fascination with words — with etymological origins, with sounds, with playful allusiveness and association of word with word. But that her bearing down on language until it reveals itself is more than just the curiosity of a linguist is suggested by her reflections on her childhood awareness of language. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Thomas speaks of her family's "lies" to the world, lies intended to convince others that her family was "the same as all those well-to-do families." But Thomas knew this was untrue and so "began to listen very carefully to what people said."⁵ Acknowledging that her scrutiny of language was born out of a mistrust of words, Thomas says:

"I thought... people didn't say what they mean. And I guess that's why *Alice in Wonderland* has always been my favourite book. People didn't say what they meant, and they didn't mean what they said either."⁶ So Thomas was initiated into her reflection on language because it seemed to her an enemy: the medium as façade, not message.

Perhaps readers need to share, to some extent, Thomas's mistrust of language in order to appreciate the way she deliberately 'mis-understands' it in her work. Her method is precisely to *stand under* words, to view them from the position of the overlaid, the rolled over, the laid out. But such mistrust is surely necessary for anyone who recognizes the critical relationship between language and culture. Many feminists have noted the male perspective built into language since "naming the world" has been seen, all the way back to Adam, as a male prerogative.⁷ Yet it has been, traditionally, exactly this phallogocentric language upon which women writers have had to depend to communicate *their* vision of the world. In their dependence on such language, they have truly been hanged and then choked by words they hoped would bear female experience to readers. But language, it turns out, is not innocent or neutral, so that, at the same time women writers have sought to expose the failure of phallogocentric language, to make vocal the silent, they have often been thwarted by the very words they have had to use.

Women writers can make a number of responses to this apparent impasse. Silence is one. A refusal to speak. A denial of 'the truth' in words. A rejection of the tools at hand. But silence is the most

tragically ironic of responses because the epiphany women apprehend is that their experience lies hidden in the very silences and gaps of phallogocentric language. It lurks behind the man-full metaphors of what *is* said and lies waiting, temporarily speechless, in the void of what is *not* said. *Knowing* this, the silence of women, which might once have connoted only oppression may now mean (as Margaret Atwood implies at the end of *Bodily Harm*) women's collusion, conspiracy, and participation in the medium of oppression.

There are other, more affirmative, responses represented, for example, by the creative word-making of Mary Daly. Daphne Marlatt demonstrates through image, metaphor, and even syntax an approach which is perhaps closer in spirit to Thomas's approach. In "Musing with Mothertongue," Marlatt reflects:

*if we are women poets, writers, speakers, we also take issue with the given, hearing discrepancy between what our patriarchally-loaded language bears (can bear) of our experience and the difference from it our experience bears out — how it misrepresents, even miscarries, and so leaves unsaid what we actually experience. Can a pregnant woman be said to be "master" of the gestation process she finds herself within? — is that her relationship to it?*⁸

Marlatt's musing embodies women's miscarriage of experience through language. She attests to the need for women to divest the emperor's language of its disguise of pretended objectivity. Women know what history has sought to deny: that culture lies in alleging that language is more or less ideologically innocent, that etymology, metaphor, allusion, and even sound *are* relevant to gender definition and identity.

It is just at this point that Audrey Thomas's fiction addresses the language and identity crisis. Not content to be silent, awakened early to a mistrust of language, Thomas wrestles with words — with their sounds, their denotation and allusion — through her feisty, questing, furiously scribbling protagonists. What may appear as scrawls, though, even to Alice in *Intertidal Life*, who writes not only diaries but also novels, become script both for Alice's book and for her life, her self. Words are Alice's medium as writer, but because of her awareness (like Thomas) that words deceive and her alertness to the role of phonology and etymology in creating meaning, her relationship with language is always dynamic and exploratory rather than complacent.

The narrative line of *Intertidal Life* involves Alice's plunge into her past in order to exorcize the pain of her marriage breakdown. Her goal is to reconstruct an identity for herself which, in ameliorating the pain of the past, will be strong enough to see her into a threatening future (she faces serious surgery). Alice's occupation as writer in the story deliberately calls attention to the role of language in her attempt to come to grips with her identity and her past. The novel opens, in fact, with a scene in which words assume a physical reality in defining self as Alice recalls a teenage game:

Another thing we used to do, or did one summer, was tape our boyfriends' initials on our backs with adhesive tape and let the rest of our backs tan naturally. After a couple of weeks — zip — off came the tape and there we were, permanently branded. Well — temporarily.⁹

In this game words, or at least the initials which signify the words, become a self-inflicted branding, a way of telling the world how Alice may be identified. In the present circumstance, the game becomes a metaphor for Alice's examination of all the inadequate brandmarks which have failed her. And like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus (though with considerably more humour and wisdom), Alice experiences many of these painful brands through language.

As she reaches into her past, Alice begins to see how instrumental unexamined, 'unheard' words have been defining her. Both Alice the diary writer and the third-person narrator who hovers so close to Alice, frequently interrupt their narratives in order to ponder the words they have just used to record and describe:

I can always remember what I was wearing when a crisis occurred... a tartan skirt (Hunting Stewart) the night I lost my virginity. Why do we say "lost" when it is (usually) so freely given? A certain blood-soaked blue-and-white cotton nightgown (why do we say "lost" when it is gone can never be found, is gone for good and you know it, you looked, you had the evidence of your own eyes.)

Even the little word "lost" becomes suspect not only for Alice, but also for the reader, here prompted to confront metaphorical meaning in her own world. (Do we blame a woman for 'losing', giving away, something she did not 'own' in the first place, was only holding in trust until a man should exercise his now-usurped prerogative of 'taking' it from her?)

A more powerful incidence of Alice's

reshaping of the now unstable past (unstable because newly, unnervingly interpreted), occurs as she remembers taking communion after the birth of one of her daughters. Recalling the cup so fastidiously offered by the young male priest to the "placidly bleeding" women, Alice muses:

For the word is not made flesh, it's the other way around. The flesh made word, or rather, in the beginning, made cry, made howl. Then, later, the word, simple at first, all babies make it, race, colour, creed do not come into it. Made word: Ma-Ma, Ma-Ma, the breast.

Once again, it is the language in which the ritual is articulated against which Alice rebels. It is not so much that she denies the sacrament itself as that the embarrassed delicacy and abstraction of the priest's ceremonial words scarcely embrace the female reality of birthing and blood. As there is symbolic fullness in the word become flesh, so there is truth for these women in the flesh become word ("Ma-Ma, breast"). In order to participate appropriately in the ritual of the sacrament, however, Alice finds herself having to invert the flesh/word sequence, not because she is theologically heretical, but because the ceremony ignores and conceals the relevance of her experience. All this, of course, she represses, because the priest is young, male and awkward among the bleeding women. Even so, Alice's reflections rebelliously dislodge her memories from the confinement of stultifying metaphors and formulations which no longer satisfy her. Although the consequence may be insecurity and ambiguity, Alice begins to realize that her sometimes playful, often deadly-serious testing of words also frees her from at least one level of patriarchal linguistic tyranny: its authority.

Even the tiny sea creatures which survive the constant beating of the Pacific waves — the "intertidal life" — function as a dynamic and often ruefully humorous metaphor around which Alice reorganizes the painful memories of her marriage breakdown. The ironic inappropriateness of the words which describe these creatures becomes for Alice a wonderful commentary on her own situation:

Limpets do not go limp — would be no good at civil disobedience. Would not hang limp, flaccid, pliant... No, these little mollusks creep over rocks, feeding on algae, but always returning to the same spot. "The muscular foot is so powerful that limpets are found in wave-swept areas where few other forms of life can survive."

Alice does not confuse phonology with etymology; she is well aware that her association of sound with meaning is a phonic pun. But, denotative meaning notwithstanding, sound also *means* for her in her new alertness to language. Beginning to see herself in need of a limpet-like muscular foot, Alice recognizes that being a limpet will mean finding a new spot to which she can always return. "They really know how to hang on," she reflects, "which was not really what Alice was supposed to do — or was not really what she was supposed to do re: Peter, her husband, formerly Peter the Rock. None of that hanging on for dear life or limpet life."

In this instance, Alice comes to grip with her former identity — ex-wife — through metaphor. Not surprisingly, metaphor seems to help her to break open her past experience and to create a new response to it. Presumably this is because the nature of metaphor is, initially, to be discriminating. Metaphor begins with ideas distinguished from each other and ends with ideas integrated into a new whole which is different from and more intense than either of its components. Alice's quest involves not only a discriminating about her past, a separating of past from present so that she can be freed of some of her pain, but also about the very language in which the past was formulated and shaped. The old metaphors and interpretations are not trustworthy and if the new ones are just as much a function of perspective as those they replace, they are, at least, *hers*, created out of *her* experience, *her* imagination. Peter the Rock and Alice the limpet was a powerful metaphor for at least one aspect of Alice's response to her marriage before her husband began having affairs with her 'friends'. But now Rock no longer describes Peter and Alice, needing to write her book "to stay sane," must plant her muscular foot on some other rock. Peter is no longer her lover, as she admits when she draws a line across the "l" in lover and the word becomes "over". She knows the Rock is crumbling when Peter calls her to assure her that he will still be her friend and she hears the "end" in "friend" and the

"rust" in "trust."

The more Alice is attuned to language, the better she is able to 'hear' her past, acknowledging, if not at ease with, the role of her response to the marriage dismantling her identity. Significantly, her hearing of her own words as well as those of Peter and his lovers, happens through an ironic filter. This is not simply a function of time having passed. It is because irony is vital to a critical re-evaluation of the past. Of course Alice sometimes uses irony as a defense but it is also a tool, a mode of transcending powerlessness. Learning how to set players up in a chess game, for example, Alice reads that "'at the start... the Queen is the Piece placed nearest the King.'" Hearing as she has not heard before, Alice now recognizes the ironic travesty of male-female relationships in the apparently neutral rules of the game. Language as surely as action assumes for her the terrible power both to create and to destroy (and de-story). She begins to understand that she must develop radar to detect the difference between the careless misuse of words and the deeply-rooted, culturally-reinforced social indifference to the way language functions.

One of the more ironically amusing sources of Alice's word study is the dictionary. The deeper into past reconstruction she gets, the more she lifts words up, savours their sounds, test their allusiveness: "*mother*, mother-fit. hysterical passion; "*Mummy* c.1. Body of human being or animal embalmed for burial." Sometimes Alice listens for sound and relates sound to meaning in phonically allusive puns: "Who can see the 'other' in mother? Calling the school for so many years — "hello, this is Hannah's mummy." "This is Anne's mummy" — to make identification easier for the teacher. All wrapped up in her family." Alice needs to *hear* the hidden allusions lurking beneath the surface of language even when they are phonic, as in this case. Her word study is not a pedantic hobby but an attempt to grapple with her personal past in the context of the broader cultural and linguistic (patriarchal) past in which her experience occurred.

It does not seem to be the case as she dismantles this past, however, that Alice's mistrust of language results in radical mistrust of the world or excessive cynicism in her response to life. On the contrary, she has not, even at the end of the novel, ceased loving Peter. But her preoccupation with language makes Alice aware, like her namesake in Wonderland, that saying what you mean and meaning what you say may well be one of the six impossible things the Queen recommends Alice attempt before breakfast. Like Thomas, Alice has a wisely ironic appreciation of the 'impossibilities' when women start meddling with the medium.

¹ Wendy Keitner, "Canadian Women Poets and the Syndrome of the Female Man," in *Room of One's Own*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1984), p. 77.

² Keitner, p. 77.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 107.

⁴ Barbara Godard, "Ex-centriques, Eccentric, Avant-Garde: Women and Modernism in the Literatures of Canada," in *Room of One's Own*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1984), p. 68.

⁵ Eleanor Wachtel, "An Interview with Audrey Thomas," in *Room of One's Own* vol. 10, nos. 3 & 4 (1986), p. 39.

⁶ Wachtel, p. 39.

⁷ Keitner, p. 77.

⁸ Daphne Marlatt, "Musing with Mother-tongue," in *Room of One's Own*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1984), p. 55.

⁹ Audrey Thomas, *Intertidal Life* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1984), pp. 10-11. All other references are from this edition.

NEW GRADUATE OPPORTUNITIES AT BRISTOL

The Faculty of Social Sciences is offering a new Masters and Diploma in Gender and Social Policy, commencing October 1988. The course is full-time over 1 year or part-time over 2 and involves 3 seminar

courses over 2 terms, plus a short dissertation for M.Sc. candidates. The course will draw on staff from 5 departments in the Faculty. Teaching will include research methods in the social sciences and students will be

encouraged to work on projects which have policy implications. Details from Ann Warren-Cox, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bristol, Senate House, Bristol, BS8 1TH, England.

FROM THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD

A CELEBRATION ON FILM



Available in 16 mm for free loan, or for purchase in 16 mm or video formats from your nearest NFB office.

**Margaret Laurence,
First Lady of Manawaka**

52 min. 52 sec.

This film traces the life of one of Canada's most celebrated authors. Images of her small Prairie home town haunt Laurence and the characters we meet through readings from her work.

Our Kinda Talk:

**An Introduction
to Margaret Laurence**

23 min. 30 sec.

In this classroom adaptation of **Margaret Laurence, First Lady of Manawaka**, the author speaks of her growth as a writer and describes the genesis of her Manawaka stories.

A Writer in the Nuclear Age:

**A Conversation
with Margaret Laurence**

9 min. 10 sec.

In this intense film Margaret Laurence talks about her deep concern for human life -- the central force behind all her writing -- and the moral responsibility of an author to others and to the planet.



National
Film Board
of Canada

Office
national du film
du Canada