

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING— SEX AND THE SELF-DISCOVERY NARRATIVE

VIVIENNE MULLER

*She was all the time conscious of her body nudging a message through her clothes.
(The Frangipani Gardens 174)*

As Luce Irigaray has pointed out, women have experienced some difficulties in finding both literal and symbolic rooms and wombs of their own. Lacan claims that women exist by proxy in the Symbolic Order or remain external to it – a silence or a gap in the male records. Many contemporary Australian women writers have taken up the sometimes complex debates about women's identity and women's lives at the narrative level (both form and content) producing fictional texts like *Poppy* by Drusilla Modjeska or *Not Being Miriam* by Marion Campbell that conduct lyrical and powerful deconstructive missions in undermining the certainties of 'stories men require them to tell, or tell about them, or tell against them' (Gelder and Salzman 81). In these texts, a range of feminist theories are themselves self-consciously recruited as part of the narrative fabric, to assist in the legitimising of the project at their core – the recording of women's stories about women's lives that have been silenced or suppressed.

In some respects, these texts thematically and stylistically collude with much post-structuralist thought on the subject of the subject – that is that while recording the lives of women, they often conclude that the subject (male or female) cannot in a sense be pinned down, but exists in a state of indeterminacy, even multiplicity. Some, like *Poppy*, further suggest that such multiplicity and fluidity may in fact be signifiers of the 'feminine', and in reaching this point they suggest that stories that appear to present the stability of identity or the truth are illusions, albeit powerful and influential ones, that are male initiated and owned, part of the public discourse of the Symbolic Order. The assumption that such public discourses serve male hegemonic interests and that a new kind of writing is necessary to record women's lives, underpins this text, requiring a different sort of methodology, chronology and narrative style, as *Poppy* serves to demonstrate. Lalage, the narrator and Poppy's daughter, intent on writing her mother's biography, discovers that the 'mother tongue is conversational and inclusive, the language of stories, inaccurate, unclear . . .' (317), and the result is a generic hybrid of all types of narratives – diaries, letters, personal lives, memories, knowledges, borrowings from feminist theories, as well as the recording of gaps and silences left unattended by what is said – to speak the feminine.

Poppy has some challenging things to say about gender and genre, about women's identity and language of the 'feminine'. It is in severe danger of being canonised in mainstream Australian and Australian women's writing for these reasons. Not so much in danger of this are texts that deal more explicitly with sex and sexuality as part of the picture of female identity. Bronwyn Levy suggests that a de-eroticisation of literature by women could be the price paid for visibility in the mainstream, and that texts that refer to female sexuality in more 'muted' ways are often regarded as less problematic than those that record the sexual in a much franker form (220).

There are a number of general references to things sexual, and specifically to female sexuality in *Poppy*, some broad-siding the national character (male), as for instance when Poppy suggests that she believed that lesbianism was the only 'sensible solution' for many Australian women given the lack of affection and interest demonstrated by 'ghastly and supercilious' Australian men. As an alternative to heterosexual sex, however, as Levy points out, lesbianism here is not considered a serious option. Rather what is alluded to is the lack of spiritual and emotional investment in the masculine libidinal economy. In *Poppy* not much is said overtly about sex or female sexuality. This could be for a number of reasons. One is, of course, that given the historical time frame for Poppy's life, women were not expected to be sexual creatures, and so learnt the harsh lesson that Nora Porteous receives from husband Colin in Anderson's *Tirra Tirra By the River* when he says in response to Nora's desire for physical contact that 'not every man liked his wife to behave like a whore' (52). Nothing quite as destructive is even implied in *Poppy* – the silence about sex is just one more thing omitted from the woman's story. Sex and sexual relationships in *Poppy* are simply part of those 'other' aspects of women's lives that remain for the most part unchronicled. Even Poppy's private diary entries reveal a reticence to record the sexual, alluding in somewhat clichéd and euphemistic terms to loving 'her first husband Richard with the enthusiasm of youth' with its inevitable leakage into the demands of marriage and motherhood (184), or in quasi-symbolic terms that re-valorise the mother-child dyad to her second husband, an ex-priest – 'With Marcus I am the child, a tiny creature, and also the mother, a full breast . . .' (184). Even the more modern and emancipated Lalage (Poppy's daughter) is reticent about her own sexuality, and somewhat prudish about acknowledging her mother's. She presents Poppy's story by editing out the physical bits claiming that an 'openness of the body' betrays a 'closure of the spirit' (185).

As a text that seeks constantly to undermine its own certainties, and this includes the authoritative position of the narrator, Lalage's prudish attitude towards the sexual does not remain unchallenged. Despite her efforts to resist showing Poppy making love, Lalage is forced to admit that the early years with Marcus shows 'a woman alive in her body' (185). There is in the text much that is implied at the symbolic level about female sexuality, and if one would want to consider the possibilities of metaphor and symbol, then it no doubt could be argued that the labyrinth and threads metaphors work together to provide a sense of the multiple and complex nature of the 'silent feminine' (including of course the sexual) in a way that recall Irigaray's celebration of the same when she writes:

It is our good fortune that your language isn't formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once. (209)

However, one gets the feeling that in *Poppy*, female sexuality is not to be confused with the more important issue of female subjectivity, or to put it another way, knowledge and pleasure, mind and body, remain to some extent fixed along the dichotomy with the first term in the pairing valorised above the second (as Lalage suggests in her setting up the 'openness of the body' against the 'closure of the spirit').

The concept of the self-discovery text opposes much that is promoted in post-structuralist thought about the self as ultimately unknowable, socially and culturally mediated, unstable, in process. Yet for many women writers, the idea of a true and knowable female self remains a significant one in narrative and ideological terms. In texts of self-discovery, the 'self' is either a goal to be worked for or something to be recovered and is presented as a potentially 'self-actualising' agent, in opposition to a socially constructed 'self'. As Felski points out:

the focus upon gender as the primary marker of subjectivity which is conceived as a source of opposition to a patriarchal society can result in a somewhat schematic distinction between the false roles imposed upon the heroine and the true self which comes to light during the course of the narrative. (132)

In emphasising that emancipation via self-discovery is the goal that is ultimately achieved in self-discovery novels, Felski further comments that:

Sexuality rarely plays a dominant role in the self-discovery process. Erotic passion, by its very intensity, can sabotage the protagonist's struggle to strengthen an often precarious sense of independent identity. Knowledge rather than desire is emphasised. (131)

In a number of texts of self-discovery by Australian women writers both past and present, that *do* see sex, sexual relations, female sexuality as part of the subjectivity question, Felski's thesis appears to be somewhat substantiated.

A dominant pattern in these texts is a foreclosure on the possibility of any rewarding heterosexual relationships and equitable sexual politics. This theme if you like draws attention to the ways in which patriarchy tends to alienate women from their sexuality, signifying (through the views of male characters) the female body as reproductive, passive receptacle detached from any erotic moments, annexed to home, hearth and family. Athena's self-conscious regarding of her body preparatory to an all night love-making session with Philip in *The Children's Bach*, is a telling testimony to seeing the female body in the way just described, and of female interiorising of the male gaze, *visa vis* the female 'sexual' body.

She was ashamed of her motherly body, of the homely uses to which it had been put, of the marks of its unromantic experience. (66)

It is with great relief that Jessica Anderson's Nora Porteous in *Tirra Lirra by the River* renounces sexual relations altogether after a series of disastrous encounters with men who deny her any investment in the erotic or sensual. If sexual fulfilment in heterosexual relationships is registered in any way at all it is featured as a fantasy or a brief encounter of the 'earth moved' kind. Athena's brief erotic fling with Philip in *The Children's Bach*, Nora's with the man on the ship. Either way, the actively desiring female subject in these texts is not rewarded (or only temporarily so) if her desire is directed towards things sexual. It is more 'socially', 'personally' and politically rewarded if it is expressed as an artistic, or domestic, or mothering, or altruistic self.

Rosie Scott's main character Belle in *Lives on Fire*, recovers her mothering 'self', devoting it to enhancing the lives of street kids after husband Tyler leaves her. Like Nora, she is 'reborn' after a suicide attempt which effectively signals the death or, more accurately, the deferral of the sexual. Towards the end of *Lives on Fire* Belle anticipates a recuperation of the sexually desiring 'self' which in this (as in other texts) is eroticised as artistic, spiritual and mothering.

Abel and Hirsch have discovered in their scrutiny of the novels of self-discovery that those female protagonists involved in expressing their sexuality have a difficult track to negotiate in the important quest towards self-knowledge:

The female protagonist must repeatedly chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it (12)

Nora's recovery of her artistic and reflective self, her 'openness of spirit' is less

'treacherous' than seeking gratification of her erotic impulses or an 'openness of body'. Some six years separate *Tirra Lirra* from *The Children's Bach* in terms of writing; in terms of the time-setting of the novels the latter moves into the eighties, but the patterns are similar. Athena's recovery, perhaps discovery, of the value of her creative domestic self with its warring impulses outweighs any possible gains in the love-making stakes, or in the outing of a suppressed sexuality. It is questionable for example that Athena will ever come as close to a 'jouissance' of the mind and body than in one of her passionate sessions at the piano where 'under her ignorant fingers those simple chords rang like a shout of triumph, and she would run to stick her hot face out the window' (2).

Metaphoric sex is 'safer' in the long run than actual sex for women in these texts, and perhaps it can be argued this is precisely their point. The message of the desiring female body is that it is a liability. Female desire expressed in sexual terms if compromised, can only be seen as compromising to the 'self'. Alternatively, it can be usefully translated into something more transcendental, or it can be de-eroticised or re-eroticised as domestic or creative (*The Children's Bach*, *Tirra Lirra By The River*). In a society which has seen and arguably continues to see the female body as sexualised in disempowered ways, these representations of female sexuality located in the artistic and/or domestic are perhaps not surprising, recuperating as they do in more positive ways, 'safe' spaces women have always occupied.

In a recent novel that presents female sexual desire and sexuality in a much franker and more confrontational way than *Tirra Lirra* and *The Children's Bach*, Angelika Fremd's *The Glass Inferno*, the sexual politics of heterosexual relations repeat a familiar pattern. The main character Inge Heinrich, a German migrant, runs a treacherous rites of passage as an actively desiring female protagonist in Australian society of the sixties and seventies. Sexual 'liberation' has clearly not liberated male attitudes towards a woman who expresses an 'openness of body'. Tristan, Inge's 'ideal' lover calls her 'damaged goods' (174). The magistrate, to whom Inge has appealed for access to her daughter, condemns her for pursuing sexual pleasure outside marriage telling her that her 'daughter would be in moral danger if she were living with you' (84).

Another pattern that emerges in novels of self-discovery that attempt in some way to articulate the sexual and the 'self' is that they present female protagonists who disassociate mind from body in order to survive or gain a position of security or independence no matter how tenuous in society. The 'split self' idea is a familiar trope in the self-discovery genre, the schematic opposition focused on in the narrative between the 'true self' that comes to light and the 'false roles' imposed on it. Forfeit of the active female sexual body and female desire is often the price that is paid for recovery or discovery of the 'true self'.

In many post-war and contemporary self-discovery texts this pattern remains a staple feature. In *The Watchtower*, Claire Vaizey effects a mind/body split in which the self must renounce the physical in order to outpace the oppressor, Felix. Claire reasons that:

While you can constrain people physically up to the limit without being able to get within miles of their mind – you can't change their thinking. (197)

While this view proves to be an empowering one for Claire, Laura remains imprisoned because she can't 'change her thinking'.

In Barbara Hanrahan's *The Frangipani Gardens*, Aunt Doll is also a split self, alienated by the Symbolic Order and respectable society from things sexual. Her sexuality is, however, conserved in the erotic and apocalyptic paintings that she paints at night in her

studio away from her neat spinsterish house. Aunt Doll's decision to disclose this sexualised self to her niece Lou (by leaving the door to her studio open) is sabotaged by Lou's rejection of the female desire figured in the paintings, a passion Lou only too painfully recognises as that similar to that of her prostitute mother, Ella:

For her prissy lips and Queen Mary dresses were all part of a monstrous disguise. The paintings proved it. She wore her hanky up her sleeve and was always washing her hands and never once farted – but it was all a front for a passion worse than Ella's. (144)

Inge Heinrich, living in the liberated sixties some decades on from the time setting of the events in *The Frangipani Gardens* experiences less of a compulsion to keep the body and female desire locked away. But 'keeping body and soul together' is not so easy. If she does it is in defiance of dominant views about female sexuality. Experiences of the sexual kind emphasise yet again the denial of female pleasure and passion, thus forcing an alienation of the body from the psyche.

We don't kiss. We don't stroke each other. Opening my legs wide, he forces his entry. I feel satisfied and disappointed at the same time, like a baby when the cold rubber of a dummy is pushed in its mouth instead of mother's breast, warm, involving. (7)

Inge, like Claire and Aunt Doll, like Athena and Nora Porteous is in a sense forced to view her sexual self as private if expressed at all, punishable if publicly disclosed. Inge's sexual experiences as a result are often masturbatory, autoerotic, voyeuristic. She effects a strong detachment of 'self' from the sexual, of mind from body in those instances when she senses she is vulnerable, powerless. On those occasions she barter her body in a depersonalised way, in a tradition, as she fantasises of her mother Lisl, or of her 'invented' ancestor, Lucy the Ape, who was 'always available, always in demand' (12) in return for a safe and protected place. Female sexuality lies hidden and unexplored, in the words of one of Inge's acquaintances, 'like an unopened parcel whose mysteries are contemplated but never explored' (*The Glass Inferno*) or it is 'symbolic' rather than actual, like Aunt Doll's secret paintings in the studio, or it is cryptographic like the female protagonist's paintings on the inside of kitchen cupboards doors in Sue Woolf's *The Painted Woman*. In positioning female sexuality and its expression as antagonistic to female emancipation and 'individuality', many self-discovery texts reflect feminism's uneasy inheritance of the liberal humanist ideal which stresses the intellect rather than the passions, reason as opposed to the emotions, the rational as opposed to the expression of pleasure and desire. Given this ideology, it has been noticeably difficult for women writers to insist on potentially positive 'social and political meanings for female sexuality' (Kaplan 33).

In some of the self-discovery texts, however, there have been some attempts to do this and this often takes the form of a gesture towards an alternative female sexuality that is vaguely idealised as an eroticised bi-sexuality or lesbian sexuality. Thus in Rosie Scott's *Liveson Fire* the beautiful Sky who seduces Belle's husband Tyler away from her, exerts a fairly powerful influence on herself. At one stage Belle comments on Sky's physical/emotional effect on her:

I was almost paralysed by the sheer abundance of delights, as if my mind had seized up trying to track each of them down, her silk leg against my hip, her taut perfumed stomach breathing lightly against mine, the overpowering odour of her skin, a faint

delicious whiff of fresh sweat when she moved her arms. Flooded with embarrassment, desire, delight I thought stupidly, no wonder men go so wild over women, no wonder they dream continually of being lapped in that heavenly softness as they go about the hard world.

The novel however recruits bi-sexual desire for heterosexual stability as this passage indicates, thus deferring the possibility of an alternative sexuality. However, this arguably lesbian impulse is usefully channelled into Belle's later moves towards self-determination and the reclamation of the mother-daughter dyad. It also conscripts the artistic, what Belle calls the 'old joyous obsessiveness of creativity' for self-realisation.

Inge in *The Glass Inferno* imagines herself as a man making love to her virginal friend Sue:

I'm sure Sue is scared Michael or some other man is going to skewer her messily and painfully. She's so innocent, looking like an early morning dahlia with the yellow towel around her head. Her body is willowy while mine is already drooping. Her nipples are rose buds, mine are lascivious buds. I can imagine making love to her, gently, tenderly. If I were a man I would take her somewhere beautiful, lay her in soft grass, tickle her belly and breasts with daisies, caress her from top to toe, eat her fingers and toes then blow on them gently. I would play with her hair, put my tongue inside her mouth and ears, her Mount of Venus, talk to her softly, croon to her.

When all her pores were open, all her openings expectant I would deny myself to her, let her beg and plead, let her shiver in the breeze roughing the grass and trees. Finally I would give in and enter her slowly, then withdraw, teasing and teasing her until finally sinking into her. Together we would travel to a place of transformation and return different, a place where you die and return. If I were a man. (28)

Her fantasising encodes the recognisable male and female sexual roles in the love-making act, yet these are eroticised in ways that are clearly not options in the real world inhabited by Sue and Inge. As it comes to pass, Sue is raped by a man she initially likes, becomes pregnant, and later suicides. Inge herself who desires a sexual relationship in which the body and the mind can both participate, experiences horrific parodies of the kind of love-making scene just described with the men in her life.

In Georgia Savage's novel *Estuary*, Vinnie Beaumont, the main character, has a brief lesbian relationship with the enigmatic drifter, Marcia. The relationship empowers Vinnie in her campaign to sabotage the tyrannical father figure – Victor. Vinnie reflects however, that the 'experience had been incomplete, because I'd missed the authority of a man's penetration and the sweetness of the little time of truce that follows it' (181).

Such 'moments' in these novels are clearly used in the sexual politics of the narrative to signal the absence of the erotic for the female protagonists in the heterosexual encounters described. As in *Poppo*, they are not entertained as serious alternatives to the heterosexual, and they work, in the words of Kaplan as 'disruptive forces' that 'can be harnessed to revolutionary possibility' . . . but 'only for the moment of disruption itself' (181). Equally they illuminate the failure of women (perhaps women writers?) to imagine their pleasures outside a dominant male economy.

Is there a 'route' to freedom through the sexual for the questing female protagonist in the novel of self-discovery? The 'evidence' of a number of texts suggests this is not the case – rather that the actively desiring female subject is hindered by this rather than

helped towards emancipation. Are the over-determined conventions of the *bildungsroman* with their accompanying legacy of liberal humanist ideology in part responsible for this? Do they haunt the self-discovery text even in its more subversive forms? Perhaps the dominant romantic pattern of the quest in the traditional novel of self-discovery demands things spiritual rather than sensual, the life of the mind for which the body remains the restricting and ultimately limiting corpse (*The Pilgrim's Progress* approach). While some female *bildungsroman* like *Poppy* clearly appropriate and even subvert traditional form by recording the individual female in conflict with society and the untold stories of women's lives, the conventional demands for detailing cultural and social specificity virtually ensures that if the female body wants to speak it will always be denied permission. In this respect women's self-discovery texts may well be repeating the same old story, that our society is phallogocentric, that woman's place is marginalised, that the expression of women's sexuality and sexual desires cannot guarantee a change in social attitudes. Alternatively female sexuality (as many texts inscribe) can be re-defined within the house safely distant from the outside world, or reified in the 'artistic' which, in a sense has always enjoyed a metaphysically privileged space, or re-valourised in the recovery of the mother-daughter, mother-child dyad. Perhaps it could be argued that the 'domestic', 'artistic' and the 'mothering' have become for women characters in a number of recent texts eroticised 'centres' where both the spiritual and the sexual have taken on different meanings.

This type of text, what Bronwyn Levy calls the 'muted' text, foregrounds the symbolic and the lyrical rather than the chronological and the linear and invites the female reader to seek out the possibilities of metaphor – even the sexual, affirming them as inscribing the 'feminine' – a watchtower, a well, a web, a labyrinth, a cupboard, a piano in the kitchen. Taking this view one can nearly always find or purport to find a (preferably lyrical) 'submerged plot' (Abel and Hirsch) which is confessing something different, even subversive. Thus in *The Glass Inferno* something positive and sensual can be salvaged from Inge's 'wrecked' life in the real world. Inge's references to her poetry and her fecundity, her reverence for 'life' as celebrated in metaphoric terms, the sex act and in the maternal body, her discovery of mother-daughter rupture and rapture (despite her own mother's rejection of her), her affirmation of the natural world especially in her sojourn in New Guinea, and in the many references to landscape that suggest renewal and rebirth, could be seen to collectively articulate a self that will be eventually recovered – an emancipatory female position stressing metaphoric rather than actual allusions to the sexual and a disavowal of the world which negates these things.

But even if we read the sexual possibilities of metaphor, annexing them to the artistic, the creative and the mothering 'centres', there is a sense in which a text like *The Glass Inferno* quite explicitly insists on and describes a desiring female self, the needs of the flesh, the openness of the body and a space for this in the social world. Levy comments that:

Although re-reading the Australian women's tradition with an eye for allusions to sexuality is valuable, we should not repeat the mistake sometimes made in contemporary feminist criticism of seeking out 'muted' texts as if at the expense of more overtly politicised writing. A relatively 'frank' tradition of women's erotic (including 'anti-erotic') writing does exist, although some of it needs reclaiming by re-reading. (231)

The expression of that sexual self for women and for women writers is by no means an easy road. Hanrahan's Lou Munday is constantly beset by the body 'nudging messages

through her clothes' which she desperately attempts to ignore after witnessing the social condemnation of her mother Ella. Hanrahan suggests that to totally suppress the sexual may however lead to a spiritually parched life, or an unhappily divided one as Aunt Doll's experiences exemplify. The articulation of the sexual with the self remains, especially for women in a female-denying society, nevertheless an important and clearly problematic issue which these texts address without necessarily resolving. In the end of *The Glass Inferno* which is also a beginning for Inge, Inge reclaims her psyche but also importantly her body from male ownership acknowledging its significance in 'self definition' even if it exists in a future life that remains to be lived beyond the ending of the book:

I lay claim to my inner landscape ... I lie back and know I am made of flesh. (184)

WORKS CITED

- Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. New England: University Press of New England, 1983.
- Anderson, J. *Tirra Lirra by the River*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1978.
- Felski, R. *Beyond Feminist Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Fremd, A. *The Glass Inferno*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992.
- Garner, H. *The Children's Bach*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1984.
- Gelder, K. and Salzman, P. *The New Diversity*. Ringwood: McPhee Gribble-Penguin, 1989.
- Harrower, E. *The Watchtower*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1966.
- Irigaray, L. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Transl. C. Porter and C. Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Kaplan, C. 'Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism'. *Sea Changes*. London: Verso, 1986.
- Levy, B. 'What's Erotic'. *Gender, Politics and Fiction*. Ed. Carole Ferrier. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990.
- Modjeska, D. *Poppy*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1990.
- Savage, G. *The Estuary*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987.
- Scott, R. *Lives on Fire*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993.
- Woolfe, S. *Painted Woman*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990.