

LOVE THAT KILLS: ANITA BROOKNER'S REVISION OF THE ROMANCE IN *THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Blau du Plessis suggested the need to re-imagine new versions of women's destiny. This paper will analyze Anita Brookner's contribution to such matters. It will discuss Brookner's heroines and concentrate in her last texts. Brookner seems to contradict utopian projections of women's selves and shows the difficult patterns of personal survival. Her heroines' emotional adventures are convincingly fought against their intimate and cultural inheritance. Their struggle and their questionable success seem to me to provide an artistically authentic starting point in the projection of contemporary heroines.

KEY WORDS: Blau DuPlessis, feminist theory, contemporary literature, Anita Brookner, women's identity, love plot, mother-daughter relationship, exile.

RESUMEN

Rachel B. DuPlessis ha sugerido la necesidad de reimaginar nuevas visiones sobre el destino de las mujeres. Este artículo analiza la contribución de Anita Brookner en ese sentido, examinando sus heroínas y concentrándose en sus últimos textos. Brookner parece contradecir proyecciones utópicas de la subjetividad de las mujeres y muestra los difíciles caminos de la supervivencia personal. Las aventuras emocionales de sus heroína son convencidamente contrapuestos a su herencia íntima y cultural. Sus luchas y su cuestionable éxito parecen proveernos de un punto de partida artísticamente auténtico en la proyección de heroínas contemporáneas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Blau DuPlessis, teoría feminista, literatura contemporánea, Anita Brookner, identidad de las mujeres, argumento amoroso, madre-hija, exilio.

The interpretation of contemporary writing by women has traveled very far from the anxieties expressed by earlier critics such as Molly Hite in 1989 when she justifies her work on contemporary women writers in the following terms: "In the contemporary period, and specially for the body of fiction written after 1960, 'women's writing' is a category almost completely outside the dominant experimental movement of postmodernism." Hite's study tries to prove that some twentieth century women writers had written and were writing well beyond what critics

Gilbert and Gubar had identified in most women's texts of the past as a tendency towards the "biographically mimetic", "the anxiety of authorship", or towards what Mary Jacobus had defined as an "unstated complicity with the autobiographical 'phallacy'" (Hite 14). Hite convincingly argues that many contemporary women writers were offering important complementary versions of the western story.

If Hite significantly named her 1989 text, *The Other Side of the Story*, seven years later, Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham published a collection of essays, *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the xxth Century* (1996), in which they revised women's writing in the post modern scenario. It is important to compare the title of this new text to the title Hite had given to her earlier collection, in order to understand the radical changes that had taken place not only in the writing but also in the assessment of women's writing in a very short period of time. But if the title significantly points towards a thoroughly revised understanding of twentieth century writing by women, Sceat and Cunningham make this quite clear in their introduction to their collection of essays, and particularly in the titles they give to its four parts: "Usurping the male", "Endorsing the female", "Private Power", and "Public Power". As can only be expected in a collection of essays at the end of the century, its contributions tend to emphasize notions of female achievement and empowerment by including the study of women's audacity and talent in undertaking in their writing, "genre subversion, genre appropriation and even the creation of new genres and subgenres" (7). Dominated by what Susan Gubar described in 1983 as the twentieth century "utopian imperative" in women's writing, the many voices of women have encouraged the literary projection of radically revised heroines particularly in texts of an ambitious literary nature. At the same time, the reinterpretation of psychoanalysis from a female perspective allowed for an intense emphasis in the legitimatization and empowerment of a culture specific to women.

But not all the literary representations of women in the late twentieth and early twenty first century are positive and optimistic. Recent and contemporary feminist theories and literary trends seem hardly to have affected Brookner's writing, for example, though most of her stories are nevertheless intensely experimental in the understanding and projection of women's lives in the twentieth century. Though far from celebrating women's empowerment, yet like much contemporary writing about women today, Brookner also explores the development of her late twentieth and early twenty first century heroine's selves in characters who are often professionally engaged in activities connected to writing and literature. Halfway between the Bildungs and the Künstlerroman, her many novels provide a subtle analysis of intensely articulate and coherent female characters who become impossible to forget or dismiss. Profoundly affected by modernism, Brookner's work simultaneously pursues further investigations into the complex area of the search for moral and literary truth in her characters, mostly women, in specific cultural scenarios. In this sense her writing is dramatically engaged in a quest common to the Western tradition, and her contribution to this difficult task is certainly well worth taking into account.

What distinguishes her approach to those of other women writers is her focus on a subject many contemporary women writers, for obvious reasons, have



tended to forget: the persistent and fundamental need of love on the part of women, but also of men, in the post modern, perhaps post feminist scenario; the exploration of the possibilities of incorporating some new version of the love plot in the contemporary novel. Rather than focusing on the professional and personal emancipation of women, a source of endless inspiration in twentieth century writing by women, Brookner chooses to go back to the ever unfulfilled human need for love, and to explore its sources and tragic limits. The author specializes in trying to approach the distance between personal expectations and actual experience. Her purpose is the analysis and understanding of the half truths our culture lives by and the need we have to defend ourselves from them in order to survive and achieve the only fictional happiness available, that of stoicism and resignation.

The American writer Dorothy Parker was once asked by a Hollywood producer why her scripts were always sad and ended badly. Parker, well known for her passion for paradox, answered: "(...) in all the history, which has held billions and billions of human beings, not a single one ever had a happy ending" (qtd. in Meade 276). Though Brookner may have never read this bitterly ironic statement, it nevertheless seems to be the starting point of her writing, and to have become a guiding principle in all of her stories written so far. Ruth Weiss, Brookner's first heroine in *A Start in Life* (1981) already introduces most of the author's recognizably autobiographical motifs: the young heroine, daughter or granddaughter of comfortably established central European exiles, is submitted to what Brookner continues to consider the central drama of womanhood: the intimate desire for love, and her failure at it. Brookner's important novelty lies in her careful and devastating vision, in practically all of her novels, of the complexity and difficulty of writing the love plot in true terms in the mental scenario of the contemporary heroine. Of course her analysis is restricted to a very specific kind of heroine in a never changing context, yet she manages to universalize these conditions and to make her introspection convincing and recognizable to a broad specter both of women and men.

Unsympathetic readers insist on the apparent monotony of her many heroines and few heroes; on the repetitive nature of the fictional adventures endlessly proposed by the author in novel after novel. Indeed her slow, unhappy heroines, sometimes her heroes, young or middle aged, seem to unfashionably waste their youth looking after quiet mothers in huge, dark, middle class apartments in well to do London streets. Their sad and unassuming stories openly contradict current literary proposals in which the destinies of many heroines are recognized to have greatly improved in terms of self assurance and independence in relation to the representations of literary heroines in the past.

Except for a very brief period in the nineties in which the author seemed to almost submit to the feminist temptation (Usandizaga), Brookner has never altered her vision, and in her first two novels published in the XXIst century, *The Bay of Angels* (2001) and *The Next Big Thing* (2002), she seemed to offer very interesting summaries and possible imaginative conclusions to the subjects raised in her previous work. In spite of the many obstacles in her characters' perception and self-perception, in these later novels, Brookner's heroine and hero seemed to have finally learnt a few partial truths, the main one being, very much in agreement with



psychoanalytical theories, the exceptional weight of one's origins, particularly of one's mother, in the development of the individual. Few writers have elaborated this issue as thoroughly as Brookner, particularly in the case of women, and though she dramatizes it in many of her texts, it is in her later novel, *The Bay of Angels*, where she provides a lasting consideration, a tentative conclusion to her heroine's discoveries and limitations. In this novel, the heroine's long reflection on her mother's life and on her own complex relation to her, as well as her response to her mother's death and to the loss it implies for her, is located at the very center of the character's experience and it focalizes the novel's proposals as well as Brookner's whole literary achievement.

It is the first novel in which Brookner allows her heroine to explicitly acknowledge the love of the mother to be the strongest in life; the first time where the author has her heroine locate sexual love as secondary and almost trivial in relation to maternal love. The result is a powerful exploration of our deep and mysterious connection to our origins, to our past; the ultimate source of our individual affections, perceptions and truths. It is also a moving dramatization of our permanent awareness of loss, of our painful feeling of abandonment, of being exiled from our sources, and of the fact that they are irrecoverable. No human love can substitute this tragic consciousness, and all love plots become impossible utopian projections of a wish that can never be satisfied. In this, Brookner pays homage to the most consistent current philosophical and psychological interpretations of human life. Significantly, Zoë, the heroine in this novel, can only love a man, Dr. Balbi, who recognizes feeling like herself about his own past. Implicit to both characters, and actually acknowledged in their dialogue, is the awareness that life's main tragedy is the inevitably early loss of the only possible source of true love: maternal love. The death of the passionately beloved mother becomes a sorrow from which there is no recovery. The illusionary love plot has been totally abandoned at this stage, and Brookner's one but last novel, *The Next Big Thing*, picks up where the previous one, *The Bay of Angels*, left: in a further reflection on loss—the early loss of the mother's love and its terrible consequences for Herz, the male hero—and the novel follows his perceptions of these events of the heart at the approach of death.

It was not easy to imagine the kind of story Anita Brookner could write after her last two books, *The Bay of Angels* and *The Next Big Thing*, yet a few months ago the author published another novel, *The Rules of Engagement* (2003), a new and extraordinary reflection on her past subjects, and I wish to focus my essay on this text. The starting point of my discussion is the article by Philippa Gregory, "Love Hurts", included in Scaet and Cunningham's collection of essays, which rather exceptionally focuses and openly questions optimistic assumptions about the literary representation of women's projection of the love plot in late twentieth century popular literature. Gregory compares contemporary popular literature with that of the eighteenth century, and asserts that if "The eighteenth century novel produced fictional heroines whose behavior reinforced the conventions and morals of the real world", the same can be said of today's writing, because "the attitudes and conventions of the fictional world have a relationship to the real world" (146). Most interestingly, Gregory sees women's independence as reflected in popular literature in



terms of “trappings —the careers, the travel, the expenditure— are nothing more than a gloss on the traditional cautionary tale.” The critic devastatingly follows her argument to the point of insisting that

Modern heroines roam greater distances but they too are in jeopardy until they find and secure the protection of the hero. Their sexual activity is not an empowering and enjoyable exercise: it exposes them to unwanted pregnancy, to sexual abuse, and to emotional distress... The modern novel... celebrates female vulnerability and female pain... More often than not [heroines] do not attempt to compete with men at all in the world of work, but only consume..., and [heroines] are still the specialists in suffering.” (146, 147)

My purpose is to read Anita Brookner’s *The Rules of Engagement* in the context of Gregory’s suggestions, as a reflection on the love plot and the ways in which it affects women’s destiny in the contemporary world.

At first sight *The Rules of Engagement* seems to return to Brookner’s well known scenario of the love plot, but the novel offers new perspectives, both important and rewarding, as it carefully records the reflections of a woman’s life, born in 1948, who remembers and tries to make sense of her experience from her childhood and youth to her middle age in the 1980s. Elisabeth Weatherall, a heroine who writes in the first person and whose name is only mentioned in the second half of the novel, is apparently not very different from many previous Brookner heroines, but as is always the case in her novels, a careful reading can prove that this similarity is only apparent and that her differences are extremely important. Once again we encounter a passive, subdued middle class woman with a happy, uneventful childhood and early youth. After a year in Paris, her marriage to a friend of her father’s, a man twenty seven years her senior, proves her choice of an uneventful life. Indeed, the heroine’s main adventures will be those of the mind, and the many autobiographical clues suggested in the first half of the text reach a climax when the author lets the reader know that her passivity is the result of a personal choice to become an observer of life and a recorder of events rather than an actor:

What did I do with myself? I was not entirely inactive, or so I persuaded myself, for the time seemed to pass, as it does for everyone. But it was not the sort of time by which others reckoned. It was ruminative, attentive to change, to those alterations in the light, to tiny inconsequential happenings and accidents... I often wished that I could do something with these impressions, that I were a writer of some sort and could form them into a pattern, though there was no narrative thread that I could invent. I felt, mysteriously, that there was some virtue attached to being a witness. (152)

The central experience the character narrates in this novel is that of herself in relation to the life of her childhood friend, Betsy. Bearing the same name and being submitted to very similar experiences, the two characters could be seen to offer alternative responses of the self to very similar events, and the whole story pivots around their different identities that will determine their radically different



future. Like Shakespeare rewriting possible alternative destinies to that of Hamlet in Laertes, or to prince Hal in his alter ego, Hotspur, Brookner also offers the perspective of double characterization in this text, and explores the causes and ultimate reasons for the dramatic differences in the destinies of both characters, that will allow one of them to survive and will lead the other one to a tragic and premature death.

In no way does *The Rules of Engagement* break with Brookner's earlier writing, and the text should be read as a sequel not only to all of her earlier fiction but particularly to the author's two novels published in the previous year and a half. Though dealing centrally in this case with the characters' yearning, experience and final disillusionment with love, the transition from the previous two novels is clearly and coherently made, for the differences between the two characters are initially suggested to be connected to their origins, to their mothers. Betsy's early loss of her mother and family life in unclear circumstances is seen by the narrator as a lack from which she never recovers and the source of her tragic destiny. "She was unfortunate: ... and it made her something of an anomaly in our midst. My mother professed sympathy for her, but viewed with dislike Betsy's attempts to be winning when she came to our house." (2) The narrator, Elisabeth, on the other hand, has known and enjoyed the stability of family life in spite of her quarreling parents, and the memory of her childhood is constantly present in her narrative. But further than that, in coherence with her two previous novels, the characters' origins, their childhood and the references to their parents both initiate and end the story Elisabeth narrates. The past is the source as well as the final reference in the narrator's self, and the narrator also believes it to be that of her friend Betsy: "Betsy's desire to be part of a viable family would have been her most primal need" (112). The novel ends with the heroine writing many years after the events she narrates, with the perspective time affords. At this stage the narrator proves to have come to terms with her anxieties and her own failures, and to have also managed to overcome her previous haunting dreams. It ends with the recovery of innocence after achieving a new balance in accepting the limitations of life and the inescapable condition of loneliness Brookner had explored in her previous texts. This recovery is proved by the altered quality of her possible dreams: "Were I to dream I should find myself in the past again, at home with my parents, or running to meet them, my face alight with joy, as it must have been, at the beginning of the world" (247).

But her final knowledge is achieved only after the narrator has gone not only through the understanding of herself but also of her friend Betsy. None of the difficulties of the narrator's search are spared on the reader who must follow her slow, hesitant, and ambivalent processes of enlightenment of her own and her friend's motives, feelings, and actions. It takes the narrator the whole book to reach her conclusions, to be able to acknowledge: "the heart of the matter... how valiantly Betsy had opposed her fate, which was essentially that of someone denied the protection that enables one to confront the inordinate difficulties that must be confronted if one is ever to achieve a fugitive maturity" (225). Betsy's tragedy is thus clearly suggested to be necessarily connected to her lack of protection, to the absence of a mother and a family.

The radical differences between the two heroines are early perceived by the narrator who soon realizes that, “I was not the kind of woman who sent out the right messages” (18) to people, and particularly to men, as opposed to Betsy: “She had the sort of smile that went directly to the heart; it revealed not only her vulnerability, but her accessibility” (19). The first true “discrepancy in their respective lives” (24) is brought about by their stay in Paris. The narrator is the first to choose to settle for some time in the city in her early youth, though she doesn’t adapt to Parisian life and returns home after six months. Betsy, on the other hand, spends several years in Paris and seems to integrate to the point of falling in love with a French activist of the late sixties. In spite of her short period in the city, Paris becomes a central and intensely ambivalent experience to Elisabeth, an experience it will take her many years to understand. Paris is her first renounced exile and her stay in the city encourages her to question, also for the first time, not only her parent’s but her own behavior (165). Most importantly, the heroine must learn to be alone in Paris: “I saw the point of those days in Paris. They had been the means of preparing me for a life lived according to my own rules, rather than the rules imposed on me by other people” (60). The narrator interprets her stay in Paris as the first stage of her process of maturing, her first exile perhaps because, according to her, adulthood is for all of us, the beginning of exile. Learning to survive on her own in the foreign city forces her to achieve a certain degree of heroism, but her feelings about the time spent in Paris and about her decision not to remain in the city are always ambivalent. Her quick return leaves her forever with a “homesickness for romance” (196), at the same time as the city allows her to recognize her first opportunity for emancipation, an opportunity she chose to dismiss at the time. The city is a constant reminder to her both of empowerment and of loss. It “haunts” her until the end of her life, “as a lost opportunity often does” (172-3).

Paris has a very different effect on Betsy who identifies with the city and its culture and settles for a much longer stay. If French literature, Racine’s *Bérénice* in particular, had always been Betsy’s favorite text, she also gives in to the city’s seduction, and unlike the narrator who marries upon her return to England, Betsy becomes the lover of a most romantic character. Digby, the narrator’s husband, is old, loving, reliable, and lacking in passion. Betsy’s French lover, Saint Jorre, is young and beautiful. “He was the movement, the *Zeitgeist*”, yet “It seemed to me that for all his resplendent appearance he would not have much use for normal love or sex, for his energies appeared to be concentrated on achieving some impossible Utopian goal” (33). The Utopian romantic which attracts Betsy and dominates her life counterpoints the realistic, monotonous domesticity of the narrator’s married life.

But the analysis of the dichotomy between the two friends’ lives is never simplified in the narrator’s discourse, and if the narrator expresses the danger involved in her friend’s romantic choices, she also confesses her many concerns, doubts, and uncertainties about her own life and self, such as her resentment at the many kinds of limitations imposed upon her by her marriage. Some of these limitations she tries to compensate by having an adulterous love affair with a friend of her husband’s, Edmund, an attractive, rich and married man. This affair becomes pivotal both to her story and to that of her friend Betsy, for, later in the novel, when





the narrator decides to give up her lover and Betsy's French lover dies, Betsy will also become Edmund's lover. As the story proceeds it becomes increasingly obvious that the narrator's analysis of difference is also simultaneously a study of similarity. In providing a double version of her story, the text becomes a broad and exhaustive exploration into women's need to understand the occult but extremely dangerous and menacing implications for them embedded in the love plots available to them: "We were both in love with virtual strangers... Like simpletons or perhaps just like women, even here we had been seduced by outward form, and had made the mistake of believing that this outward form represented the truth" (75). At this early moment in the development of her story, the author has the narrator disclose the true purposes of her novel, of all her writing, her ultimate ambitions in trying to narrate the truth about women's experience: "But truth is not so easily discerned, certainly not disclosed. I, in my hard-hearted way, was aware of this, but Betsy was so clearly above board that she was a victim of her own good faith" (75). Indeed, though in love with Edmund, the narrator is aware of his unconcern with morality, and in recognizing his lack of remorse and his indifference "to any form of censure" (43), she proves to be in control of herself. If the narrator acknowledges responsibility in having started and accepted her affair with Edmund in the terms he establishes, when her husband dies early and unexpectedly, she decides to leave him. Having inherited her husband's legacy of goodness and benevolence which protects her, she realizes "that my safety, and indeed my sanity, depended on a change of course. I should have to obey the rules" (99-100). Though she never regrets her affair and feels remarkably little guilt, she is suddenly made aware of her vulnerability. She instinctively realizes that Edmund's destructiveness is made far more dangerous by his wife in whom the narrator sees not his victim but his accomplice. Edmund and his wife become one further example of the kind of couple we find in several novels by the author, couples united by a cruelty and egoism that render them particularly perverse. Their destructive power is most prominently presented in her 1988 novel, *Look at Me*. In her last version of these evil couples provided in her last novel written so far, Brookner investigates the effects of their damage to the very end. Like Tom and Daisy Buchanam in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Constance and Edmund Fairlie are defined by the narrator as "demonic... collusive, without shame" (154), and their relation to one another is seen as "the dreadful dynamics of this couple... He and Constance were monstrous" (114, 110). Unlike Betsy who will not realize "the mechanics at play" (139), and who will be seduced and destroyed by both of them, the narrator sees the couple as dangerous people bound on destroying those around them.

But Brookner's heroines accept the complex nature of their experience, and though the narrator misses Edmund after leaving him and is extremely critical of his behavior towards her, nevertheless, perhaps because she manages to remove herself on time from him and from his dangerous influence, she is left with no regrets as regards her love affair. In fact she feels grateful "That in giving me access to my own license, to my own lawlessness, Edmund had made me know myself, and in doing so I had gained a liveliness and even a courage that had not previously been within my reach" (88). Most importantly, her love affair allows

her to acknowledge the energy and power of sex, because “sex is the antidote to death.” (95)

The early loss of husband and lover at the same time imposes an important turning point in the narrator’s thoughts and feelings which must necessarily reorganize themselves with the perspective of her present life as a maturing woman, but also for the future. Yet the author will submit her heroine to a third attempt at a love plot, to a new temptation or obstacle for her to come to terms with. After a long period of great loneliness, Nigel Ward, a peaceful man she meets by chance, becomes a sporadic lover, and he eventually offers her a permanent companionship. If the narrator has worked out her way through her two previous lovers, this third possibility becomes particularly difficult for her to sort out at this later stage of her life dominated by intense solitude. Her relationship with her husband is retrospectively seen by the narrator as having been satisfactory in certain ways but radically unsatisfactory in terms of her more vital and sexual needs. As regards her lover, Edmund, the narrator is aware of having been spared the possible dangerous effects of his self-centered nature, and of his part as a member of an evil marital arrangement. The process she undergoes in order to understand the new unforeseen dangers implied in the acceptance of her third lover, Nigel Ward, becomes complex, and forces her to rigorous thinking. But her uncertainties must necessarily be decided upon when she is forced to choose between submitting to Nigel’s wishes of spending a holiday with him in France, and remaining in London with Betsy who is alone, very ill, and about to undergo surgery in a London hospital. At this point of her life the narrator acknowledges the duties of friendship over those of love, and remains to look after her friend Betsy, abandoned in this difficult moment by her lover Edmund and by his wife Constance in whom Betsy had invested her love and energy for several years.

But Betsy is only one of the reasons for the narrator’s rejection of Nigel, the true causes being interestingly connected to her desire to defend her own notion of personal energy and passion. If she sees the advantages of accepting her companion: “...it was a relief to surrender our solipsism, to allow a more or less chosen companion into our lives” (219), she soon realizes that Nigel doesn’t accept her for what she is, and above all, that he avoids the passionate in her nature, something she knows must necessarily be the source of love: “It would seem that in the absence of passion I could feel little except fear. That was the singular gift of passion: it eradicated fear... I feared what I had already perceived, the transformation into the kind of feeble and needy woman whom a man like Nigel might think appropriate... I feared the loss of authenticity which would leave me at the mercy of others, my own vestigial strengths quite gone” (223). In order to please Nigel she is expected to keep “mute about my own nature” (224), something she had also had to do in her relationship with her husband. Yet in her husband’s case she had been forced to find a lover, “my true nature had won out, and I could not risk this happening again” (225).

The narrator follows a subtle course in informing the reader of the processes which drive her to reject the love plot in any of the terms proposed to her which correspond to the most traditional and expected ways of behavior between



men and women in our world. At the same time, the narrator's defense and justification of her right to be accepted in her own terms becomes an important paradigm in the elaboration of an alternative love plot. It further provides a radical revision of the subject of the true nature of women's desire and of her right to think of love considering her right to self knowledge and to personal choice. Very few writers have so far provided so subtle and accurate an elaboration of the problematic nature of love and of the many prejudices which have always determined desire and love in actual experience. Very few writers have had so far the audacity to provide the actual external and internal details in the true dramatization of loneliness, or to have allowed his or her heroines to choose loneliness as the authentic destiny for a literary heroine within a specific context. Unlike most fiction writers Brookner has dared to represent love as an often transitory experience, a short interruption in the most common of human conditions, that of being alone. In her many novels, the author has become a specialist in the analysis of the difficult and contradictory processes which might lead to the acceptance of loneliness. "I could see the advantages of such a settled arrangement," says the narrator thinking of Nigel Ward's wish to become her permanent partner, "but I could no longer see the attraction. I might do better on my own, with my own knowledge to guide me" (217). Her conclusions deconstruct the long illusion that has nourished the western love plot for several centuries, because as the narrator confirms, the happiness associated with having a partner is ultimately a cultural construct: "I know how lonely it can be without someone close to you, but it becomes quite difficult to work out why. Probably status is involved. A woman with a partner feels superior to a woman who has none. But this is illusory. All one ever possesses is free will and even that has to be safeguarded. Handing over one's life to another person is not really to be recommended" (174).

Betsy's attitude to love is worked out as an alternative to that of the narrator's. Having lost her mother and father very early on, she has no reference by which to measure the only possible version of true love imaginable in Brookner's terms: the love of the child for its parents or the love of the parents for their child. Alone in the maze of her complex feelings and experiences, Betsy is destined to get lost, and the narrator carefully analyses the processes of her destruction. As is always the case in Brookner's novels, the heroines' homes are a reflection of their selves. As can only be expected, the narrator's flat, that is to say, her husband's, is exactly the same as the many homes inhabited by the author's many heroines: large, comfortable, old fashioned, unimaginative, yet a refuge from the dangerous outside, an outside heroines safely contemplate from the windows. The flat Betsy buys in London when she returns from Paris after her lover's death, echoes her limits. It is small, ugly, inadequately equipped with the old furniture belonging to her parents' home; a place the narrator profoundly dislikes. "The contrast between the brilliant streets and the darkness of Betsy's flat was eloquent. I could not see anyone wanting to return to this place" (237). It is the only flat Betsy sees before buying it and she never quite inhabits it, permanently staying with the Fairlies in their rich house, her adopted home according to the narrator. Without the protection of a family or of its memory, and without the protection of a home, Betsy relies on the



fragility of her illusions which lead her to unrealistically expect from others the goodness and love she is ready to give. "I saw the extent of her love affairs, and their all too obvious limitations: as far as I knew there had been only two, both of which had succeeded in denying her essential nature, that of a loving simple girl, an all too willing victim" (226).

The denouement of the story collects its many tensions, its many ideas and suggestions, and offers the only possible solution for the two heroines given the different attributes allowed them by their author. If the narrator is saved from Edmund's egoistic evil and from the degradation of a late marriage of convenience to Nigel Ward, the Fairlies end up by destroying Betsy to the point of her death. Given the demands of literary coherence, Betsy must pay with her own life for her romantic innocence. There is no possible salvation for Betsy, for whom "distractions were to be avoided, her love affair demanding an exclusivity that anyone not affected by this particular madness could hardly comprehend" (234). Though having defended passion as the necessary source of survival, its excess is defined by the narrator at this stage as incomprehensible madness. On her way to the hospital, after having been asked by Edmund to make herself responsible for Betsy while she is in the hospital, the narrator experiences her final epiphany, "I came to the heart of the matter. I knew, without needing to be told, what was wrong with Betsy" (225). This awareness completes and confirms her version of the story, its tragic outcome understood to be inevitable at this stage. But Betsy dies as a romantic literary heroine, and her tragic end reenacts her favorite text, Racine's tragedy *Bérénice*. As the narrator has let the reader know at the beginning of her story:

Betsy remained faithful to the grander concepts in her favorite Racine. 'Que le jour recommence, et que le jour finisse/ Sans que jamais Titus puisse voir Bérénice...' These lines became prophetic, so that at the very end, when I visited her in the hospital, I would see her eyes widen in her thin face, and hear her murmur, '... sans que de tout le jour...', and then fall silent. (5)

This tragic end could be perhaps considered improbable in the liberating eighties, yet in Brookner's view there is little feminism can do to help the contemporary woman when caught in the alluring net of the inherited romantic plot. The novel includes a constant reference to the advances of the women's movement, but feminist ideas are kept at a critical distance in the text, as if the author did not believe in the truly liberating effect of political emancipation. The novel's intention is to investigate the power of an alternative emancipation; the difficult process of psychological growth for women. Brookner is committed to a revised concept of literary truth which implies the rejection of utopian consolation and chooses to face the inevitable limitations of human life for what they are. Brookner is after a representation of experience without disguising the dangers that may originate in others, the sadness of age, the necessary confrontation of solitude and acceptance of death.

But if this novel proves to be a female *Buildungsroman*, a story of apprenticeship in the complex processes of development and maturity for the contempo-



rary woman, it is also a *Künstlerroman*, a novel about the development of the artist. The narrator offers her own clues to make this interpretation possible, for she not only declares her choice of becoming an observer of life, a possible writer, rather than a participant, as said above, but she explicitly connects her story to literary tradition. This is a usual procedure in Brookner's novels which often include marginal and discreet reflections on the author's literary background, disguised references to her dissatisfactions with it, and in particular to her disagreements with its representation of women's destinies in connection to the love plot. Her stories also often express in sentences mostly hidden and discreet, the need to rewrite the woman's plot in new and more accurate terms. This is also clearly one of the main purposes in this last novel.

Literature is finally to be found at the source of the difference between the two friends. If, as has been suggested, their original family life greatly determines their characters, their literary education is responsible for further discrepancies between the two, and education is suggested as the main influence in the development of human experience. Though constantly recognized in all of her novels, this suggestion becomes most explicit in this last text in which the reader is often made aware of its importance. The author's profound concern with the writing of a literature nearer to experience is insisted upon on the last page of the story. As if afraid the reader might forget her most relevant message, the narrator insists: "I had been given the wrong instructions, by teachers, by novels. Betsy at least had chosen grander models. That was how I thought of her now, as a tragic heroine whose destiny it is to die... But in fact everyone I know seems to have been prefigured somewhere, in pages which I do not take the trouble to trace (246).

The lasting presence of literature in her characters' identities remains a firm conviction with the author who has her narrator interpret her experience and that of her friend Betsy in connection to specific literary heroines and texts. But what the story convincingly proves is the distance between the expectations created by their readings and the facts of their own experience. Though this distance is clearly seen in the case of Betsy's inclination and choice of the romantic text, in the case of the narrator, Brookner tries to prove the limitations of the Victorian novel but also the continued value of the Victorian heroine. At the beginning of her story, the narrator naively confesses to be a great reader of Victorian novels and to be fascinated by them: "How brave the female characters were! How noble or resolute the men! I told myself that that was why novels were written, to give ordinary men and women a better idea of themselves, and, more important, to show how fate might take a hand even when the given circumstances appeared to militate against a significant outcome" (28). Later in her life, though Victorian heroines were certainly not submitted to the fragmentation and uncertainties of life in the eighties, they can continue to be relied upon as models. Their apparent and old fashioned submissiveness which might make them look remote to today's reader, "had nothing to do with weakness; on the contrary they were fearless, those women, as perhaps I had once been" (28). But as time goes by, the distance between the narrator and her models seems to grow, and her attitude towards her models becomes increasingly critical, until at one point in her difficult life she ceases to read Victorian novels



altogether. Eventually though, she cannot avoid going back to her favorite texts, to rereading the life stories of characters whose heroism cannot be questioned. The heroine's narrative must resume her main purpose in writing her novel, her long reflection on the complex relations between life and art.

Though ultimately approving of the value of Victorian heroines as models for contemporary life and hence for contemporary literature, the narrator's radical disagreement is with the endings provided by Victorian writers to their stories. This is perhaps one of the central issues in Brookner's writing, insisted upon in this last novel in which the narrator explicitly disapproves of traditional literary endings. After having written over twenty novels the author has her narrator acknowledge the most relevant lesson learnt in experience and which must be represented in the literary text: "that there can be no adequate preparation for the sadness that comes at the end... that there is nothing really fine about endings" (52, 172). The revision of literary endings becomes one of the author's most important contributions to the contemporary novel and one of her main responsibilities, a sign of her commitment to truth. This seems to me to be perhaps the most original experiment in Brookner's writing, dealt upon over and over again in all of her novels.

The romantic dimension in the classical literary Western canon is proved by the author to be openly dangerous to all of Brookner's heroines, but it is centrally acknowledged in this novel. It is significant to remember that the first sentence in the first novel Brookner ever wrote was a denunciation of the effects of literature upon her first heroine: Ruth Weiss' life was "ruined by literature" (*Start* 1), inaugurates the heroine's story and the stories of many unhappy Brookner heroines. Indeed Betsy's life is also destroyed by literature. As suggested by Gregory, love certainly continues to hurt. Brookner proves further that love can also kill; and that controlling the love plot is not a matter of happiness but a question of life and death for the heroine. She shows that women continue to be in great danger until writers provide them with adequate models of understanding and behavior.

It has taken many years and many stories for Brookner's heroines to become aware of the damage the romance does to them, and to begin to recover from it, but warning the reader about it and trying to find a way of rewriting a possible ending to a woman's story is what the narrator of this last novel is engaged with. What we are clearly told in this last text is that there is no literary salvation available to the contemporary heroine. That she must find her way and her personal truth alone in an often paradoxical world. We are further informed of the fact that nobody can help her out in the complex way towards comprehending the world and herself; that she can never pass on her responsibility to a lover or a husband. Brookner further proves that in no situation are happy endings to be expected, and that literature cannot pretend otherwise. In careful and tentative ways, Brookner suggests that experience necessarily includes deception, failure and loneliness, and that though there might be partial endings, the only possible truthful ending in life is death. In many of her previous novels, often very successfully, Brookner tries to provide a method for the representation of disguised truth in the contemporary novel, but in this last novel she also allows the reader to follow the complex process of its literary elaboration.



The understanding of the function of love in the lives of women is the narrator's and the author's ultimate purpose in her last novel. Not only does this story warn us about the limitations of love, but essentially about its great risks for women's selves and consequently for their very lives. Though the narrator acknowledges her great moral privilege in having lived without harming or damaging anyone, morality as such is not a central concern for the characters in this story; it is placed at the service of the natural forces of survival. As the narrator warns the reader, the adequate rules of engagement must be carefully sought out and followed not only in the pursuit of personal fulfillment, but most importantly, in women's search for their contested positions and functions in a profoundly altered and unknown social and cultural environment.



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