

This is the **Accepted Version** of a paper published in  
Paradoxa:

Kelso, Sylvia (1998) MS found on a checkout counter.  
Paradoxa: studies in world literary genres, 4 (11). pp. 253-268.  
(In Press)

## “MS Found on a Checkout Counter”

### INTRODUCTION

This issue of Para.Doxa sought submissions on texts that “transgress” the creative/critical boundary from either direction, and which might themselves prove “marriages of critical and fictional discourse” (Attebery, 26.4.97) The discourse of the call for papers, however, is sited as firmly within academia as the journal itself, with its practices of editorial scrutiny, refereeing, rewriting and proof-reading, which guarantee the contents are “genuine.” When prodded for a possible submission, I thought naively that I need only produce a piece of ficto-criticism, a metafiction about metafiction, which, having been rejected or tempered in this furnace, would, to mix metaphors, cut gaily through the bordergates and settle safely far inside the land of academe.

Yet almost at once this border developed a two-way traffic. First, the attraction of writing a metafictional piece about Stephen King’s most metafictional novel became the temptation to put words in the mouth of his most terrible female monster: to let her write back, making her own redress of a horror writer’s gynophobia. But quite quickly came a counter-impulse to undercut and interrogate the very academic discourses that would rehabilitate Annie, by recycling them through the mouth of this murderous female *naif*, who would now function as a theorists’ Candide.

This dual citizen did not easily manage a visa for the grove of Academe. But when the issue’s editor suggested I temper the wind of my metafiction to the shorn backs of non-horror readers with some prefatory explanation, I began to wonder a good deal more seriously about that border’s porosity. At what point, I asked, did the elegant games of ficto-criticism actually embrace the sober business of academe? Was it indeed possible to transgress the border both ways? If so, at what point did the transgression have to stop?

Transgression has been a highly fashionable word in criticism. Less common are measurements of its limit. What happens, for instance, when a critical article pretending to be fiction is actually published in an academic journal? How do you reference a letter from Annie Wilkes to Stephen King?

What happens if you don't? If you insulate the shamelessly ficto-critical from the reputable academic with a bogus preface, a sort of Derridean pre-supplement, at what point must the preamble itself transit the border and become serious? Suppose you attach another preface that exposes the ficto-critical nature of the first? Will the real Academia recede forever beyond such mirages' access? Could the journal's credit stand it if the editors attached a straight-faced introduction announcing, "This MS was highly recommended by a member of the editorial board"? Or will transgression of the creative/critical boundary, if carried far enough, demolish the transgressor and its vehicle as well?

As the managing editor wrote in response to the idea of a bogus academic foreword that "queered" the letter, in turn to be "queered" by another foreword that traced the fictional tradition of the first, these speculations have turned the original "metafictional nucleus" into an unstable reactor, precariously sandwiched between insulators of quasi-scholarship, whose own spuriousness threatens to release an explosion that would "not only destroy traditional boundaries but suck the narrator/author into the rising maelstrom, and even threaten the existence of the publication itself" (Willingham 27.2.98)

I have become quite enamoured of this metaphor for the ungainly monster couched at the centre of this labyrinth: this core, this unstable, fissionable evocation of a fissioning woman, this nucleus that may at any moment, in a charming innuendo, "go critical" (Willingham, 27.2.98). The questions, however, remain. If we transgress the creative/critical boundary into the lands of fiction, at what point does the Newtonian counter-reaction take over, or in more homely terms, when does the rubber band snap back? At what point do "we" - that equally charming fiction of critical discourse - have to admit we are doing proper academic work? So far it has taken "me" an introduction and two prefaces to come near bridging the quicksand between solid criticism and that gloriously unstable metafiction about metafiction, and already questions are shooting up under the bridge like trolls under the Billygoats Gruff. Because of the voices now ricocheting round this fission chamber, the Introduction, the first Preface, the second Preface, the scandalous Letter, which one is "me?" Is it "me" who produced the first Editor's stuffy footnotes? Is it "me" who is out here queering the second Editor, while proposing to address you in proper acaspeak? Or am "I" in there at the core, a part or the whole of the fissionable

nucleus? And am “I” wielding a single or a double ax? Is this the labyrinth of Luis Borges or Mary Daly? The Father’s or the Mother’s House?

This navigation of increasingly precarious borderlands makes me wonder if fiction and criticism are not in fact matter and anti-matter, needing to be perpetually separated by grimly tended walls of insulation lest, rather than provide playful and politically correct transgressions, they blow the investigator apart. But this seems a chicken-hearted perspective for an issue where, as the editor wrote to me, contributors might make up their own rules (Attebery 3.2.98). “I,” the author of the introduction, therefore turn you over to my editors, who, nameless as they may be, will introduce you by a series of carefully wielded academic instruments into the core of this metafictional labyrinth. Let us hope we all come safely out.

#### FOREWORD: ANONYMOUS

While the anecdote of the typescript’s discovery is clearly intended as a frivolous allusion to the story of Moses, the title of the anonymous foreword, “Typescript found on a Checkout Counter,” clearly refers to the science fiction tradition of “found MSS” titles initiated by Edgar Allan Poe with “Manuscript found in a Bottle” (1833), and continued by Canadian novelist James DeMille’s A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder (1888). Although the typescript itself has nothing to do with science fiction, and the editor clearly has an incorrigible bent to frivolity, the referencing and footnotes are quite accurate. I have therefore reproduced both as they stand.

#### FOREWORD: TYPESCRIPT FOUND ON A CHECKOUT COUNTER

The original of this text was titled “Carried Over: A Letter To Stephen King.” It was discovered by a cleaning lady early one morning in a copy-paper carton on the checkout counter of the Public Library in the small North Queensland town of Proserpine. It had neither date nor author’s name, but purports to be a letter addressed to the popular fiction writer, Stephen King, from a character in his novel Misery. This character, Annie Wilkes, is an ex-nurse and serial killer, but also a fanatic devotee of a female romance heroine called Misery. Annie literally gives life to the male author of this ‘junk’ heroine after a near fatal car accident, but then she imprisons and tortures him to make him produce another

Misery novel. He eventually kills her, after pretending to burn the MS unread, and escapes to start a new career by publishing it for himself.

Apart from the allusion in the title to King's first novel, Carrie, the typescript shows fair acquaintance with King's work in general. There is also some knowledge, both intellectual and biographical, of leading post-humanist theorists, for example, the reference to the cover illustration for James Miller's The Passion of Michel Foucault, and the allusion to Gilles Deleuze's death by defenestration, as well as to his influential theoretical concept of the rhizome.

At the same time there is at least superficial familiarity with Dante's Divina Commedia, since the letter-writer is positioned on a step somewhere in Purgatory, with a view of Hell beneath - there is an allusion to Dante's damned lovers in the second *bolgia* - and the sound and scent of Heaven above. Libraries are absent from Dante's cosmology. Evidently it is a conceit of this piece that unread books, fictional characters and post-humanist theorists all end in Purgatory, where, unlike the refin(ing) souls in Dante, they remain.

The original typescript had been produced in Times Roman 12 point on a good quality laser printer. It was in excellent condition, except for what appear to be scorch marks at the edges. I am informed, however, that there is no laser printer in the Proserpine Public Library.

CARRIED OVER: A LETTER TO STEPHEN KING

Dear Mr. King,

I know that person who shot John Lennon says he is your number one fan<sup>1</sup>, but he is absolutely wrong. *I* am your number one fan. How could it be otherwise? Didn't you create me, just like that ugly thing in Mary Shelley's book said to Frankenstein? And I must say, you really were not much kinder, considering that after you created me, you used a typewriter to bash me to death.

This place is really very strange. There are no walls and no furniture, except the alcoves, and it's quite dim all the time, as if the power's half-down. And there is a lot of fire, although I don't seem to burn - at first I was quite alarmed. But people keep going past, burning like film-disaster shots, and climbing, just as if they are walking up stairs, even though I can't see anything to climb. Up above I can't see anything either, but sometimes I hear weird music, and there is a smell of roses, like those air-fresheners they use on Hospital wards. Down below is what looks like a big open-cut mine, and there is even more fire. But there are a great many books in the alcoves. I never was much for reading, but it passes the time, and some of the stuff may be peculiar, but it's no worse than doctors' talk. So I am learning a lot of words I never knew before. And as somebody I know didn't say, Words are power, Mr. King.

There are other people who seem to be staying, and we have had some interesting talks. There is one person called Mitch. He speaks with a foreign accent, and he is bald, and has a strange habit of wanting to look at himself in mirrors, dressed up in a Japanese robe<sup>2</sup>. He has some *very* strange ideas about That Business; he tells me stories about Men and Those Bars in San Francisco, and there are times I would wash his mouth out, if I could find any soap. But he also talks about power, and how power is mediated through discourse, and about subjects - I have figured he means people - who are constituted

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1 According to George Beahm, John Lennon's killer requested an autograph from Stephen King with the claim that he was the writer's "number one fan." See The Stephen King Companion, ed. George Beahm, London: Futura, 1991. pp. 364-65.

2 See James Miller, The Passion of Michel Foucault, London: HarperCollins, 1994. p.357 discusses the photograph of Foucault by Hervé Guibert on the front of Miller's book. It shows Foucault "dressed in a kimono, a faint smile on his face... standing at a threshold.. his image doubled and redoubled on [polished ebony panels] in a distorted reflection of the man who wordlessly beckons from beyond."

by discourse - I figure this means, people who are made by words<sup>3</sup>. And you know, Mr. King, that is exactly what you did for me.

Some other strange ones hang around with Mitch. One got here by jumping out a window; I can't understand his name, but he keeps talking about nomads and rhizomes, which I thought was the pesty sprouting grass that grows in garden beds. But he knows Mitch. At times they get each other quite agitated, and then they both become shirty when they talk too much to the other one, whose name is Jack. *He* had the nerve to tell me I was an aspect of the imaginary! I was never so angry in my life, and Mitch was no help at all, he just kept saying I should be flattered because it was imaginary with a capital "I"<sup>4</sup>. About the only time the three of them agree is when they start wondering about somebody else, who is not here yet. He is another Jack, but I cannot make head or tail of his surname. It seems to be something like Derision, but they say he is so long arriving that they have started calling him the Great Deferred<sup>5</sup>.

You must be asking, What is the point of this, just like Paul Sheldon when he was writing that manuscript in my upstairs room. But this is all very much to the point, Mr. King. At least, it is for *me*. Because if I am a discourse-constituted subject, you constituted me, and I do not at all appreciate being called imaginary, and it's no use saying you didn't do it, because I do not believe this nonsense Mitch and Jack talk about "texts" - I suppose they mean books - being just "a tissue of cultural quotations"<sup>6</sup>. I understand what that means, now. And I do *not* agree with that Roland person that authors are dead, any more than some characters are. Oh, I know quite well I am supposed to be, because you made sure you killed me before you finished the book. But *some* characters go on living, Mr. King, whether the author says so or not, just look at that wicked cocaine addict who was created by Arthur Conan Doyle. And

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3 Whether deliberately or otherwise, the narrator has here twisted Foucault's famous concept of the "discourse-constituted subject," the subject spoken by discourse, into the construction of a literary character, "people who are made by words."

4 This is apparently an allusion to Jacques Lacan's concept of the "Imaginary."

5 Evidently a garbled reference to Jacques Derrida. At the date of this edition of the typescript, Derrida is the only one of the notable post-humanist theorists mentioned who is still alive.

6 See Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text. London: Fontana, 1977. The correct citation is "tissue of quotations," p.146.

they even get into other people's books!

And the books go on living too. I think there must be books as well as people up above - discourse-constituted or otherwise. I know there are a lot of books down in the open-cut mine. I can see thousands and thousands of Harlequins flying up in the wind off the second level, along with that stupid couple Paolo and Francesca<sup>7</sup> - Jack told me their names - and all those other idiots. And I must admit, to see all those romances wasted quite breaks my heart. If I could get some I would read them, even if they could never equal my darling *Misery*, because they would certainly be better than the stuff like Mitch and Jack and the Rhizome Person's, which is stacked in the alcoves here.

Maybe I did get carried away there. But, Mr. King, however you twist and turn and say Paul Sheldon killed me and it wasn't you because you're the author and you're dead anyhow, it won't do. Paul Sheldon was *you*. So now I am going to talk to *you*, Mr. King, and I am going to tell you what you really did in that book you tried to say was about me and Paul Sheldon, that you called Misery.

I think you are really quite a smart writer, Mr. King, but sometimes not as smart as you think. You were clever with Misery, though, because it is what these books here call self-reflexive, and they think this is very good, and also I think they would say you were nearly postmodern, and that is something like Cleanliness-next-to-Godliness, or 20/20 vision. And probably Misery is even the best thing of all. And that is, Metafictional. I think that means it's fiction about fiction. Well, Paul and I would have different thoughts about that, Mr. King, but for these critic people, I suppose it will do. I have even found a book where one says Misery is part of your Writing Phase<sup>8</sup>. So Phases must be something writers should also have, or maybe it's just used when you want to prove the writer is Serious.

I don't know about the other books in your Writing Phase, except I have now read The Dark

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7 Evidently a reference to the adulterous lovers whom Dante made the illustration of sexual incontinence: Inferno, Canto V, 88-141.

8 "One critic," or "this critic person," cited here but also repeatedly on pp. 11 and 13-15, appears to be Sylvia Kelso, whose unpublished PhD. dissertation Singularities: The Interaction of Feminism(s) and Two Strands of American Popular Fiction, James Cook university of North Queensland, 1997, includes a chapter on the "Male Gothic" writers Stephen King and Dean R. Koontz, with a specific treatment of Misery, pp. 119-22.



Half, and if I ever meet that George Stark I will have a thing or two to say to him. But of course, that book only shows that I am right about discourse-constituted subjects, because didn't Stark try to steal Tad Beaumont's body, and aren't you Tad Beaumont as well?<sup>9</sup>

But I was talking about Misery being self-reflexive, and that's because it's not really about me or Paul Sheldon either, it's about writing. And that's why you kill me with a typewriter, although I resent the implication that I am out-dated, but I suppose he couldn't have hit me with a plastic keyboard because it wouldn't have worked at all. And then where would you and Paul be?

If Misery is about writing, though, then isn't it really about writers' fears? Just like you and Paul are worried that his good manuscript will never be published and he is destroying his Great Talent writing hack-work - which is what you both called my Misery books. And the way I make him write another one, and I blackmail him over what goes in it - really, Mr. King, all I did was make some suggestions, and I left him all that time to write, and then he told me he'd burnt it before I ever read the end. Is it any wonder I tried to murder *him*? But you were very clever when you said that with this book you "tried ... to illustrate the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the reader"<sup>10</sup>. Because I'm in "the text," and I can tell you, Mr. King, that was pure misdirection. What this book illustrates is the threat readers pose to *you*.

No doubt you will say, Baloney. Well, I will come back to that, because I have learnt how to do this sort of thing in the alcoves, and first I tell you the good parts, and then I give you the pill. Like hospital rounds in reverse. So firstly, Mr. King, as they would say here, for a horror novel Misery is quite brilliantly self-reflexive, and it obviously comes late in a generic tradition, just like that film I've heard some of the young passersby talk about, called Scream. And that's because Misery is not just a horror novel, it's a novel about writing a horror novel - well, about the horrors of novel-writing, anyhow.

But Misery isn't just a novel with horror in it, even such a famous novel as your book The

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9 George Stark, the redneck villain of King's 1989 novel The Dark Half, is a character created by the writer Tad Beaumont, who comes to life and literally fights Beaumont for possession of his body.  
10 Stephen King, "Two Past Midnight," Four Past Midnight, New York: New American Library, 1991, 237-39. p. 238.

Shining. It's a novel that presumes, as they would say here, that the readership has certain expectations of a novel with this kind of cover, and your name on it, and then it twists the screw one turn further, because it creates its horror - which is me - but then it makes a writer my victim. So it makes its horror the process of its own creation, and that, Mr. King, is even smarter than Mary Shelley in Frankenstein, because she made the horror the horror of creation - but not the creation of Frankenstein.

But Misery is also clever like Frankenstein because of its narrative sophistication, and that is really something you should be proud of. It is amazing that you could make a best-seller, and even an Oscar-winning film, although that woman does not really look like me, out of something as complicated and sophisticated as anything Canonical.

I have learnt that word too. It means the books they sell in Waldens on the shelf called "Literature" and the ones freshmen have to read.

Anyhow, Misery is *really* clever because it's not just stories nested like those Russian dolls, the way Mary Shelley did, and it's not just a novel about writing, it's a novel inside a novel about writing. There's Misery, which you say you wrote, and then what you say Paul wrote, and that's Misery's Return. And Misery is *about* writing Misery's Return. And they trade instalments, so they are not just nested in a different way, but plaited all the way through. So that is very sophisticated, and postmodern, and metafictional, not just to have two narratives - anybody can do that, Mitch says, even Charles Dickens - but to have one narrative that *says* it's a narrative inside the one that pretends to be the Real Thing.

And what's more Misery's Return isn't just another novel, it's in another genre, and that's very postmodern because you are doing an *imitation*, and you are *cannibalizing* things, which this person Jameson says is the essence of postmodernism, and you have made a *pastiche* as well<sup>11</sup>. Although I can tell you, Mr. King, being a romance reader, that Jameson is righter than he meant, because when you thought Paul was writing a romance - like Joanna Lindsey or Roberta Gellis - it was really a crossover

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11 A reference to Fredric Jameson's much-quoted essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 148 (1984): 53-92.

with what is here called Imperial Romance, and that's Rider Haggard and those old fogeys. But maybe you knew that anyway, because early on you say I am like "an African idol out of She or King Solomon's Mines"<sup>12</sup>. Another woman wrote a whole piece about me, and she says I invoke the dark side of the ancient Great Goddess in forms like the Greek Artemis, both butcher and virgin<sup>13</sup>. That sounds like a hussy, and I was always a Good Girl, but I must admit, I quite like the idea of such a long family tree.

But because of Rider Haggard, that pretty romance-style inside cover for the English Libraries edition, with the writing like a proper Joanna Lindsey book<sup>14</sup>, would have made a lot of people really mad, because this isn't what *we* call romance, and what's more you can tell you wrote it, Mr. King, and that you and Paul are a man and not a proper romance writer, because you never once show us poor Misery's point of view. And that funny woman Janice Radway is right. We do notice those things<sup>15</sup>.

All the same, it's very sophisticated and postmodern to have a novel inside a novel, and even more metafictional is having a novel about the *process* of novel writing. Process. They use that word a lot here. It's like postmodern and self-reflexive, and like one mad book said, it is a Good Thing<sup>16</sup>. But good or bad, *I* like the idea of a novel that is written to show how it was written. Mitch says it is like those paintings by people like Velazquez who put themselves in the picture. I say it is like somebody who did a tapestry, but they didn't hide all the hard work. They got the back of the threads in too.

And I must admit, when I read about what you and Paul were really thinking upstairs, about

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12 Stephen King, Misery, New English Library: London, 1990, p.8.

13 Katherine K. Gottschalk, "Stephen King's Dark and Terrible Mother, Annie Wilkes." The Anna Book: Searching for Anna in Literary History. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Contributions to the Study of World Literature, Number 46. Westport: Greenwood, 1992. 195-205. pp. 196; 200.

14 The New English Library American edition of Misery has an inside cover for Misery's Return, "by Paul Sheldon," in the orthodox female romance cover style, including copperplate typestyle and lush illustration. See George Beahm, The Stephen King Companion, p.361.

15 An allusion to Janice Radway's pioneering study of female romance readers, Reading the Romance. Radway studied a group of female romance readers who claimed they could always tell a male romance author because the novel never showed the heroine's point of view. Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature. 1984. London: Verso, 1987. p. 179.

16 The typescript's writer has apparently read the historical spoof 1066 And All That, W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman, 1930, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970. Here events justified by national ideology, such as the Boer War, are "obviously a Good Thing." See "Memorable Results", p.118.

how to put the chapters together, and what to have happen to Misery next, and that metaphor about the guys down “in the sweatshop”<sup>17</sup>, which I think means the imagination, well, I was really interested. Did you know, Mr. King, that a whole lot of writers have invented metaphors for the creative process, as they say here? And this critic person<sup>18</sup> says that writers persistently couple the conscious and unconscious in their images for producing fiction. For instance, she says there are two famous literary Genesis myths, where somebody called Walpole and Mary Shelley - again - both attributed their ‘seed images’ to dreams. And “seed” is a word somebody called Le Guin used about how she started something called The Left Hand of Darkness<sup>19</sup>. Then this Canonical writer called Virginia Woolf talks about the writer as fisherwoman, “letting her imagination down into the depths of her consciousness while she sat above holding on by a thin but quite necessary thread of reason”<sup>20</sup>. But somebody called Robert Louis Stevenson got right under your neck, Mr. King, because he said writing was an interaction between “the part done when I am sleeping” by “the Brownies,” and the editing and marketing “done when I am up and about”<sup>21</sup>. So you really did plug into a very long tradition there, Mr. King, and you know, I just remembered, that Stevenson person wrote Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde - or was it Mr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde? so he was a horror writer too.

Except all this process-stuff means that I have a very big bone to pick with you now, because after so much reading I understand what is meant by plagiarism. And if you were here now, Mr. King, I would put you to bed for a week, and maybe I would wash your mouth out, because I can see what you did

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17 Stephen King, Misery. Pp.132, 173, 180.

18 Evidently another reference to Kelso, although the passage does not appear in her PhD.

19 In an interview Ursula Le Guin says her novels come from "generating seed[s]," sometimes images. Thus her famous novel The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) began with "this vision of two people with a sled on the ice." See Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin." Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990, pp. 164-65.

20 This description is quoted by Ursula Le Guin, in the essay "The Fisherwoman's Daughter," from her non-fiction collection Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts On Words, Women, Places. New York: Harper and Row, 1990, pp. 212-37. p. 227.

21 R.L. Stevenson, "A Chapter on Dreams," Appendix B, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Weir of Hermiston Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp.198-209. p.207.

when you were being Paul Sheldon, when he was stuck and I had the thought about Misery and the beesting - *you stole my idea*.

Because you didn't acknowledge it. I know what that means too. But the worst thing I found from reading all these women's books in the alcoves and I have no time for bra-burning Women's Libbers but there is no doubt they have some good words, and what you did was to *silence the woman's voice*. And this is part of the *patriarchal conspiracy*<sup>22</sup>.

So I am pretty upset about that, Mr. Paul King, and it is lucky for you that you are in Bangor, and Paul is lucky he only lost a foot. Because if I were Out There now I would definitely sue.

Anyhow, I said I would do the good bits first. And it's very nice the way you made the printers do the parts with the letters missing after the typewriter broke, although I bet they cursed you up hill and down dale while they did it. But it doesn't just add verisimilitude - isn't that a wonderful word, it means a reproduction as good as the original even if it's a fake, and somebody called Baudrillard says that is really Postmodern because it becomes part of the things he calls simulacra<sup>23</sup>. Like Barbie Dolls, I suppose. But anyhow, it doesn't just add verisimilitude, it makes the reader *aware of the reading process*. They are very big on that in the alcoves. It is a sign of sophistication and books that do it are praised, although it makes no sense to me. But because you use verisimilitude so the pieces of Misery's Return look as if they were done on Paul's typewriter, it keeps the readers aware that it's a book. That's postmodern too.

There is one more good thing, this critic person says, and that is the way Misery's Return lets you flout the horror audience that keeps on expecting you to write the same thing over and over again. In that way, you and Paul are both Scheherezade, like he called himself, because you are writing to save your lives

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22 It is hardly surprising that Annie Wilkes, a conservative in politics if not practice, and especially in speech, would look down on feminism. Here the narrator does refer to at least one respectable, well-researched and ubiquitous concept from early '70s feminism, the silencing of women. There is evidently a garbled knowledge of feminist research into the other early '70s shibboleth, patriarchy, in "patriarchal conspiracy."

23 An obvious reference to Jean Baudrillard, theorist *par excellence* of the postmodern, and his equally well-known concept of the simulacra. See for example Simulations, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

from the demands of your readers. For you, I guess that means staying on top of the horror market and the best-seller lists. And to make all those horror fans swallow a novel that is half a pretend women's romance, well, that's a pretty neat trick.

Those are the good parts. I already slipped in some of the pills, but now it's time to get back to the real ones, the things you pointed away from when you talked about fiction having a hold over the reader, when it's the writer's fears of the reader that you really mean.

We can start here with me. This critic person<sup>24</sup> who wrote about your books used one of the Women's Libbers called Nancy Chodorow. She is quite famous, and the book they keep talking about isn't here at all<sup>25</sup>, which is another reason I think books as well as people can go up the invisible stairs. But all these other people quote it, and she has this very good idea about mothering. She says children perceive their mother as totally powerful, but little girls identify with her and little boys separate from her and so they come to resent her power and later they cut themselves off from her. Nancy must have had sons, I think. So this critic person says that you and Paul have presented me as a horror novel's version of the wicked powerful mother. I save you after the car-crash. I breathe life into you, and my breath stinks. I am huge, I have absolute power over you, and I treat you like a bad male infant. I keep you in bed and make you drink floor-washing water, and won't give you pain-killers, and chop your foot off with an axe to keep you with me, and I kill the policeman like no nurse should, and I'm a manic depressive - really, Mr. King, you should say bipolar - and that makes me like a mother from a child's view, tyrannical and arbitrary. And Paul hallucinates, so like the Death Goddesses, at the end I really seem unkillable.

I don't know if it was all hallucinations, Mr. King.

And I only did those things for your own good. Both of you swear too much. You needed

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24        Again, this appears to be a reference to Kelso's treatment of Misery.

25        This must be Chodorow's first and most influential book, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. The ideas cited are reprised in Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. pp. 23-65.

discipline, and protection as well. Didn't you get the best-seller out of it, and Paul finished the Misery book, and then he had a whole new career. What more could any mother do?

Well, apart from this rank ingratitude, the critic person says I am a female power who chiefly threatens male creativity, and you really did have an aunt who "disapproved... strenuously" of you reading old horror magazines as a boy<sup>26</sup>. And what's more, you say you have this dream that comes back "at times of stress," of "writing a novel in an old house where a homicidal madwoman is ... on the prowl." You're working away in a hot third-floor room - just like Paul - waiting for the sound of the typewriter to bring her bursting through the attic door, "all gray hair and crazed eyes, raving and wielding a meat-ax"<sup>27</sup>. As if I ever wielded a meat-ax, let alone raved. But what the books here say makes it all much more hygienic, so to speak. Because what you really mean is more writers' fears, either that you won't be able to do it or it won't be any good, or nobody will like it - or you just have a deadline. And you symbolize - that's another good word - these fears as a madwoman, and that's a patriarchal stereotype the Women's Libbers say, and they are right. You're just making *me* stand for all the little squirmies running round inside of *you*.

This critic person tries to explain why you do this, and she takes one thing from another guy who isn't here, or his books either, although Mitch keeps making noises about fads won't last. But his name is Peter something and he says "the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class"<sup>28</sup>. So the critic person says that when you make me a bad powerful mother you are drawing on the collective history of the white middleclass, because it created the concept of the powerful mother that Nancy maps. But there is this other person called Marlon Ross who has written a book about what he calls the Romantic ideology, which is a certain specification of a group that includes you and some old writers, and it explains an awful lot about

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26 An anecdote from King's non-fiction work, Danse Macabre, London: Futura, 1991. pp.115-7.

27 Stephen King, Danse Macabre, p.104.

28 The citation is from Pierre Bourdieu's early but extremely influential book Outline of a Theory of Practice, 1972. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. p.86.

the way you treat me in Misery<sup>29</sup>.

This Ross guy says “Romantic ideology” is a complex of ideas about authorial self-possession, denial of influence, exclusion of femininity, and repudiation of a female readership, constructed by the canonical Romantic poets<sup>30</sup>. I suppose that’s Wordsworth and all them we had to learn at school. But Ross says the Romantics tried to deny dependence on the market<sup>31</sup>. And that’s what you and Paul are doing when you complain so bitterly about me making you write for me. And authorial self-possession is writing for yourself and nobody else, not even editors or publishers. So when you won’t give me the Misery manuscript, you assert authorial self-possession violently. And my death is a brutal narrative solution to the pressure of popular celebrity, which is what you have a lot of, Mr. King. And the Ross person says Byron indignantly rejected his female readership<sup>32</sup>. So my death is a narrative rejection of the sort of readers you don’t want, and it’s justified by a caricature that, the critic person says, parts company with ‘real life.’ Because Out There, like John Lennon’s killer, most obsessed fans are male. But because you make me a female fan of female romance, you can apply this Romantic ideology to your own worries about being a popular and not a Canonical writer. Because you may admit that your books are “the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald’s”<sup>33</sup>, but you are still pretty defensive about it. Like when you say

I could be in worse company. I could ... be ... a ‘brilliant’ writer like John Gardner and write obscure books for bright academics who eat macrobiotic foods and drive old Saabs with faded ... GENE MCCARTHY FOR PRESIDENT stickers on the rear bumpers.<sup>34</sup>

So because the booksellers and the academics and even ordinary people see romances and romance readers as even commoner and sillier than horror writers and readers, when you kill me, you and Paul

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29 The paragraphs following draw on the work by Marlon Ross, firstly his article, "Romantic Quest And Conquest: Troping Masculine Power In The Crisis of Poetic Identity," in Romanticism and Feminism, ed. Anne K. Mellor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 26-51, and then his book The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

30 Ross, "Quest" 26-51; Contours 3-14.

31 Ross, "Quest" p.33.

32 Ross, "Quest," pp. 35-36.

33 Stephen King, "Afterword," p.557.

34 Op. cit., p.554.



purge your output of what this critic person calls a really powerful feminine abject.

That's something that has to be thrown out. There's this woman called Julia Kristeva who says abjects are like the skin on hot milk when you drink and you just gag them up<sup>35</sup>. Aren't you lucky I never gave you hot milk, Mr. King? And there is another woman called Judith Butler who says abjects are ejected to constitute the system they are thrown out of<sup>36</sup>. I *think* that means that if you sick up the milk-skin, it defines you as being not-milk. So you have to have an abject to let you exist at all. Don't you think that's pretty interesting?

I do, because that means if I didn't exist so you could pitch me out, you and Paul couldn't claim that you had standing as Good writers - like you are both so touchy about.

But that isn't the end of the sneaky things you do with me, and with woman things in general. This guy Ross says the Romantic poets colonised the feminine virtues of passion and imagination<sup>37</sup>, because before their time men were supposed to be rational and not imaginative. And the critic person<sup>38</sup> says Paul colonises femininity, excusing his production of female romance as writing, like Scheherazade, to save his life. And she says there is a parallel with market demands on you, Mr. King, when you were a poor young writer struggling to support your family, and now when you are the star at the top of the bestseller lists. And they *both* talk about you stealing my ideas, just like women in Romantic poetry become like Mary Tighe and Dorothy Wordsworth, suppressed influences and silenced listeners<sup>39</sup>. And she's noticed how when I suggest things, first you reject them, then you subsume them without acknowledgement. Isn't that a good word, subsumed?

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35 See Julia Kristeva's formulation of the abject, in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, 1980. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. pp.2-3.

36 This is a less easily located reference to the work of Judith Butler, who develops the idea of the abject as constitutive. This emerges in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990. pp. 90-93. It is formulated clearly in Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex". New York: Routledge, 1993. p.3.

37 Another reference to Marlon Ross, "Quest" pp. 36-38.

38 Apparently another reference to the Kelso discussion, which draws strongly on Ross at this point.

39 Ross, Contours pp.155-86; 4-5.

And another thing that you and Paul do, Mr. King, is what the Women's Libbers and some other people I have read call colonising. That means you take over other people's voices and stories and ways of storytelling. And you do it three times over in Misery, because first Paul appropriates Scheherazade, and then you colonise the romance genre. At least half of Misery is Misery's Return. And this person says that you make poor Misery a surrogate for revenge on *me*. She suffers near fatal allergies, capture by an African tribe, display in bondage, and silent helplessness. And all of that is very bad by the Women's Libbers' lights, and I can tell you, it's not what real romance writers do, because in real romances it's the *hero* who gets to do the suffering. Next time you want to write a romance novel, Mr. King, you just have a look at Diana Gabaldon's Outlander or Laura Kinsale's Flowers from the Storm or even that old Jane Eyre - and there are men getting captured and beaten and even, in Outlander, Other Things, or men having strokes so they can't talk, or men just losing their hands and their eyesight. Don't tell me about victimised romance heroines!

And the last time you colonise, is when you and Paul have the nerve to end Misery by making *my* romance start *your* new writing career. This may be a nice solution for a writer who feels he is a hack and is writing a narrative reconciliation with the demands of his market, but as the critic person says, what you do is to foreground female writing and colonise a female style to reach your own freedom - whether it's from the fans, worries about being a hack, or me.

Well, if the critic person and Marlon Ross are right, you do all this stuff, Mr. King, because you have developed your ideas of what a writer ought to be from this old ideology. *That* is why you think you ought to be market independent, and have authorial self-possession, and be ashamed about feminine things, or else colonise them and say they are masculine, and most of all, have this complex about whether you are a Good Writer. And because of the masculinist bias - isn't that a fine phrase? of the Romantic ideology, everything that's negative in this ideology gets feminised. So Paul has to write female romances, and the reader who might get obsessed by your writing and come back on you is female, and I have to get killed at the end so you can deny I had any influence, and you can have some claim to be a Good Writer. Which as both Ross and the critic person say, has not included women for the

last two hundred years. And it's quite ironic, don't you think, Mr. King? Because Misery has ended up postmodern and self-reflexive and metafictional, so you could be a Good Writer anyway.

So now I have explained what you are really doing in Misery, and pointed out the sneaky ways you put down me and Misery and romance in general, and I feel a little better, I guess. Mitch and Rhizome Person think I have been pretty dull, and Jack keeps saying I have to address the Imaginary - I am putting in the capital because you have to with him - but I think this is enough. I will close with one other little thought for you, Mr. King. It doesn't matter if I am a phantasm of the Imaginary or a formulation of a specific aspect of collective class experience, or a reincarnation of Artemis, or yet another Othered Woman, as that old Women's Libber Simone de Beauvoir says. So long as you keep constituting me as a discourse-based subject, I am going to be around, even if I'm only sitting in an alcove reading books with Jack and Mitch. So I will be more polite than Shelley's Monster, and I will say, Thank You, for creating me, because I wouldn't be here without you, any more, if that Butler woman is right, than you'd be here without me. And I will close with some lines from an old Forties song. I am very fond of Forties music. Back then, people knew how things should be. Remember, Mr. King,

*I'll be seeing you, in all the old familiar places...*

*And when you're looking at the moon, then you'll be seeing me.*

All my love

Annie

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