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TRUSTING THE UNTRUSTWORTHY

PERRY NODELMAN

"I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual." [1] So says Marion MacAlpin in the first sentence of Atwood's *The Edible Woman.* But the woman who emerges over the next few pages is not stolid. Far from being impassive, Marion is quick to notice the absurdity of the people around her and sharptongued in her expression of it. She has every attribute of intelligence but self-knowledge. But, for at least part of the novel, it is Marion who tells us what is happening, and we might wonder how we can trust her perceptions of others when she perceives herself so poorly. The folly Marion sees in the people around her must be real; otherwise her desire to escape it, the main concern of the novel, is fatuous self-indulgence. Atwood asks us to accept Marion's assessments of the other characters and to doubt her judgements of herself.

The reason for this confusing state of affairs is clear; the novel is both a narrative in the first person and a satire, and these forms of writing usually imply attitudes that contradict each other. Like *The Edible Woman,* most novels in the first person deal with the narrator's gaining of self-knowledge; they demand that the narrator take part in the events he describes, and they depend on the possibility of change. But, according to Gloria Onley, "Dickens' caricatures and Bergson's essay on mechanization as a principle of comedy seem to underlie Atwood's satirical description of character and behaviour." [2] We laugh at such characters because they do not change and, therefore, cannot gain self-knowledge. Furthermore, the person who perceives the shallowness and rigidity of such cardboard caricatures cannot interact with them without seeming to turn into cardboard also. Marion sometimes seems to be as foolish as the fools she so wittily describes, particularly when her struggle with them is so intense; she ought to be able to dismiss them easily.

Problems of this sort are typical of Atwood's writing. In fact, they seem to underlie Linda Roger's criticism of "the failure of compassion in the characters who dance in an involuntary circle around her ice-woman. No one is strong enough to challenge her supremacy at the centre of the universe and this is a weakness, as her voice becomes too strident, losing conviction." [3] Apparently the caricatured shallowness of the other characters makes the problems of the protagonist-narrator seem contrived.

We might wonder, then, why Atwood chose to indulge her satirical wit in a narrative of personal growth — or, alternatively, to present much of her satirical novel as a first-person narrative. Thematically, the answer to that is obvious; *The Edible Woman* is not just a novel containing caricatures, it is a novel *about* caricature. Its characters have chosen their rigidity as a defensive response to the complexities of living, and Marion must understand that before she can escape her own self-caricature, her idea that she is an ordinary "sensible" girl. Marion suffers something similar to the "Rapunzel syndrome" Atwood describes in *Survival,* and she must "find a way out of the rigid. . . stereotype in which she finds herself shut like a moth in a chrysalis."[4] According to Atwood, such cocoons are usually forbiddingly hard shells that protect and imprison the warm, loving qualities of the women they contain; Marion's chrysalis is her soft femininity. Eventually she acknowledges and learns to trust the perceptions of her witty intelligence, the very thing the "sensible" girl refused to be aware of but that readers of the novel have been enjoying all along.

But letting Marion tell her own story has not made things easy for the novelist, who has to make the limits of her narrator's trustworthiness clear to her readers. That Atwood was conscious of the problem is clear in her insistence that readers of the novel notice it. While Part One and Part Three of *The Edible Woman* are in the first person, Part Two seems to be told by the objective voice of an uninvolved narrator. The change inevitably draws attention to how the story is being told.

In Part One, Marion does not seem to be very trustworthy; like most first-person narrators, she is too involved in the events she describes to avoid distortion, and in any case her lack of self-knowledge is obvious. But Marion's characteristic attitude is clinical detachment, and as it turns out, the narrator of Part Two speaks with the same dispassionate distance. The similarity between Marion's attitude in Part One and that of the apparently uninvolved narrator of Part Two eases our doubts about her trustworthiness.

But the voice of Part Two is really Marion's voice. We do not know that until Part Three, when Marion says "that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again" (p.278). While the change signals an important step in the development of Marion's self-knowledge, Atwood has still duped us into accepting the omniscient objectivity of a voice that had no objectivity. She has done that, I think, so that we will trust Marion's estimations of the other characters and believe in her need to move beyond them.

Still, we cannot accept everything Marion tells us; she may be objective, but the structure of the novel demands that she frequently be wrong about herself. Atwood makes us understand that by allowing obvious contradictions between Marion's behaviour and Marion's interpretations of it. Near the beginning of the novel, Marion says, "I got so caught up in being efficient for Ainsley's benefit while complimenting myself on my moral superiority to her that I didn't realize how late it was until she reminded me" (p. 12). After that, we

cannot believe in Marion's efficiency. A few pages later, she prefaces an astute and intricate description of the internal workings of the company she works for with the comment that "I have only hazy notions of the organizational structure of Seymour Surveys" (p. 19); so we cannot trust her ignorance either. By the time Marion agrees to take on an extra assignment from her boss because "my lateness that morning had given her leverage"(p. 25), even though no evidence of anyone's annoyance with her has been provided, we understand that her real motivation was lack of self-confidence. We have learned not to trust Marion's comments about herself.

Our distrust of Marion allows us to feel superior to her and to laugh at her comic self-blindness. We understand Marion better than she understands herself, much as Marion's witty intelligence allows her to understand her friends better than they understand themselves. But Marion know the other characters are more foolish than they think; we know she is more intelligent than she thinks. Our enjoyment of the real Marion's perceptive wit makes us admire her intelligence and hope that she will learn to acknowledge it. We sympathize with Marion even when she is blind to the truth about herself.

But Atwood's manipulation of her narrator goes further than that. Marion's ability to describe the other characters so wittily denies her faulty image of herself; in fact, her story continually contains implications she is not aware of. At one point, she guesses that the cause of her erratic behaviour "was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self, and the subconscious has its own logic" (p. 101); in this novel, it also has its own language.

Take, for instance, Marion's inability to eat. It surprises her when it happens; but we have been carefully prepared for it. From the beginning, the book is permeated with images of food and of things related to food. The first conversation is about teeth, the second about pork chops. Marion sees even inedible objects in terms of food. She speaks of a fan "stirring the air around like a spoon in soup" (p. 17), of Seymour Surveys being 'like an ice-cream sandwich" (p. 19), of a woman's hair "the colour of a metal refrigerator-tray" (p. 20). Marion's "subconscious" appears to know the significance of eating long before her conscious mind is aware of it.

Finally, it is the underlying implications of Marion's language that make the novel work. While she is unaware of the meaning of her actions, her "subconscious" is hard at work, producing images that let readers of the novel understand her problem. And because these images are so consistent and so carefully organized, we know that Marion is not as foolish as her behaviour or her lack of self-knowledge might suggest.

In his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Edible Woman,* Alan Dawe suggests that

> When "poor old Fischer" expatiates — in Chapter 22 — on *Alice in Wonderland* as a "sexual-identity-crisis book," the reader who takes the trouble to follow him closely can see that the trio of alternatives

that Fischer gives to Alice are similar to the three that Margaret Atwood has given to Marion (p. iii).

While Dawe is right, Fischer's discussion suggests more than interpretations of character; almost everything in it is reminiscent of images found elsewhere in Marion's narrative.

For instance, Fischer says that Alice "rejects Maternity when the baby she's been nursing turns into a pig" (p. 194); the eternally maternal Clara calls her daughter a "little pig" (p. 206). Fischer's "serpent, hostile to eggs" has his counterpart in Len Slank, the slimy deflowerer of young girls who has hated eggs since childhood. And Marion discovers Fischer's "all-too-female mushroom which is perfectly round but which has the power to make you either smaller or larger than normal" in a beauty parlor: "she looked sideways down the assembly-line of women seated in identical mauve chairs under identical whirring mushroom-shaped machines. . . Was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical? An electric mushroom" (pp. 209-10). Marion leaves the machine larger than life, but diminished in Duncan's eyes. Apparently Atwood intends Fischer's discussion as a guide to the workings of Marion's subconscious; we are actually reading about Marion's adventures underground. [5]

Marion sees herself as a "little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit-burrow" (p. 194) early in the novel. As Peter tells Len of his hunting experiences, Marion's "mind withdrew, concentrating instead on the picture of the scene in the forest" (p. 69). But as she says, "I couldn't see the rabbit." When she retreats to the washroom, "the roll of toilet paper crouched in there with me, helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end" (p. 70). Marion has found the rabbit she could not see earlier, and she seems to identify its plight with her own. Perhaps she could not see the rabbit because she *was* the rabbit; and in Len's apartment she again escapes into a burrow: "though I was only two or three feet lower than the rest of them, I was thinking of the room as 'up there'. I myself was underground, I had dug myself a private burrow" (p. 76).

Marion's subconscious metaphor for her situation continues throughout the novel. After she stops eating meat, "she felt like a rabbit, crunching all the time on mounds of leafy greenery" (p. 173). And if Marion is the rabbit, Peter is always the hunter.

In fact, Marion's refusal to eat is prompted initially by her subconscious recognition of the hunter's violence veiled by Peter's good manners. As he uses a knife and fork on his steak, she thinks, "How skilfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting; and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her" (p. 150). But her subconscious will not let her dismiss its wisdom so easily. It immediately reminds her of hunting again; perhaps she is recalling Peter's tale of rabbit hunting as she thinks of the fake lack of violence implied by the "bloodless" hands of

the hunter in the Moose Beer commercial. The commercial then triggers another memory, this time of the newspaper story about a young boy who had gone berserk with a rifle: "when he choose violence it was a removed violence, a manipulation of specialized instruments, the finger guiding but never touching. . . It was a violence of the mind" (p. 151).

Marion's subconscious has shown her the connections between the boy's use of "specialized instruments," Peter's use of knife and fork, and Peter's attitude to herself. Like the animal whose flesh she has been consuming, Marion is herself potential food, a rabbit hunted in order to be consumed; her subconscious understanding prevents her from eating her own surrogate.

But in what sense might Marion be consumed? What exactly is Peter hunting? Marion's subconscious gives us the answer to that when it understands Peter's violence in terms of a subtle confusion. His weapons are his eyes; when he is angry, Marion says that "his eyes narrowed as though he was taking aim" (p. 81). And as he proposes, Marion imagines herself captured in his gunsight: "as we stared at each other. . . I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (p. 83). But Peter's eyes are not just the guns of a hunter; they are also the camera of a photographer, taking aim and capturing Marion's image. In fact, it is this two-dimensional image of Marion, the cardboard caricature she pretends to be, that Peter wants to capture.

Both guns and cameras shoot things, and Peter's hobbies include both hunting and photography. If Marion begins by identifying herself with the rabbit Peter shot, she finally escapes him when he attempts to take her with his apparently lethal camera: "she could not let him catch her this time. Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (p. 245). What would be "fixed" is Marion as Peter wants her to be — his image of her. She would turn into a photograph of herself, an unchanging cardboard figure. She would always have to be the same Marion, the Marion Peter thinks he is in love with.

This Marion is the stolid, sensible girl in whom readers of the novel cannot believe. For Marion, that stolidness is a disguise; because it is what people expect her to be, it simplifies her dealings with them. Like the clothes she chooses, it is "a camouflage or a protective colouration" (p. 14). Ironically, it is the camouflage that Peter thinks he loves and tries to capture. When Marion disguises herself most completely, in her red party dress and thick makeup, she is afraid of losing herself completely:

> what was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together? She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible. . . (p. 229)

Even the real parts of her seem doll-like. Earlier, Marion had believed that since she and Peter "had been seeing each other only on weekends the veneer hadn't had a chance to wear off' (p. 61). But when she is "inside her finely-adjusted veneers" (p. 229) of red dress and thick makeup, Peter likes her best of all.

If Peter is so interested in capturing Marion's deceptive veneer, it is not surprising that he is so adept at disguising his own violence. As Ainsley says, he is "nicely packaged" (p. 146); Marion must learn to distrust the deception of that package. Not surprisingly, her subconscious makes packaging an important metaphor for a curious form of deadliness throughout the novel.

In terms of food, packaging makes the violence of eating, the apparently unacceptable idea that we are beasts who consume the flesh of other beasts, bearable: "what fiendishness went on in kitchens across the country, in the name of providing food! But the only alternative. . . seemed to be the cellowrapped and plasticoated and cardboard-cartoned surrogates. Substitutes, or merely disguises?" (p. 155) If such disguises allow us to ignore our fiendish eating habits, perhaps we can similarly disguise the emotional violence we perform on each other. Marion understands that Ainsley's "pink-gingham purity" (p. 119) is a device to trap Len: "it's like bird-liming, or spearing fish by lantern or something" (p. 70). And she realizes that Lucy, the office virgin, is playing the same game,

> trailing herself like a many-plumed fish-lure with glass beads and three spinners and seventeen hooks through the likely-looking places, good restaurants and cocktail bars with their lush weed-beds of potted philodendrons, where the right kind of men might be expected to be lurking, ravenous as pike (p. 112).

Apparently everyone has packaged himself as camouflage for the hunt; everyone is hunting everyone else's camouflage. In such relationships, what is under the camouflage never comes into play. It dissolves away, and almost everyone in the novel suffers the same problem Joe accuses Clara of: "she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed" (p. 236).

Such dangerously stultifying packages should be removed, but Marion is faced with an apparently impossible choice. If she allows Peter to capture her "veneer," her real self may vanish. But what will happen if she removes the camouflage? Marion has thought of herself as being "sensible" for so long that she is not sure she can cope with the world in any other way. Perhaps it is the package that gives her her shape and holds her together.

Marion's subconscious copes with this problem by engendering a series of images of eggs and turtles, objects with hard shells protecting soft insides. When Len Slank is threatened by Ainsley's seduction of him, Marion comments on "his eyes exposed and weak without their usual fence of glass and tortoise-shell" (p. 157); the "tortoise-shell"

could not be understood so literally if Marion had not just been thinking about turtles and the process by which they are boiled alive to be eaten. Later, Len explains how he came to hate eggs, and Marion sees Len himself as an egg, his hard surface hiding the scared little boy inside: "his shell had not been as thick and calloused as she imagined. . . with only a slight shift, an angle, a re-adjustment of the pressure, the egg would crack, and skoosh, there you were with your shoes full of albumin" (p. 160).

Len keeps his shell on to protect himself; without it he dissipates into a formless puddle. For this reason Marion's subconscious makes the strange choice of describing the almost sexless Duncan with the same images it used for the womanizer Len. Duncan keeps "his head drawn down into the neck of his dark sweater like a turtle's into its shell" (p. 94), and even when he does end up in bed with Marion, he pulls himself "back into the bedclothes like a turtle into its shell" (p. 253). In fact, Duncan seems to be the Mock Turtle that Fischer speaks of in his discussion of *Alice in Wonderland*, "enclosed in his shell and his self-pity, a definitely pre-adolescent character" (p. 194).

But if Duncan is a "mock" turtle, it is because he is not as tough as he pretends to be. Although he compares himself to "a frenzied armadillo" (p. 95), another creature with a tough shell and a soft centre, he really wants to be an amoeba: "they're immortal. . . and sort of shapeless and flexible" (p. 201) — like a raw egg removed from its shell.

Unfortunately, Duncan is like an egg in another sense. As Fischer unwittingly suggests, he is "pre-adolescent"; like a chick refusing to emerge from his egg, he packages himself in his eccentricity in order to avoid real life. He sees himself as the baby "bore" in his description of the unusual *ménage a trois* of his apartment (p. 54), and as he says, "Maybe I'm a latent homosexual. . . Or maybe I'm a latent heterosexual. Anyway I'm pretty latent" (p. 190). When he does finally allow himself to emerge, during his rendezvous with Marion in the hotel room, she sees him as a "blank white formless thing lying insubstantial in the darkness" (p. 254) — the defenceless amoeba he had always known he was. But Duncan finds his formlessness unbearable, and he restores his shell by lying to Marion about his sexual experience, telling her that she did get him out of his "shell" or "hatch" him into manhood (p. 264).

Duncan represents a use of packaging directly opposite to Peter's. Peter uses camouflage to disguise his violence, Duncan to protect himself from violence. Because Duncan's approach seems to be particularly enticing to Marion, her subconscious perceives a similarity between herself and him. At one point, Duncan tells her "I'm a changeling. . . They kept telling me my ears were too big; but really I'm not human at all, I come from the underground" (p. 141). Marion also sees herself as a creature with big ears, a rabbit, and flees underground to her burrow.

But Marion's subconscious forces her to understand that identifying

herself with Duncan would be a bad decision. When he takes her to see the mummy-case at the museum, he tries to make her admire it. Marion is tempted, particularly because its "stylized eyes. . . gazed up at her with an expression of serene vacancy" (p. 186). According to Duncan, this beautiful shell represents a serene invulnerability to the ravages of time and life; as he looks at it, he says, "Sometimes I think I'd like to live forever" (p. 187). For Duncan, the mummy-case symbolizes an ideal state of being. But invulnerability to life is, in fact, death, and Marion realizes that when she looks at "the shrivelled figure" in the open mummy-case. The beautiful hard shell protects only a "well-preserved" corpse.

Duncan finally finds "serene vacancy" near the end of the novel, when he flees the complex demands of emotional involvement with Marion, retreats inside his shell, and moves "underground," into the "cavity in the city" (p. 262), the empty ravine that is as far down as you can go in the city of Toronto. Here Duncan possesses "serene vacancy"; he is "close to absolute zero. . . in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing" (p. 263). Like the mummified corpse, Duncan's real self is shrivelled; that is the price one pays for a shell of invulnerability. Marion must realize the truth of what Duncan had said earlier before she can reject his choice: "as long as you only think about the surface I suppose it's all right. . . but once you start thinking about what's inside. . . " (p. 188).

But whenever Marion thinks about what is inside herself, she becomes afraid of removing her shell and exposing it. When Duncan first meets Marion off the job, he tells her that "without that official shell you look sort of — exposed" (p. 93). Marion cannot decide if that is good or bad, but later, when Duncan indulges in an orgy of self-revelation, she says, "It seemed foolhardy to me, like an uncooked egg deciding to come out of its shell: there would be a risk of spreading out too far, turning into a formless puddle" (p. 99). Her fear of formlessness becomes most obvious as she bathes before Peter's party. She decides to "indulge her desire to lie back. . . , to float with the water washing gently over her nearly-submerged body" (pp. 217-18). Dissolving into this nearly drowned state, Marion sees "a curiously-sprawling pink thing," an amoeba-like object which turns out to be a reflection of "her own waterlogged body." Marion has almost turned into "a formless puddle." But hearing footsteps outside the door, she feels vulnerable: "all at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle." Significantly, she fears there will be nothing left if she loses her cardboard exterior. And so she returns to her shell: "it was safer on the dry beach of the cold tiled floor. She slid her engagement ring back onto her finger, seeing the hard circle for a moment as a protective talisman that would help keep her together." Atwood's choice of words here is a little peculiar; but the "hard circle" is like the "hard gold circle" of the bangle Lucy wore earlier at the office party, and which Marion concentrated on as "a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other" (p. 167), the "sargasso-sea of femininity" she had also been afraid of

drowning in; both hard circles share the protective qualities of eggshells.

Eventually Marion breaks through her shell, specifically, the "finely-adjusted veneers" of red dress and thick makeup Ainsley had helped her to hide behind. She sees herself in this makeup as "egyptian-lidded" (p. 222); she has become like the mummy-case she looked at earlier. Understanding that it is this shell that Peter is really hunting, this cardboard photograph of a "tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue" (p. 243), and not the real person hidden behind it, she refuses to allow Peter to pull the trigger of his camera and take her. And having escaped his violence, she conceives the idea of symbolically feeding Peter his prey, in the form of the cake woman; she understands that it represents what he really wanted all along.

Finally, she consumes it herself. Having learned from Peter the danger of packaging as camouflage, and from Duncan the danger of packaging as defence, she can step outside her shell, the fixed image that stultifies growth, and emerge as a mature being, responsive to change. Her fears of dissipation have disappeared; she has learned from both Duncan and Peter that there is less to be afraid of without a shell than there is wearing one.

All of these images come together to provide, not just the information a reader needs to understand Marion's behaviour when she does not understand it herself, but also a convincing description of the "subconscious" workings of Marion's mind. Because Marion tells the story, it is she who provides the imagery that makes it meaningful and that eventually allows her to understand herself. Of course, Atwood helps her a little; the other characters continually say things that, like Fischer's discussion of *Alice in Wonderland,* confirm the significance of Marion's subconscious imagery. But the novel is still a convincing narrative of personal growth, one that can afford the witty perceptions of a satirically-minded narrator.

But above all, *The Edible Woman* is a novel of character. While most of the people it describes are caricatures, the fact that they are seen as such offers a subtle insight into the workings of one carefully delineated consciousness — that of the narrator herself. According to Linda Rogers, "the woman at the centre of her [Atwood's] universe is numb. She cannot feel and she cannot give. The value of her existence lies in observation. What is lacking is the humanity which will tie the brilliant impressions together."[6] But, ironically, it turns out that Marion MacAlpin is "numb" only when she tries to *deny* that the value of her existence lies in observation; she learns to value herself for the right reasons when she no longer aspires to a vaguely sentimental (and traditionally female) "humanity," nor tries to "feel" or "give" in ways that are identifiable and comfortable to those less perceptive than herself. In this sense, and in terms of Atwood's categories in *Survival,* Marion has been afraid to be an "ice-woman" so much that she has

misrepresented herself; her triumph is that she does *not* sink into that warm "sargasso-sea of femininity." Atwood's clever manipulations of point of view and imagery tie Marion's brilliant impressions together, and make her a sympathetic and believable character, a woman who knows, as Yeats knew, that "there's more enterprise/ In walking naked." [7]

NOTES

[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*. New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 11. All further references to *The Edible Woman* are to this edition.

[2] "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," *Canadian Literature*, 60 (Spring, 1974), 24.

[3] "Margaret the Magician," *Canadian Literature*, 60 (Spring, 1974), 85.

[4] (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 210.

[5] The title of the original manuscript of Carroll's fantasy was *Alice's Adventures Underground*.

[6] p. 84.

[7] "A Coat," *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1950), p. 142.